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REEXAMINING A COMMUNITY:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND
THE SOUTHAMPTON REBELLION OF 1831

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The Southampton Rebellion (Nat Turner's Rebellion) erupted in Southampton County, Virginia, in the late summer of 1831. The death of nearly sixty whites at the hands of slave rebels shook Old Dominion to its foundation and left a nation in shock. The historiography concerned with the rebellion focuses largely on the character of the rebellion's purported leader, Nat Turner, and the larger political impact that the rebellion's outbreak had on both Virginia and the United States. But what would a focus on enslaved women do to our understanding of America's most famous slave rebellion? This dissertation explores the ways that African American women's lives and experiences provide a unique vantage point from which to interrogate the African American community's longstanding culture of resistance and the labor economy that shaped all of the lives of those who resided in the county. Attending to African American women's lives allows for a narrative of the rebellion not as the history of one great man and his vision but, rather, as a narrative of a site of resistance produced by an entire community of African Americans.

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Preface:

If you travel to Southampton County today its history is written all over its landscape. Its main roads, now paved and marked with state highway labels or green street signs, follow the routes that they followed in 1831, the year the Southampton Rebellion took place. Many smaller roads in the southern half of the county, the area where most of the rebellion happened, take their names from important sights in the rebellion's narrative: Cabin Pond road, Barrow road, Porter House road, Cross Keys road, and even Blackhead Sign Post road are part of the everyday life of the county—imprinted on its Google-map, its green street signs, and the memory of its current residents.

As with any rural community, there are still any number of paths and roads on private property that connect fields to houses and to the officially denoted roads of the county. The descendants of Sidney Turner, a farmer and African American resident of the county in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, own one of those paths. The path remains clear mostly due to the efforts of Turner, then his son, and now his grandson. The grandchildren of Sidney and Corrine Turner remember their grandfather walking them down the path past Cabin Pond to a dugout hole in the ground. There, they were told, is where their ancestor Nat Turner hid out for months after their county's most famous event. There is where he was captured. And there is where Sidney Turner's descendents would like the Southampton County Historical Society's driving tour to make a stop.

When one of his granddaughters was asked why the family wanted to make the location a part of a driving tour in 2011, she responded, "'We didn't want it to get lost in history,'" Hawkins said. "Something really tragic happened here.'" In the county where America's most famous slave rebellion took place there are no historical markers to

denote where the rebellion's important participants lived and worked, where they were jailed, tried, and hanged, or where slave rebels traveled to visit violence on the white community. The only marker, to my knowledge, stands at Cross Keys. The marker notes that Cross Keys was a crossroads where many whites sought shelter and protection during the rebellion. And yet, the historical memory of county residents is vibrant and deeply personal.

It is remarkable that descendants of Nat Turner own the land on which he was once enslaved, the land where he and his comrades planned out the rebellion, and the land where he hid. It is even more remarkable that Sidney Turner acquired the land in two parcels, one 1915 and the other 1939. But the story of the Southampton Rebellion is not just the personal history of one notable enslaved lay-preacher. It is more significantly the story of Southampton as a community before, during, and after the intense violence of August 1831. It is, moreover, a contemporary story as well as a historical one. If you visit the county today its residents refer to the Southampton Rebellion as *the* rebellion. While the local historical society owns and plans to restore at least one structure visited by enslaved rebels and the county's website includes a section about the rebellion, Turner's descendents who were called upon privately for generations to help curious outsiders locate Nat Turner's cave have recently, in 2011, come forward and offered to allow tours led by the local historical society to visit their land.

Scholars nail down the start of the rebellion as the evening of August 21st, 1831, when a group of enslaved men met at Cabin Pond, had a meal, and decided that the next morning they would travel from farm to farm killing every white person they encountered, bolstering their numbers as they went. When the ordeal ended is less

concrete in the historiography. For some the end came sometime in the afternoon of Tuesday, August 23rd, 1831, when the final skirmish had subsided between enslaved rebels and local militia. Then again one could claim that it really ended about a week later, on Wednesday the 31st, when the first court session was convened to pass judgment on those suspected rebels who managed to survive the violence of the previous week. For many of the county's white residents the rebellion did not end until a month later on October 30th, when Benjamin Phipps stumbled upon Nat Turner himself hiding near the farm where he was once enslaved. Whichever end date we think we all know, which ever timeline we've heard for the event, its moments and dates and places of significance have been determined by the actions and experiences of the rebellion's male participants and the white male survivors who successfully took control of the event's narrative.

For Turner's descendents, who in their 70s have decided to share their family curated historical sight with their community, the story is not about one of their ancestors but all of them. "This farm is just like our blood," said one of them. For contemporary residents of the county the story of the rebellion is not the story of the Virginia Debates or the fiery writings of northern abolitionists. It is not the story of one enslaved man's religiosity and journey to leadership. It is the story of their community, their families, and the collective tragedy of the loss of life experienced by all. Now, a little over 180 years after the event, some of the descendents of the rebellion's survivors, white and black, are making an effort to preserve what was once knowledge locked away in local dissembled memory.¹

¹ Information about and quotes from Turner's descendants can be found in the following article by a staff reporter at *tidewaternewsdotcom*: "Nat Turner's descendants offer his hiding place to be part of driving tour," *tidewaternewsdotcom*, February 10, 2011,

It is with this in mind that I began the reexamination of the Southampton Rebellion that follows.

Chapter 1

An Intimate Rebellion, a Community Study: Towards a Continuum of Resistance and Rebellion in Antebellum Southampton County, Virginia

On the morning of August 22, 1831, after an evening of barbecue and spirits, a group of enslaved African American men started what would become the most famous slave rebellion in American history. There were other slave rebellions and insurrections during colonial times, the early national period, and antebellum times, a few of which were more extensive and better planned. But the Southampton rebels' success at killing around sixty white men, women, and children, forced a shocked region to interrogate slavery's utility and security with heightened anxiety. The debates that the rebellion caused in the halls of Virginia's legislature are significant not only in state but also national political history. It is not a surprise then that the Southampton Rebellion and "General" Nat Turner himself are central to the historiography of American slave rebellion.

Historians have come to call most American slave rebellions by the names of their leaders: "Denmark Vesey's" rebellion, "Gabriel's" rebellion, "Turner's" Rebellion. Accordingly, inquiry into Nat Turner's spirituality, psychological state, and biography, dominate scholarship on the event that historians have come to call Turner's Rebellion. Turner historiography has influenced most accounts of slave rebellion in the United States because of the rebellion's relative success and Nat Turner's place in American historical memory. Most studies of American slave rebellions focus more on male leaders and each slave rebellion's broader political significance than the diversity of any given rebellion's participants. Enslaved communities are rendered synonymous geographical

backdrops and political milieus. Occasionally, the enslaved men involved in American slave rebellion are cast as protectors of enslaved communities, grasping for masculine validation by protecting their wives, children, and kin. But communities were much more than the backdrops for resistive action; they were the genesis of resistive action. They were dynamic, diverse, and integral to a pervasive culture of resistance among African Americans. Recently scholars have shifted the focus from “great male slave rebels” towards the enslaved communities that participated in and supported slave rebellions. Part of this historiographical shift has opened the door for an interpretation of slave resistance that includes African American women through the inclusion of so called “every day resistance” on the part of African American communities. However, just as new critiques appear that challenge the centrality of individual male enslaved leaders and argue for the inclusion of women in a broader definition of slave resistance, violent rebellion remains the prerogative of enslaved men. Thus, a gendered binary is developing in the scholarship: enslaved men rebel while enslaved women resist.

Through paying careful attention to the lives of women, this project challenges this emergent binary by looking to the community that produced the Southampton Rebellion instead of to the biography of its purported leader. Southampton’s sites of “every day” resistance are part of the neighborhood on the county’s south side most affected by the rebellion. Resistance and rebellion, then, are part of a continuum of resistive strategy and action. To map the human geography of the many sites of resistance in Southampton County, is to look beyond who the traditional historical sources associated with the rebellion mark as rebels—mostly enslaved men—and to see the rebellion as a product of a complexly interconnected community; one that includes

enslaved women and children, free people of color, and whites who could not claim elite status.

Men Rebel and Women Resist: Reconciling Parallel Historiographies

The historiographies of African American women's history and the history of American slave rebellion are separate yet parallel. While both historiographies are included in the broader discourse of African American and, ultimately, American History, it is striking how little the two have intersected. It has not been until relatively recently that, by labeling women's daily activities resistance, historians have placed the two historiographies in conversation. African American Women's history finds its roots in the many studies of the enslaved community of the early to mid- 1970s as well as the many oral and community histories kept by African American women though largely barred from the professional academy until the mid-20th century. Large synthetic works like Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1977) and John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979) intervened in a historiography dominated by late 19th century and early 20th century histories of the American South that presented American slavery as benevolent and beneficial to African Americans. African American women's roles in the enslaved community appear throughout these foundational works because of the prominence of enslaved households in each historian's evidence. While slave resistance figures into their analysis, kinship and socio-cultural preservation remain at the center of each study. These foundational studies posit the existence of black culture and family structures as key to

directly refuting dominant interpretations of the enslaved as docile and their owners as benevolent through cultivating an understanding of the enslaved experience.²

Later, women's historians challenged the assumptions made by works on American slavery, highlighting women's labor, the roles beyond motherhood that enslaved women filled, and their significance to the American slave system.³ Much like

² The enslaved community remained and remains of central importance in slavery historiography to present. For more contemporary examples of community studies, see: Brenda E. Stevenson. *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*. (New York: Oxford, 1997); Dylan C. Penningroth. *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-century South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2002); Melvin Patrick Ely. *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War*. (New York: Vintage, 2005); and, Anthony E. Kaye. *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2009).

³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. (New York: Norton, 1985, 1999); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 1985, 2009); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1988); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, eds. *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies*. (New York: CUNY, 1993); Joan Rezner Gunderson, "The Double Bonds of Race and Sex: Black and White Women in a Colonial Virginia Parish," in *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible" a Reader in Black Women's History* (New York: NYU, 1995); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine eds., *More Than Chattel: Black and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1996); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996); Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, (New York: Oxford, 1997); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South*, (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M.H. Camp, *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, (Athens: UGA Press, 2006); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007); Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2007); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. (New York: Cambridge, 2008); Daina Berry, "Swing the

the social historians who wrote large community studies to discredit pervasive notions of African Americans and the family structures of enslaved people, women's historians took on pervasive, yet contradictory, characterizations of black women as lascivious and hyper sexual, as the docile caretakers of their white owners, and as the caustic firebrand matriarchs of African American households. Far too often, scholars salvaged the image of the African American family and community at the expense African American women: they either bolstered stereotypes or ignored the presence of women entirely. While women's and gender scholarship influenced the canon of American Slavery, it did not intervene in and transform scholarship on slave rebellion.

Instead of pointing to kinship ties and cultural production, scholars of slave rebellion posited that rebellions on the part of the enslaved discredited the myth of a benevolent slave system while establishing the agency of the enslaved. Predating Gutman and Blassingame's canonical works, Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943) demonstrates the constancy of slave resistance beyond violent revolt, presenting a "laundry list" of American Slave Revolts while acknowledging the "every day" resistance of the enslaved and free population. Aptheker makes the point that the very common occurrence of slave resistance throughout slavery's history refutes all arguments that the enslaved were docile and universally compliant. *American Negro Slave Revolts* concludes with Turner's Rebellion, also the subject of Aptheker's graduate work, and notes the many male participants in slave revolts. Enslaved male leaders, their political goals, and biographies, remained central to Aptheker's scholarship on American slave

Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe": Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia, (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois, 2010.)

rebellion. This centering of the rebellion's male leadership would continue for generations of scholarship.

William Styron's infamous fictional treatment of Nat Turner's biography, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), portrayed Nat Turner as a mystic plagued by the desire for a young white woman that he later murders during the rebellion. Along with outrage at what was widely hailed as a racist portrayal of the rebel leader, Styron's novel ignited scholarly interest in redeeming Turner and black masculinity. A host of scholars reacted and responded to Styron by publishing work based on the historical record of Turner's life.⁴ Notably, Stephen B. Oates' *The Fires of Jubilee* (1976) is a biography of Turner written in a narrative style. Turner, and not the broader story of American slave rebellion, is in sharp focus as Oates tries to reconstruct Turner's experiences in hopes of shedding light on the slave rebellion that would be named for him. Henry Irving Tragle's, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (1973), remains significant compilation of primary documents related to Turner's Rebellion.⁵ While these important works were published at roughly the same historiographical moment as Gutman and Blassingame's large community studies, they sharpen their focus on Nat Turner as a leader and as a man instead of taking into account the community that surrounded him. This scholarship on American slave rebellion, focused on Turner's

⁴ For extensive critical analysis of Styron's novel see: *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

⁵ Kenneth Greenberg's, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (New York: Bedford, 1996), features a small compilation of primary sources that relate to Turner's Rebellion along with Turner's Confessions as related to Thomas R. Gray in 1831. See also, Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971.) Tragle's compilation is much more extensive and remains a the definitive published volume of primary sources available.

Rebellion as the model of a “successful” rebellion, prioritized the history of violent rebellion and insurrection, rarely focusing on the history of resistance in the communities in which these rebellions were planned and fomented.⁶

The Southampton Rebellion was not America’s only slave uprising. On the contrary, as Aptheker’s work demonstrates, enslaved men and women challenged bondage constantly. The history of American slave rebellion expanded, then, not by including more actors in the narrative of the Southampton Rebellion but by interrogating America’s other slave rebellions. The United States was the sight of very few large slave revolts relative to the other locations around the globe where slavery was the dominant economic system. The two slave rebellions that garnered historians’ attention in the late 20th century, Gabriel’s Rebellion (1800) and Denmark Vesey’s Rebellion (1822), were both betrayed and discovered before they were able to commence. Enslaved and Free African Americans were executed in both cases based on mere suspicion of their involvement. What historians studied, then, were the social and political environments that shaped each rebellion’s leader and strategy. Douglas R. Egerton’s, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, for example, focuses on the sociopolitical world of Richmond, Virginia’s artisan class in 1800. Edgerton demonstrates the political savvy of Gabriel and his coconspirators through an examination of the politics of the early republic, the economic realities of life as a tradesman, and the interracial social milieu of Early National Richmond. The Gabriel that

⁶ Gerald W. Mullin’s *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford, 1972) was also published at roughly the same time. Mullin’s work does not focus on Turner’s rebellion but does highlight another enslaved male rebellion leader, Gabriel.

Egerton writes about is not a mystic or a messiah but a product of Early National political and class struggles.

Conversely, James Sidbury chooses to engage the early national religious climate in his book, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810*.⁷ Sidbury acknowledges evangelical religion's profound impact on early national politics and identity formation. Additionally, Sidbury engages early national masculinity. Much like Egerton, Sidbury interrogates artisan culture and politics as a key part of his analysis. Additionally, both scholars make convincing cases for interrogating community dynamics when studying slave rebellions, a strategy made perhaps more evident by the urban context of Gabriel's Rebellion.

Denmark Vesey's Rebellion, like Gabriel's Rebellion, was fomented in a major antebellum city, Charleston, South Carolina. Again the rebellion's urban context shapes the way it is historicized. Historians cannot and do not ignore the importance of acknowledging Charleston, with its bustling port and majority black population, when discussing the Vesey Rebellion. However, unlike the Southampton Rebellion and Gabriel's Rebellion, historians have conflicted opinions as to the significance of Vesey's Rebellion. Nothing better illustrates exactly what is at stake in the field of slave rebellion scholarship than the publication of works on Denmark Vesey's 1822 rebellion in 1999 and the resulting debate over their accuracy in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 2001 and 2002. The central critique made by Michael P. Johnson in his review, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," of Douglas Egerton's *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, Edward Pearson's *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of*

⁷ The title itself is a biblical allusion to Joel 3:10, a book in which the minor prophet Joel speaks of coming judgment.

the Denmark Vesey Slave conspiracy of 1822, and David Robertson's *Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* is quite simple: all three historians assume in their respective work that their subject, the rebellion plot, existed.⁸ Johnson was not the only scholar to posit the critique that historians should not assume that each rebellion's plot was anything more than white imagination and anxiety. In a far less thorough review of the same works Alebert J. von Frank expresses the same reservation that Johnson states, writing, "Knowledge of what Vesey will eventually do gives coherence and purpose to the scattered facts of the old man's youth, so that the slave's career becomes a suspiciously straight path to power and glory."⁹ Both historians' critiques demonstrate their authors' concerns with the use of source material, a critique often levied at scholars of African American history.¹⁰

⁸ Michael P. Johnson. "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4. (Oct., 2001) 2.

⁹ Albert J. Von Frank. "Remember Denmark Vesey: He Shall Go out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey, Douglas R. Egerton, *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822*, Edward A. Pearson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It*, David Robertson." *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 29, No. 1. (Mar., 2001), 41.

¹⁰ It should be noted here that in the parallel historiography of slave revolt and rebellion in the Caribbean the involvement of enslaved women became a feature of the literature well before any analogous turn in the literature on US slave rebellions. A brief citation of pertinent works includes: Hilary McD Beckles, *Natural Rebels: Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1989); Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Janet Hanshall Momsen, *Women & Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective* (University of Indiana, 1993); Verene A. Shepard, Bridget Berreton, ed, Barbara Baliey, ed. *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, (New York: Macmillan, 1995); Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 2001); Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*, (Kingston: UWI, 2002.)

In response, Egerton writes, “Indeed, one wonders why generation after generation of historians appear so skeptical of black resistance to oppression.”¹¹ With this statement Egerton restates the very frustration apparent in much earlier work on slave rebellion: what about the horror of slavery makes slave rebellion anything but inevitable? Furthermore, at the beginning of the 21st century, why are scholars still debating the agency and determination of the enslaved to be free? And so, the battles of earlier historians of American slave rebellions resurfaced and, instead of expanding the scope of the scholarship to include the histories of the broader African American community, historians were forced to assert, yet again, the importance of acknowledging the persistent nature of resistance from the inception of American Slavery.¹²

The scholarship on American slave rebellions produced at the end of the 20th century bears the marks of interventions made by women’s and gender historians. The work of Egerton and Sidbury, for example, acknowledges the role that gender played in identity formation and politics. Yet the gender that most are interested in exploring is masculinity. And with good cause: the sources related to Gabriel’s Rebellion and Denmark Vesey’s Rebellion are saturated with reference to manhood. And while it may

¹¹ Egerton, Douglas P. “Forgetting Denmark Vesey; Or, Oliver Stone Meets Richard Wade.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 1. (Jan., 2002), 18.

¹² Attention has also been paid to rebellions in regions outside of the southeast. For example, see: Jill Lapore. *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in the Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Vintage, 2005); Daniel Rasmussen. *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. (New York: Harper, 2012). Additionally, colonial slave rebellion has also received renewed attention. For example, see: Peter H. Wood, J. Vernon Cromartie, and Rodger Lyle Brown, contributors. *The Invisible War: African American Anti-Slavery Resistance from the Stono Rebellion through the Seminole Wars*. (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2006) and Peter Charles Hoffer; Timothy James Lockley. *Maroon Communities in South Carolina: A Documentary Record*. (USC Press: Columbia, 2008); *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739*. (New York: Oxford, 2011).

be true that African American men involved in both plots were invested in asserting a masculinity that possessed many of the markers that white masculinity claimed, I argue that it does not necessarily follow that African American women were invested in claiming the same femininity that antebellum whites espoused for white women. While African American women would surely have welcomed protection from sexual and labor exploitation—that is, emancipation from slavery—we must be careful not to assume or imply through omission that antebellum African American women wanted to claim the same femininity idealized by whites and applied to white women. The reality of enslaved and free black life was that women often labored alongside men at the “masculine” occupation of field labor. The physical proximity to African American men that their labor demanded makes it ahistorical to assume that men acted in ways that affected the entire community without the knowledge of African American women. Perhaps during the trials that followed major slave rebellions African American men were reticent when it came to implicating more community members than necessary, a strategy that makes sense when implied involvement in a rebellion meant death, but that does not evidence women’s exclusion from plotting and implementing rebellion. And yet, when women finally enter the discourse on American slave rebellions and resistance, historians do so not by framing them as co-conspirators in violent rebellion but instead as perpetrators of a different type of rebellion all together: everyday resistance.

The historiography left the loophole of “everyday resistance” open to new interpretation in regards to African American women. Stephanie M.H. Camp’s work on enslaved women and slave resistance stands alone in fully recognizing this loophole, challenging the centrality of armed rebellion in the historiography. She writes, “The

valorization of the organized and the visible veils the lives of women, who rarely participated directly in slave rebellions and who made up only a small proportion of runaways to the North—the kinds of slave resistance that have been most studied within the United States.”¹³ Camp certainly holds true to this statement and the assumptions it denotes. Camp’s work does much to expand the definition of rebellion and resistance. However, women remain “every day” resisters implicitly disconnected from violent rebellion. And so, an unintentional binary emerges. With Camp’s important work in mind, I posit that resistance/rebellion existed along a continuum of resistance that assumes the inclusion of men and women in both strategies of resistance and rebellion because of their connectedness within the enslaved community.

The view of enslaved women as simply excluded by enslaved men, while roundly espoused by scholars of America’s slave revolts,¹⁴ makes little sense in light of African American women’s integral role in the African American social and cultural communities, their ubiquitous resistive activity as described by Camp, and their often intimate, hardly consensual, connection to white men and the white community.¹⁵ The

¹³ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004) Camp’s work is in direct conversation with not only the foundational works on American slave rebellion but, also, more contemporaneous works on slave rebellion like, for example, Douglas Edgerton’s, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (1993), and James Sidbury’s, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (1997), as well as Kenneth Greenberg’s edited volume titled *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (2004).

¹⁴ Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 11-14.

¹⁵ For examples of women’s specific roles as laborers, mothers, and community members, see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, (1985, 2009); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (1997); Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After*

idea that enslaved people suddenly adhered to a gender code that made enslaved men more apt to rebel and able to exclude enslaved women from their plans seems highly implausible when the historiography of African American and women's history are even briefly considered. Of course, the idea that enslaved women were involved in an active and constant culture of resistance "every day" and were somehow left out of moments of violent revolt seems equally implausible. Yet, it is important to remember that focusing on the leaders of American slave rebellions often obscures not only women, but also the story of an entire community. This extends to the relative inattention to the rebellion's foot soldiers—the men indicted for conspiring to rebel who were often executed. The archetype of the great male slave rebel leader had utility in shaping multiple pasts; usable pasts that inspired narratives that still shape contemporary scholarship.

Great Man History: The Significance of the Lone Male Slave Rebel

Nat Turner, his biography and character, were instantaneously of public interest in 1831. In addition to being the Southampton Rebellion's purported leader, he was missing and unaccounted for as the dust settled in August, 1831. The public's imagination was left to its own devices. Newspaper articles simultaneously exaggerated the death toll of the rebellion and the number of enslaved participants while trying to project confidence in the county's militia. African Americans, enslaved and free, lived in fear of vigilante violence all over the slave-holding South. Free African Americans were particularly vulnerable because they had no white owners to invoke property rights to save them from

the Civil War (1998); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2002).

mob violence. In this climate of anxiety, grief, and vengefulness, identifying a central leader was paramount to asserting mastery for the white survivors of the rebellion's carnage.

Along with the explosion of violence post rebellion, the white media's need to tightly control the narrative of the rebellion was also indicative of white anxiety. One New Orleans paper claimed with bravado on September 15, 1831, well after trials began in Southampton, "We have deemed it more prudent to abstain from noticing the disturbances in Southampton County, Virginia...." The paper goes on to state that its competition compelled it to report on the rebellion. Finally, the article reassures the public that, "the massacre is not as extensive as had been at first apprehended."¹⁶ One wonders why the *Bee* of New Orleans felt so cautious—were the imaginations of their white or black readers of chief concern to the *Bee*'s editors?

The whites of Southampton County and their counterparts throughout the antebellum South had many incentives to accept Turner as the leader of the rebellion in Southampton. If the rebellion had a leader then whites could indulge in the belief that participants in the rebellion were exceptional: a few enslaved men led astray by one charismatic preacher's teachings. As Scott French deftly demonstrates in his work, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory*, early newspaper accounts and narratives produced by whites about the rebellion were deeply invested in containing the imaginations and fears of the white populace and, simultaneously, managing the expectations of African Americans, some of whom could read. French examines the writings of John Hampden Pleasants, the editor-in-chief of *The Constitutional Wig*, a

¹⁶ Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 79. From the *Bee*, of New Orleans Louisiana, September 15, 1831.

Richmond, Virginia newspaper. “Pleasants sought to restore public confidence through the drafting of a narrative that clearly identified the culprits and exonerated the great mass of slaves who had no hand in the uprising.”¹⁷ For slavery to remain viable in Virginia post-rebellion, whites needed to believe that the majority of enslaved African Americans had nothing to do with conspiring to murder around sixty whites in Southampton County. Officials worked to limit suspicion in the county to those enslaved and free African Americans brought to trial. Finding and executing the leader of the rebellion was of key social importance. For the white power structure to claim that they were, again, in total control of Southampton County, Nat Turner needed to be located and executed after a state sanctioned trial in a grand display of mastery.

It is not surprising then that Nat Turner has long been at the center of historical writing about the Southampton Rebellion. Newspaper coverage has long been a key source for historians and Turner’s leadership and capture are integral to period newspaper coverage. Along with newspaper accounts the earliest history of the rebellion begins with *The Confessions of Nat Turner the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray*¹⁸. Published in 1832, Thomas R. Gray’s transcription of an autobiographical interview with Turner shortly after his capture describes Turner’s early life and leadership of the Southampton Rebellion. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, remains an important yet fraught primary source for

¹⁷ Scott French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory*. (New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 2004.)

¹⁸ Thomas R. Gray. *The Confessions of Nat Turner the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray*. (Richmond: T.W. White, 1832) and Kenneth S. Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner: And Related Documents*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997). Greenberg provides a very helpful essay that accompanies the text published by Gray. I first read the document in Greenberg’s addition before looking for the original text.

contemporary historians. Modern historians level the valid criticism that *The Confessions* were not written by Turner and show evidence that Gray privileged his own voice and opinions over Turner's testimony. Still, many early historians of the rebellion looked to *The Confessions* as a valuable source and used Gray's published account to validate Turner's importance to the rebellion. The centrality of this source to their work and the many scholarly works that followed, helps to explain the ways in which Turner, his biography and religious beliefs, have continued to be privileged in the narrative of the rebellion.

For example, the verbosely titled *Historical Collections of Virginia; Containing a Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c, Relating to Its History and Antiquities, Together with Geographical and Statistical Descriptions. To Which is Appended, An Historical and Descriptive Sketch of the District of Columbia*, published in 1845 by Henry Howe, covers only two items of historical significance in its section labeled "Southampton: the Nottoway Indians and the Southampton Rebellion." Howe, like many 19th century authors, had few qualms about barrowing liberally from other texts. For example, his section on the Nottoway is comprised mostly of a block quote from William Byrd's famous 18th century diaries. The section on the Southampton Rebellion is also essentially a lengthy quote lifted from the pages of Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner*. Addressing the cause of the rebellion, Howe remains perplexed stating, "As slaves, they were not treated with particular unkindness or severity," and continues by blaming the rebellion on, "the suggestions of a wild superstition..."¹⁹ With this statement of the general belief that the rebellion had no cause,

¹⁹ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia; Containing a Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c, Relating to Its*

it becomes clear why Nat Turner, a leader, was essential to white narratives of the rebellion: whites needed to believe that the violence of the rebellion was anomalous. This is one example of how *The Confessions* disseminated and, along with newspaper coverage, established in mid-nineteenth century historical memory the figure of Nat Turner as not only the rebellion's leader but also the rebellion's genesis.

Whites in the post-bellum South cultivated a specific historical memory of Nat Turner. Just as their recent ancestors represented the Southampton Rebellion as nothing more than the tragically violent acts of a very few delusional enslaved men, southern whites in the late 19th and early 20th century were not interested in representing American slavery as anything but benevolent and just. William Sidney Drewry was just such a southerner. Drewry, A native of Southampton County with roots deep enough in the community for one of its towns to be named for his family, Drewryville, chose the Southampton Rebellion as his dissertation topic at the end of the 19th century. He made use of his community connections to take a number of oral histories from county residents who had witnessed the rebellion. He took photographs of important sites along the rebellion route. And then, with the authority that being a student at The Johns Hopkins University gave him, he wrote a substantial work in support of Jim Crow ideology. In the newly forming field of History, a field gaining in cache and influence, Drewry laid claim to the authority of education and white skin to demonstrate how his community's history validated the separation of Virginia's black and white citizens. Drewry takes his reader through a series of mental gymnastics making the case both for slavery's acceptability, a labor system that required blacks and whites to live in close

History and Antiquities, Together with Geographical and Statistical Descriptions. To Which is Appended, An Historical and Descriptive Sketch of the District of Columbia. (Charleston: Babcock, 1845)127.

proximity, *and* the validity of Jim Crow segregation. Fraught and racist as Drewry's analysis in the *Southampton Insurrection* is, his work was considered the authoritative study of the rebellion when it was published in 1900.²⁰

It was with Drewry's work that the modern historiography of the Southampton Rebellion began. At the time it was published New South ambition required a usable history that bolstered racial hierarchy. Of course, African American oral tradition and scholarship refuted Drewry's depiction of life in the antebellum South. But the academy of the period largely ignored the work of African American scholars and the oral testimony and tradition of the African American community. It would not be until the mid-20th century that another generation of historians would find a usable past in the history of American slave rebellions and revolt. While some mid-20th Century social historians looked to enslaved communities to argue for African American agency, others looked to slave resistance and rebellion to argue against work like Drewry's.

It is no surprise that work on the Southampton Rebellion into the 21st century centers around Turner's biography, religious beliefs, and leadership style. Contemporary historical writing must wrestle with source material largely produced by whites who were invested in maintaining power and narratives sanctioned by the academy that were produced in the 19th century that clearly sympathize with those same white powerbrokers. Fortunately, narratives written by whites in power and others invested in quelling white anxiety were not the only view of the Southampton Rebellion published in the mid-19th century. These narratives are connected historiographically to contemporary writing

²⁰ William Sidney Drewry. *The Southampton Insurrection*. (Washington: Neal Company, 1900).

about the Southampton Rebellion and the work of mid-20th century historians who wrote to combat racist notions about enslaved African Americans.

Competing Historiographies: African American Historical Memory

While whites consistently constructed narratives of the Southampton Rebellion that were at best paternalistic and at worst justifications of American slavery, African Americans constructed their own historical narratives and developed their own oral traditions about the Southampton Rebellion. Unlike newspaper accounts, official court documents, and historical sketches written by whites, African American scholars' studies of the rebellion went unnoticed by the academy in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The academy regarded African American oral tradition as prejudiced and inaccurate whenever it did not corroborate dominant views that the enslaved were well treated and that only a handful participated in the violence that left sixty whites dead. African American scholars, activists, and community members who had a tradition of relying on personal testimony to validate their claim to citizenship and freedom, did not ignore African American sources. Their work resulted in the construction of another usable past, one that was also preoccupied with the "great man" narrative of the rebellion but one that cast Nat Turner as a hero and an archetypal black male leader and freedom fighter.

One striking example of the development of a parallel historiography is William Wells Brown's 1867 work, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. The "American Rebellion" Brown writes about is the American Civil War. He notes that he came to the work of writing about African American participation in the Union Army, "Feeling anxious to preserve for future reference an account of the part

which the Negro took in suppressing the Slave Holders' rebellion..."²¹ continuing that he intends first to address the long history of black male military service in American history. To do so Brown covers not only black participation in the American Revolution and the War of 1812, but also American slave rebellions. This juxtaposition is indicative of the ways that African Americans thought of the Southampton Rebellion. Brown equates slave rebellion with military service. Similar to many accounts produced by white authors, Brown also relies heavily on the text of *The Confessions* published by Gray in 1832. Yet, unlike his white contemporaries, his narrative of the rebellion is mostly concerned with demonstrating black masculine valor and courage.

Unlike many white representations of Nat Turner and his comrades as easily controlled by superstition, Brown presents a group of intelligent men with a clear plan to assert their humanity through violent rebellion. Brown acknowledges that Turner was supported by a wider community of men, both directly and indirectly. One striking example Brown uses to demonstrate black male honor is the story of a man who would not join in the rebellion violence against whites or blacks. He presents the story of Jim, an enslaved man who did not join in the rebels' activities and rescues his white owner only to request that his owner execute him. He chooses death over hunting down the remaining rebels at large stating, 'I cannot help you hunt down these men: they, like myself, want to be free.'²² All of the enslaved men Brown discusses, then, were men of character and honor even if they did not elect to fight alongside Nat Turner. While he

²¹ William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867),v.

²² Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, 25. I have come across no corroborating evidence for this story that Brown relates. While it is possible that he had access to oral sources that other authors simply did not or chose to ignore, what is striking about this story is the meaning Brown attaches to it.

notes religion's role in the rebellion, he does so to demonstrate the enslaved men's commitment to Christian religious principles and their God-given rights as human beings, not their susceptibility to superstition. And so, Brown, an African American historian and writer, used Turner's status as a folk hero to bolster their claims to citizenship during the Reconstruction in much the same way that roughly one hundred years later mid-20th century historians would look to Nat Turner as a model for black agency and humanity in the midst of the Civil Rights movement.

If Turner was useful to Jim Crow apologists, he was more useful to Race Men and New Negroes who saw in Turner an attractive example of black masculinity. As Scott French writes so accurately in the fourth chapter of his intellectual history, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory*, "The continued subjugation of African Americans, codified in discriminatory laws and practices...kept the threat of "Negro risings" alive long after the death of slavery."²³ While the fear of "Negro risings" shaped New South historians' narratives about the Old South and the Lost Cause, the legally sanctioned discrimination that such histories bolstered demanded that African Americans assert their own views about African American history in their own parallel publications. French does an excellent job of demonstrating the richness of the African American canon. He first notes Turner's emergence as a full-fledged "race hero" thanks to work like that of William Wells Brown, George Washington Williams, and Frederick

²³ French, *The Rebellious Slave*, 135. On pages 145-147, French details the Southampton Insurrection Scare of 1883. Rooted in the racial tension of Virginia's state elections in 1883 that involved a race baiting campaign on the part of Virginia Democrats that exaggerated the number of African American office holders. Race riots and an insurrection scare in Southampton County followed all based on anti-Republican campaign efforts.

Douglas, Jr, during Reconstruction.²⁴ Then French continues to illustrate the importance of the image of Nat Turner to leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington who vied to define the “New Negro.” “In my opinion no single man before 1850 had a greater influence on Southern legislation & feeling than Nat Turner...” proclaimed Du Bois.²⁵ However, the educated elite of the late 19th and early 20th century were not the only African Americans who claimed the historical memory of the Southampton Rebellion.

While scholars and community leaders exalted Turner to hero status post-emancipation, African American oral tradition had long found a usable past in the story of the Southampton Rebellion and the legend of Nat Turner. Numerous African Americans, born into slavery and interviewed in the 1930s as part of New Deal initiatives, remembered the rebellion. The memory of Turner was so present that it was invoked in a popular colloquialism: “not sharp enough to git by ole Nat.”²⁶ Often uttered in regard to whites who proved particularly racist, the saying was meant to signal that while whites may have imagined themselves as all knowing, the reality was that African Americans could outsmart them. Turner served as a constant reminder that African Americans, despite Jim Crow and slavery before it, were intelligent and capable of asserting themselves.

An African American voice offered yet another narrative of the Southampton Rebellion after the Second World War, at the same historiographical moment that Aptheker began to write his landmark study of American slave rebellions. Lucy Mae

²⁴ French, *The Rebellious Slave*, 147-156.

²⁵ Ibid, 180.

²⁶ Charles L. Perdue, Jr, Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 67.

Turner, a granddaughter of Nat Turner, published two pieces for the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1947 and 1955, respectively.²⁷ Her work highlights aspects of the rebellion overlooked by both the historians of her time and many contemporary scholars: Nat Turner's family and the aftermath of the rebellion in Southampton County. The first article, written with her sister Fannie V. Turner, begins with the story of their father, Gilbert Turner, a son of Nat Turner's. Instead of focusing on the events of the Southampton Rebellion, the article highlights their father's life story: his move to Ohio, his marriage to their mother, and his final years. Lucy Mae Turner's second article, published eight years later, gives a more detailed account of the rebellion through the eyes of her father, then a young child. Both pieces open dramatically with their father waiting to be sold at auction, a consequence of being related to his famous father. The narrative presented in both articles is one of a family triumph. Gilbert Turner manages to overcome the hardship of slavery, the loss of his entire family to the gallows or sale, and his migration to Ohio to raise a family. Unlike other narratives about the rebellion, the Turner sisters present a family history, one that takes into account the intimate consequences of rebellion.

The Turner sisters' narrative foreshadowed some of the most recent work by scholars of African American history on the Southampton Rebellion. Rather than react or respond to the historiography of the late 19th through early 20th century, some of the most contemporary work on the Southampton Rebellion acknowledges the community as important and attempts to recover the narratives of the county's female residents. Mary Kemp Davis's article, "'What Happened in This Place?' In Search of the Female Slave in

²⁷ Lucy Mae, *NAT TURNER'S DESCENDANTS*, *Negro History Bulletin*, 10:7 (Apr. :1947) 155, 164-165 and Lucy Mae Turner, *THE FAMILY OF NAT TURNER*, *Negro History Bulletin*, 18:6 (Mar.: 1955) 127-132 and 146.

the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection,” Davis acknowledges the presence of enslaved and free women in the primary documents most often associated with scholarship on the rebellion: the court records of the trials that followed the rebellion. Davis also acknowledges the work of Lucy Mae Turner along with the many references to African American women found in Drewry’s work. The article does the significant work of foregrounding women in the canon of sources on the rebellion, while pointing to and legitimating sources often dismissed by other scholars. Yet Davis concludes that the spirit of rebellion, “...was certainly alive in the male insurrectionists whom everyone saw; it was also doubtless alive in many female slaves whom no one saw,” and finishes by writing, “This is the central irony of the Nat Turner insurrection—its enduring mystery. The event invites and resists interpretations at every turn.”²⁸ Davis does the work of naming the women connected to the rebellion but stops short of claiming that they participated.

An article by another scholar of African American history, Patrick H. Breen, “A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton’s Black Community,” presents the argument that Turner was not the unquestioned leader that past accounts portray him as. Combing through court testimony and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Breen illustrates the many ways in which Turner was an outsider in his community, one that only began to accept him when he began speaking against slavery explicitly.²⁹ Breen ends by stating, “...the record is clear: the slaves of

²⁸ Mary Kemp Davis. “‘What Happened in This Place?’ In Search of the Female Salve in the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave in History and Memory*. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. (Oxford: 2003) 176.

²⁹ Patrick H. Breen. “A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton’s Black Community,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave in History and Memory*. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. (Oxford: 2003) 113.

Southampton did not follow Nat Turner because they believed that he was a prophet,” he continues, “Slaves and free blacks joined his rebellion because they wanted to fight against slavery.”³⁰ Much like the African American historians and lay people who wrote about Turner as a freedom fighter, Breen argues for a consideration of the community of Southampton sorely lacking in almost all studies of the Southampton Rebellion.³¹

The Southampton Rebellion: A Community Study

I argue that to understand the community that produced the Southampton Rebellion, we need to attend to the lives of women and their many contributions to the county's dynamic population. Using women's lives and labors as an entry point, this study reconstructs the community that reached a crisis point in August of 1831. Once women's lives are taken into account, the lives of a diversity of Southampton's residents come into clearer focus. The lives of whites, the enslaved, and free people of color, both male and female, are significant to forming a clear understanding of the impact of the rebellion's violence, its genesis, and its aftermath.

Between August 31, 1831 and November 21, 1831, the county court of Southampton generated a wealth of documents pertaining to the trial of indicted slave rebels. While modern court stenography did not exist to make a verbatim record of each

³⁰ Ibid, 118.

³¹ A recent symposium featured in the *Journal of the Early Republic* also begins an argument for the inclusion of the community in the story of the Southampton Rebellion. See, Daniel W. Crofts. "Communities in Revolt: An Introduction." *Journal of the Early Republic*, Winter 2007, Vol. 27 Issue 4. See also, Randolph Ferguson Scully. "'I Come Here Before You Did and I Shall Not Go Away': Race, Gender, and Evangelical Community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion"; Patrick H. Breen. "Contested Communion: The Limits of White Solidarity in Nat Turner's Virginia"; Anthony E. Kaye. "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion"; and Peter Kolchin. "Communities in Revolt: a Comment." In *Journal of the Early Republic*, Winter 2007, Vol. 27 Issue 4, 661-728.

trial, the transcripts of testimonies, sentences, and descriptions of each defendant remain invaluable resources to scholars concerned with the Southampton Rebellion's events and participants. While court records are helpful, the stories they tell are limited. As previously discussed, these documents are the product of a shaken elite class of whites who, in a moment of crisis, made use of their legal system to flatten and control the narrative of violent rebellion in their county's borders. It was important to the prominent men who sat as justices of the court to convey a sense of their mastery and civility. While it is true that considerable vigilante violence against African Americans, free and enslaved, raged outside the courtroom doors, elite whites used their positions of power to visit a constant stream of violence upon the African American community in the form of guilty verdicts and death sentences. Even the perceived mercy of a sentence commuted to sale out of state was just another kind of death suffered by the African American community. Along with the violence of execution and sale, these records obscure the many personal connections each witness, lawyer, justice, bailiff, militia member, and defendant shared with each other.

To fully understand African American strategies of resistance and the rebellion's events, our understanding of white systems of surveillance and control need to be clarified. Very little work has been done specifically on slave patrols, the primary means of policing African Americans outside of work hours in the antebellum South. Chapter two of this study engages the fragmented documentation of patrol activity alongside what historians know about the violence of the institution of slavery and African American testimonies about enslaved life in Southside Virginia. The justices of the county court, the militiamen, the state legislature, governor, and even the newspapers held firm in their

claim to white supremacy's absolute dominance in the rebellion's wake. But no amount of belief in the validity of racial hierarchy could bring back the sixty or so whites who died at the hands of slave rebels. While it is power's prerogative to define reality, regardless of valid evidence contrary to its vision, the fact remains that white control was permeable in more ways than one. By dissecting the patrol system we learn in sharp detail just how African Americans managed to evade surveillance once the workday was done. From enslaved testimony we learn that enslaved people carefully calculated the risk of resistive acts and made savvy decisions about where, when, and how to take advantage of opportunities to claim mobility, property, time, and space for themselves. By piecing together the relationships between African Americans, free and enslaved, and whites in terms of surveillance and control, we are better able to understand the risks calculated by those involved in the rebellion and those who survived to face its aftermath.

This study draws upon a number of sources beyond Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and the official court records of the county. While these remain valuable resources, mapping the everyday lives of Southampton's white and black residents requires a willingness to cast a wider net. Southampton has a much broader history to consider: residents of the county had lives before and after the events of the rebellion. The Southampton Rebellion stands out in the county's history as its most important event. But the event lasted barely forty-eight hours and the trials a few months. For the most part, Southampton's residents labored on farms that practiced mixed agriculture. Looking at their seasonal, monthly, and daily tasks, labor that shaped each resident's mobility in time and geography, tells us much more than the sharp chiaroscuro of court documentation. And so, this study interrogates the gendered labor regime on

Southampton's small and midsized farms. The farms visited by slave rebels in August of 1831 were in a neighborhood of such farms and plots. American slavery was first a labor regime. While I posit that both men and women were involved in the enslaved community's continuum of resistance and rebellion, this study does not lose sight of the fact that enslaved people mostly worked. To know them and their lives it is imperative to have a full understanding of their labor.

Chapter three juxtaposes agricultural information about soil belts and cotton culture, census and tax records, and the testimony of the formerly enslaved of Virginia's Southside to reconstruct the laboring lives of Southampton's enslaved residents. Accessing the labor regime on a small to midsized antebellum Virginia farm requires first a working knowledge of the main crops cultivated in the county. Cotton, and not tobacco, was Southampton's antebellum cash crop. The county was also renowned for the brandy made from the produce of its many orchards and the hams cured from the many droves of hogs that lived in its forests. Additionally, farms grew corn, wheat, vegetables, and, occasionally, tobacco. When this knowledge is juxtaposed with court records that place enslaved people on specific farms on the day of the rebellion and census records that better define the contours of each homplace's residents, the events of the Southampton Rebellion become more intelligible. Additionally, the unique role that enslaved women played in the cultivation and processing of the county's agricultural produce becomes more visible. Once their vital role in the labor regime of the county is fully acknowledged, enslaved women's social and cultural roles in the many communities of Southampton County become more visible as well.

Enslaved women are not the only county residents who become more visible once the labor regimes of mixed agriculture are fully considered. Free people of color, too, begin to appear as integral to both the enslaved and white community. Chapter four interrogates the lives and community roles of the county's considerable population of free people of color, first in a general countywide study and then in the hyper local context of the Southampton neighborhood where the rebellion took place. Free people of color, and specifically free women of color, filled important gaps in the labor economy of the county. Free men performed some of the county's most dangerous labor. Free women were almost universally employed as domestics and spinsters, an important role in cotton production. While there were some free people of color who lived on their own land, in households headed by a free man or woman, many more free people of color lived on white farms or white owned land. Some even lived on the county's Nottoway Indian Reservation or Indian land. Free people lived on farms in close proximity to both enslaved African Americans and whites. The county's extensive rosters and registries of free people provide physical descriptions, places of residence, and professions for the antebellum Free African American population of Southampton. Finally, the official trial records attest to the participation of a number of free men of color in the Southampton Rebellion and include even the testimony of one free woman. Free people of color endured incredible violence in the rebellion's wake and suffered the legal consequence of expulsion from the state once slavery's viability was established in the halls of the Virginia state house. Their role in the rebellion and lives in the county prior to its happening enrich our understanding of the black community's diversity and the richness of its tradition of resistance.

The story of the Southampton Rebellion is the narrative of a community in crisis and not the story of one lone leader's hubris. Enslaved women were vibrant members of the enslaved community and important actors in the county's long-standing African American continuum of resistance. Free people of color were important parts of the county's labor economy and in very close proximity to whites and enslaved blacks. Finally, an interrogation of the actual systems of surveillance and control employed in the county challenges the front of austere civility and mastery that the county's leading men present in the court's official documents. The Southampton Rebellion lasted for roughly forty-eight hours of the county's history. Yet, whole lifetimes are connected to this one event. This study endeavors to recognize them by looking to the complex community that produced America's most famous slave rebellion.

Chapter 2:

Geographies of Surveillance and Control: Slave Patrols in Southampton County, Virginia

The day began like most days on Virginia's southside for Nathaniel Francis. Southampton County, where his family had lived for generations, was humid and sweltering in August. The land was dotted with swamps and marshes. Lush forests separated farms and home places. Most of the slaveholding population lived where Francis lived, south of the Nottoway River that bisected the county. With the exception of a few prominent men, most of the slaveholding population was much like Francis. Small to midsized plantations dotted the marshy landscape where middleclass farmers raised cotton, corn, wheat, and cultivated orchards. The county was known widely for its brandy and hogs. Francis would have woken up to start a day of farm labor alongside his overseer and African American workforce were it not for the fact that in late August, 1831, Southampton County would suddenly become notable, notorious even, and his family would be at the epicenter of the tragedy.

Nathaniel Francis was twenty-six years old in the late summer of 1831. By August, the flow of agricultural life had lulled into a steady pattern as the summer heat rose and peaked. On the morning of August 22, 1831, Nathaniel found his morning routine interrupted when a young enslaved boy he recognized as from his sister's nearby farm ran onto his property to announce that a slave rebellion was underway. Nathaniel's first reaction was disbelief. Yet, out of concern for his sister Sally Travis, he left his home place in the hands of his overseer and headed out to confirm that all was right. Unknown to Nathaniel as he trudged off into the woods towards Sally's place, the entire

Travis family, including their small infant, had been killed in the early hours of the morning. Nathaniel's sister Sally Travis, owner of Nat Turner, was one of the first victims of the Southampton Rebellion.

Lavinia Francis, Nathaniel's young wife, confronted other surprises on that day in late August 1831. Eighteen years old and heavy with child, Lavinia was about to reach her eighth month of pregnancy with the couple's first born. As her husband ran off to check on his sister's place, her mother-in-law too decided to exit their home to check on Sally and her family. As her nephews and overseer were killed in the front yard, Lavinia was quickly shuttled to an attic cubbyhole by a slave named Red from her brother-in-law's nearby place. In that cubbyhole she succumbed to fear and the August heat, losing consciousness until much later in the afternoon.

When Lavinia regained consciousness, her husband and mother-in-law were nowhere to be found. Her nephews and overseer lie murdered in the front yard. She herself had barely escaped. Were it not for Red's quick action, and her unconscious state, the rebels who searched the attic would have found her and most certainly murdered her. Regaining her composure, Lavinia slowly made her way downstairs towards the commotion she could hear out in her kitchen. There she found her household slaves dividing up her hope chest and, according to some accounts, preparing food for slave rebels who they fully expected to return for dinner. Lavinia then grabbed a wheel of cheese and fled to the woods shocked at how quickly her home was altered.³²

³² Information about the Francis Family (sometimes spelled Frances in official documents) was gleaned from a multitude of sources. For a narrative account of the Southampton Rebellion and the Francis home place, see: Stephen B. Oates. *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 77-79. See also, Thomas C. Parramore. *Soutahampton County, Virginia*. (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 1975,1992) 87-88. For information regarding the Francis farm's population see, the Fifth

Smart Enough for Old Nat: Introduction

*Niggers was too smart fo' white folks to git ketched. White folks was sharp too, but not sharp enough to git by ole Nat.*³³

– *Cornelia Carney, Formerly Enslaved in Virginia*

Whites made it their prerogative to dictate and control how African Americans spent their time before, during, and after the workday by restricting their mobility and policing their neighborhood. They violently punished those blacks perceived to be a threat to the white hierarchy's power. African Americans went out anyway. They held meetings and church services. They went truant. They visited kin. Their actions were carefully considered, weighed, and enacted after a series of risk assessments. They acted in opposition to whites with keen knowledge and savvy. At times these risk assessments were instantaneous, the result of brutal socialization in a slave society. At others, they were the result of lengthy deliberation. Ultimately blacks acted with a simultaneous awareness of white systems of surveillance and control and cognizance of their own networks of evasion and subversion, networks they worked to keep secret from whites. To accomplish the goal of visiting kin, one needed to be quick.

Residents of Southampton inhabited numerous social geographies just as they lived and worked in the county's diverse physical and natural geography. A geography that included farmland, swamps, rivers, and forests. Whites strove to maintain a geography of surveillance and control that guaranteed them the labor of African Americans, free and enslaved. African Americans, conversely, developed and sustained a

Census of the United States: Ancestry.com. *1830 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fifth Census of the United States, 1830. (NARA microfilm publication M19, 201 rolls) 259.

³³ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 66.

competing geography of evasion and subversion. Put simply: whites used violence and brutality from slavery's inception to coerce labor from the enslaved. They used violence and brutality to discourage slaves from going truant or running away. They used violence and brutality to prevent slaves from in turn visiting violence and brutality upon whites. African Americans went truant and fled slavery. African Americans deprived their owners and employers of their labor. And in 1831, African Americans in Southampton County turned to violence.

Violence has many forms. The intimate contexts that the rebellion took place in were rife with mental, emotional, and physical violence. It should not be surprising then that African Americans turned to evasion and subversion as a survival strategy. Of paramount concern was the ability to live and persevere. At times this meant direct confrontation but, more often, it meant avoidance and cunning were a better strategy.

As the story of the rebellion's visit to the Francis farm illustrates, the whites of Southampton County, Virginia, were almost universally shocked that the black population of the county had risen in open, violent rebellion. The first hue and cry that went out around the county was, in fact, that the British had arrived in landlocked, remote Southampton County and not that the enslaved had risen against their masters. This chapter investigates what structures of surveillance and control existed in Southampton. These were systems that whites appear and express having confidence in. These systems inspired white confidence in white supremacy. Conversely, this chapter engages the variety of responses African Americans cultivated to this regime. In Southampton, just as elsewhere in the South, blacks maintained a culture of resistance. Most importantly for

this study, those African Americans who would later foment rebellion in the county were raised in this culture of resistance and under the regime of surveillance and control.

The main mechanism used to control African Americans outside of their work was the practice of operating slave patrols. By looking at the slave patrols in existence in early antebellum Southampton County, I hope to gain a clearer picture of what, exactly, African Americans were subverting and thwarting once the work day was done, and how it is that their owners were caught unaware that the bonds people around them were capable of rising up in rebellion. The systems of surveillance and control that whites developed over time in Virginia offer insights into the actual state of their security in comparison with their perceptions of their own security. When juxtaposed with the testimony of ex-slaves who lived through the late antebellum period, the practices of patrols and African American responses to them become even clearer. African Americans, enslaved and free, consistently thwarted the patrol system throughout the antebellum period. The vigilance of their owners and the white community at large shifted and changed, not the commitment of African Americans to maintain their community.

Systems of Control and Surveillance: The Development of Slave Patrols in Virginia

*No slave in those terrible days staked anything on chance in the open. He always knew or felt that what he had was a sure white man fooler.*³⁴

-Rev. W.P. Jacobs

Virginia's slave society was violent. African American's were well aware of the consequences of subversion. And yet, though violence and brutality were often employed, they proved to be limited preventative measures. The violence and brutality of Southampton County certainly did not save the lives of the nearly sixty whites that lie dead in the late summer of 1831. Whites purchased and kept slaves to labor for them. They were chiefly concerned with amount of labor they could extract from bondpeople. As a result, white Virginians tended to view the responsibility of the discipline of enslaved people as their owners'. In a community where farmers and their hands, enslaved and free, lived and worked in close proximity, the culture of surveillance and control was individuated on each respective farm and plantation. This intimacy of work and living space coupled with Virginia's broader legal history of viewing the mastery of slaves as their owners' prerogatives significantly shaped the culture of surveillance and control that Southampton's whites were able to sustain.

In early Virginia, anxiety over the escape of indentured servants and Indian attacks, a worry white Virginians of all classes experienced, far outweighed concern over slave rebellion. It was not until the eighteenth century, when concern with the rapidly expanding enslaved population began to overshadow these fears, that legislators codified

³⁴ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 155.

a system of surveillance beyond ordinary plantation discipline to thwart rebellion.³⁵

Notably, slave patrols were born out of the fear of slave rebellion and not the desire to limit enslaved people's movement for its own sake.³⁶ Many slave owners needed their bondspersons to be mobile to facilitate their agricultural operations and to carry out some necessary forms of labor. Therefore, the need to completely restrict enslaved people's movement was not immediately apparent to early Virginian slave owners or the greater white population.³⁷

Unlike some Atlantic world contexts, Virginia slave law did not come directly from England's other prominent slave societies. For example, while South Carolina inherited legal and social practices almost directly from Barbados, Virginia's slave laws developed over time, slowly codifying what became the colony's dominant labor source by the mid-eighteenth century, enslaved labor. It was not clear in 1619, when the first enslaved Africans/Atlantic creoles arrived at Jamestown, that slave labor was going to be *the* labor source of choice. At first the onus of controlling the enslaved population fell on slave owners; slaves were after all their property and their responsibility. In the early seventeenth century, the enslaved population of Virginia, though a growing one, was relatively small and dispersed. The concerns of individual masters for the retrieval of property was much greater than general white population's anxiety over possible slave

³⁵ Sally E. Hadden. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 24-32.

³⁶ Ibid, 29. While Virginians experimented with many laws in an effort to discourage rebellion from the seventeenth century, the development of patrols grew out of an expansion of the militia's duties in the early eighteenth century. Militias and the patrols culled from them were meant to discourage slave meetings, not to prohibit slaves from being mobile. Passes were meant to legitimate slaves' mobility.

³⁷ Ibid.

rebellions. And so, as Sally E. Hadden points out in her survey of early Virginian slave law, “Although runaway servants and slaves became common enough in Virginia, no regular procedure was implemented to prevent them from escaping—in the seventeenth century colonists worried more about retrieval after the fact than prevention in the first place.”³⁸ The eighteenth century brought a dramatic increase in the importation of enslaved Africans and Atlantic creoles.³⁹ With the increase came new anxieties for the entire white population of colonial Virginia.

Hadden presents what is perhaps the only focused study on slave patrols in the United States. Her 2001 book *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, provides what may be the only scholarly study of slave patrols and their development and composition over time in Virginia. In her opening chapter she traces the evolution of slave patrols from first comprehensive slave code of 1705 to the slave patrol law passed in 1754 that would remain in place through emancipation in 1865. Often when we consider law and legislation we make the assumption that laws were followed simply because they were conferred upon and written down. While the slave codes were in place by 1705, the mechanisms for enforcing them were not uniform.

Surprisingly, even after a failed insurrection attempt in 1721, the Virginia House of Burgesses took only delayed action in 1723 to reiterate slave codes that remained without clear enforcement mechanisms. The use of militia against enslaved people was not authorized until 1727. This law did not call for regular patrols but only conferred upon militia leaders the power to muster when Virginia’s enslaved population was

³⁸ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 26.

³⁹ Ira Berlin. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 109-141. Berlin’s fifth chapter provides an excellent synthesis of Virginia’s development as a tobacco colony and, contemporaneously, a slave society.

expected to congregate. While expansions to the 1727 law in 1738 and finally in 1754 added to the actions that patrollers could take lawfully, none of them demanded or required a regular patrol system in Virginia.⁴⁰ The establishment of patrols was left up to local municipalities; the management of patrol personnel and activities delegated to local militia officers. Thus it is imperative to examine the local practice in Southampton County. The existence of commonwealth law does not denote a uniformity of practice or enforcement on the part of whites throughout Virginia.

Patrols, while less than vigilant, remained the main means by which whites sought to control the illicit congregation of enslaved and free blacks once night fell and their time in the fields ended. Slave owners and, on larger farms and plantations, overseers, remained the primary supervisors of enslaved blacks during the workday. Colonial Slave Codes and later state slave law were both meant to protect the property rights of slave owners and ensure public safety. Public discipline of the enslaved population was meant as much to protect a slave owners' equity, that is the value of his or her enslaved property, as it was meant to punish slaves. For example, while it may seem that the purpose of the 1705 Code's prescription of thirty-nine lashes for any bondperson who struck a white man was to discourage enslaved people from hitting whites, the provision served to limit the retribution that a white man who did not own the bondperson in question could expect. That the sentence was reduced to thirty lashes in 1748 does not signal Virginia's relative leniency but rather the extent to which the colony's legislators were willing to protect slaveholders' property from losing value due to debilitating

⁴⁰ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 28-32.

injury.⁴¹ Legislators were also interested in managing the state's treasury. Owners expected to be compensated by the state for labor lost due to the execution of their enslaved property. When it came to their own mastery of their property, brutality and abuse were by no means spared. But in the public legal and disciplinary context, the rights of slave owners were always a serious consideration. Therefore, the actual power of any given patrol group was limited by the priority of the property rights of individual owners in the overarching legal and social system.

Henry Irving Tragle notes in the introduction to his seminal edited collection of primary sources on Turner's Rebellion that "During a period when neither the State nor the nation faced any sort of exterior threat, we find that Virginia felt the need to maintain a security force roughly ten percent of the total number of its inhabitants," a figure that included *all* of Virginia's residents, white, black, male, female, enslaved and free.⁴² According to Tragle's calculations, Virginia's militia force in 1831 numbered 101,488, at least on paper.⁴³ The perceived need for and subsequent maintenance of such a force would seem to signal heightened anxiety over the state's enslaved population. But it should be remembered that the militia's presence and periodic muster and drilling provided white men, across classes, an opportunity to bond, establish social hierarchy, and share in their perceived mastery of society. Their culture was as invested in feeling

⁴¹ Philip D. Morgan. *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Low Country*. (Chapel Hill: UNC, 1998), 264. Morgan uses this code's evolution to demonstrate Virginia's leniency in relation to South Carolina's comparatively harsher treatment of bondspeople. In South Carolina the punishment for striking a white man was originally death and later decreased to severe whipping and the loss of an ear.

⁴² Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 17.

⁴³ Ibid.

that they had power as enacting it.⁴⁴ This sense of security was not wholly misplaced; Turner's Rebellion was subdued in around forty-eight hours by local militia. White men controlled all of the political, economic, and social structures of Virginia and the nation. Conversely, as the dust settled in August 1831, sixty whites lay dead, and Turner himself remained at large until November. Militia force did not equal prevention, a reality Virginians were forced to reckon with in the rebellion's aftermath.

Southampton County's system of slave patrolling followed the general patterns throughout Virginia. Just as Hadden notes for counties in Tidewater Virginia⁴⁵, Southampton County recruited patrollers from the ranks of local militia from the late eighteenth century through the antebellum period. Local militia muster boundaries served to delineate each patrol's jurisdiction. Men eligible for militia service, regardless of slaveholding status⁴⁶, were required to serve periodically on patrols in their area. Captains appointed militia members to patrol at specific times and later accounted for their patrol hours at the local court so payment from the county's coffers could be made. The orders handed to local militia captains by local justices were simple and clear. Small groups were to go "as a patrol to visit all the negro quarters and other places suspected of

⁴⁴ Bertram Wyatt-Brown. *Honor and Violence in the Old South*. (New York: Oxford, 1986) 146-147. Wyatt-Brown, though not explicitly engaging gender, illustrates the importance of militia activity and rank to white male social status. Wyatt-Brown also demonstrates the importance of violence, against other white men as well as the enslaved, as a means of establishing and maintaining white masculine norms.

⁴⁵ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 41-47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 73. Perhaps Hadden's greatest intervention into the historiography of slave patrols is her assertion that slave patrols were not made up of poor non-slaveholding whites but, rather, a combination of men across class lines who were eligible for militia service.

entertaining unlawful assemblies of slaves servants or other disorderly persons.”⁴⁷ And, according to patrol payment records, the Southampton County militia complied.

Slave patrols had a considerable amount of power on paper. They could question any black person, free or not, about their business along the road. They could search the cabins of blacks, both free and enslaved, on the suspicion of an illegal meeting. They could even punish truants upon discovery, although notably their official orders did not include this responsibility⁴⁸. There were, however, a number of tasks patrols did not regularly undertake. They were not ordered to scour the swamps, ponds, and woods looking for meetings of disorderly slaves. While professional slave catchers often went to great lengths to search out specific truants and runaways, in heavily wooded, swamp-covered Southampton County, searching the entire landscape would have been an impossible and untenable task for most local patrols. The locations that local patrols searched were as familiar to them as the enslaved people they were attempting to police.—the patrollers were, after all the owners and workers on each property. Patrollers searched spaces they deemed to be suspicious, leaving unsearched spaces they "knew" were not in need of search and passing over places they did not know.

We Bought You to Serve Us:

⁴⁷ Southampton County (Va.) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1754-1860. Local government records collection, Southampton County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia 23219. Box 2, Folder 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Patrols were instructed to deliver truants to a justice of the court to be dealt with. See also, William Waller Henning. *The new Virginia justice: comprising the office and authority of a justice of the peace, in the commonwealth of Virginia. Together with a variety of useful precedents, adapted to the laws now in force. To which is added, an appendix, containing all the most approved forms in conveyancing: such as deeds of bargain and sale, of lease and release; of trust, mortgages, bills of sale, &c. Also, the duties of a justice of the peace, arising under the laws of the United States.* (Richmond: Johnson and Warner, 1810) accessed through Google Books.

Patrol Practices in Antebellum Southampton County

“...dey fin’whar dis meeting was gwin on. Dey would come in an’ start whippin’ an’ beatin de slaves unmerciful. All dis was done to keep you f’om servin’ God an’ do ou know some o’ dem devils was mean an’ sinful ‘ough to say, “Ef I ketch you heah agin servin’ God, I’ll beat you. You havn’ time to serve God. We bought you to serve us.” Um! um!

-Ms. Minnie Folkes, speaking of her mother’s time in bondage.⁴⁹

While Southampton County’s slave patrols followed the general patterns of muster that patrols throughout antebellum Virginia followed, the performance of patrol duties was extremely local. That is, they varied in number, frequency and duration from militia district to militia district. Their supervision was delegated down the militia chain of command and each militia captain determined the specific operation of any given group of men on any given evening, provided orders had actually been handed down and a patrol was authorized. Surviving patrol appointments and payment records specifically from Southampton County attest to the varying degrees of patrol vigilance, even between adjacent neighborhoods. Before 1831, the slave patrols of Southampton County were inconsistent, leaving more than sufficient room for enslaved and free African Americans to engage in illicit behavior once the workday was done.

Documents pertaining specifically to the militia and patrol presence in antebellum Southampton County from 1795 to 1860 provide a clearer picture of what those who chose to rebel in 1831 may have perceived as a possible threat to success. However, the documents are inconsistent. While the 1810s and 1820 are well represented, there are no documents available between 1820 and 1860. The documents themselves vary in

⁴⁹ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 93-94.

composition and content. Some patrol leaders handed the courts well organized, clearly written charts that contain dates, names and hours spent patrolling. Others simply turned in small scraps of paper for individual patrol members that contain no record of where or when patrol members patrolled. It is possible to piece together who participated in individual patrol groups but each group's militia boundaries remain obscure. With further study, patrol areas may become clearer.

What the documents do reveal are some of the patterns of patrolling present in the county during the period that rebellion participants were both children and young adults. The documents indicate local responses to threats of violence that later rebellion participants may have remembered from their adolescence and young adulthood. Though imperfect, these sources give significant insight into an important system of surveillance in antebellum Southampton County.

Slave patrols in Southampton County were not an every night presence. Times of crisis aside, the patterns of individual patrol/militia troops were more likely dictated by the agricultural rhythm of the county than by anxiety over the mobility of the county's black population. Micajah Hollowman's patrol rode out every four days at the end of August 1819. Mid- to late August was a time when field labor slowed down a bit Southampton County.⁵⁰ Most crops, especially cotton, needed less tending in late summer and would not require intense labor until harvest at the end of September through October. The harvest, in fact, probably accounts for the sparse patrolling Hollowman's patrol did in September and October of 1819. In mid- to late August his patrol went out for a total of thirty-six hours over four nights at regular intervals of four days. Yet they patrolled only two nights in all of September, on the fourth and the ninth, for ten hours

⁵⁰ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, 22-23.

each night. In October, they patrolled for only two consecutive nights on the tenth and the eleventh, totaling only twenty-four hours for the entire month.⁵¹

Surprisingly, of the eight nights Hollowman's patrol rode out from August through October, only two of those nights were Saturday nights. If slaves were given any day to rest from work for their owners that day was Sunday; making Saturday the optimal night for travel between farms and plantations. This fact could not have been lost on Jason Rowe's patrol from November of 1819 through February of 1820. The harvest over by late November, Rowe's troop rode out consistently on Saturdays or Tuesdays from November twentieth to February fifteenth. Not surprisingly, there is a huge gap in records in all available years for the months of March through June with only scattered records for July and the beginning of August. Farm labor would have been particularly intense during these months, making it more than possible that the needs of each patroller to tend to his own farm made patrolling less of a priority.⁵² Even when patrols were more consistent, they were never out every night of any given week or even every Saturday of any given month.

The number of patrollers in each troop varied by the night, but average numbers in each group stayed relatively consistent. In 1810 and 1811 patrols commonly contained three or four men. By 1819 and 1820 the number increased only slightly to four or five men. It is important to remember that each patrol group was only responsible for patrolling the quarters and roads within their respective militia boundaries and not the

⁵¹ Free Negro and Slave Records, Box 2, Folder 2. Hollowman's name is sometimes spelled Holloman.

⁵² The records available are inconsistent in many ways. It is impossible to tell if the gap in records reflects a total lack of slave patrols in the early spring through the summer in antebellum Southampton County before Turner's Rebellion. However, the amount of labor and attention demanded by cotton and subsistence crops can explain a wane in patrolling vigilance at the very least.

entire county. Also worth consideration is that fact that troops were never out on the same schedule or with the same frequency in every militia district at all times. It is probable that while a patrol group of three men patrolled one corner of Southampton County in 1810, no other patrols rode out in any other area of the county on the same evening. Increasing the number by one man in 1820, an increase that reflects more the county's growing population than any growing anxiety, would not have changed the probability that those four men were the only ones out on their chosen night of patrol in their specific district. Therefore, on nights when one or even more patrol groups rode out, patrolling remained less than thorough.

Times of crisis were an exception to the general infrequency of the patrol system. For example, in 1810, local justices made multiple patrol appointments ordering militia captains to patrol on June 7 and June 9.⁵³ Thomas Hanley's patrol rode out every night between the fifth and the ninth, and again on the sixteenth, with five to eight men each night.⁵⁴ Richard Marby's patrol made an even greater showing, patrolling seven to eleven men every night from the seventh to the tenth and again on the twelfth. Though Marby's initial show of force involved a relatively large group of men, by Saturday, June 16, his patrol had dwindled to only four men who rode out for eight hours instead of the average twelve.⁵⁵ By October, Marby reported only three nights of five or six hours, with two of the three patrols containing only three men. Early in 1811, another insurrection scare caused local justices to call for increased patrolling. While orders were sent out to patrol captains on January 22, Marby did not patrol until Sunday, January 27, and then again on the 29th and 30th. Until the twenty-seventh, Marby's patrol had not ridden out

⁵³ Free Negro and Slave Records, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁵⁴ Free Negro and Slave Records, Box 2, Folder 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

since early October. Vigilance waned again in February. Marby's troop rode out only once, on February 21, with four men for half a night. Even fear of insurrection and orders from local magistrates could not predict the local patrol's response.⁵⁶

The official records available for Southampton County's antebellum slave patrols provide only one view of their effectiveness. Although slave patrols deciphered who was truant by searching slave quarters and questioning anyone they met along the road, the amount of time spent on the patrol and the number of locations searched were left up to each patrol to determine. Throughout the early nineteenth century, patrols in Southampton were not uniform in number or frequency. Some patrols between 1800 and 1820 were as large as ten men while other men reported their hours independent of a group. While some payment reports attest to a patrol spending two or three nights on consecutive patrol between monthly court dates, others simply tally the number of hours spent patrolling for six months to a year. This makes it difficult to demonstrate with certainty the average number of hours spent patrolling or even the average frequency that groups patrolled. However, it is clear that patrols were not out in every neighborhood every night of the week or month. Of course, the testimony of enslaved people makes glaringly obvious that patrols or not, bondspeople traveled without permission frequently. Even a cursory glance at what remains of the county's records of payment reveals that the patrols were frequent only sporadically. Each patrol operated at the smallest level with no effort made by officials to coordinate the larger efforts of the patrol system. Of course, between the lines of the charts and lists of patrols ridden and payments made lie men with specific relationships to the areas and the people they were ordered to patrol. While the presence of patrols, their authority, and their brutality should not be ignored, the human

⁵⁶ Ibid.

dynamic of patrols combined with the sporadic nature of the patrol system left considerable room for manipulation and evasion on the part of African Americans both free and enslaved.

The Narrative of Evasion:

Resisting Patrols in Antebellum Virginia

Marse...He had a son on dem paddy rollers. Wen the 'ud come 'roun' the son 'ud come too. See? An he'd say, "Aw! 'Tain't nobuddy in dah but ol' Jake an' is ol' woman," an' the paddyrollers 'ud whup up thah hosses an' ride on. That night tho uncle Jake wuz havin' a big suppah an' had t'ree men undah the bed jes' a tremblin' lak aspen leaves they wuz so sceared.

-Sister Robinson (b. 1836)

African Americans were continually aware of the patrols' activities and, though cognizant of the consequences of capture, chose to evade and at times confront their local patrols. The majority of direct testimony about enslaved life in antebellum Virginia exists in a set of interviews taken in the mid-twentieth century by the Works Progress Administration. Collecting the stories of formerly enslaved Virginians fell to the Virginia Writer's Project in January 1936, upon the discovery that "there were no 'colored persons working on the Federal Writers Project'" in Virginia. From then on interviews were collected at Hampton University, in Hampton, Virginia, at the University's Negro Studies office under the direction of Roscoe Lewis, a prominent professor of chemistry at the historically black college. The project on slave narratives in Virginia was designed to employ African American academics.⁵⁷

The interviews were taken mostly from individuals who were only children during their time in slavery. A few interviewees were born in the 1830s, making them in their hundreds at the time of interview. No one interviewed was alive during Turner's

⁵⁷ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, xvii-ixi

Rebellion. But the interviews are still valuable for a number of reasons. First, the narratives speak extensively about patrol practices in the late antebellum period and during the interviewee's parents' life times, during the mid-antebellum period. Patrols are mentioned frequently and factor heavily into the experiences described by ex-slaves. Second, the interviews describe in detail how enslaved people, often interviewees' older siblings or parents, thwarted patrols. Finally, the few interviews of those formerly enslaved in Southampton County provide testimony about patrol and disciplinary practices in the county after the rebellion, making them an invaluable resource for tracking changes made to patrolling after Turner's Rebellion. The VAWP narratives are not perfect sources; they cover a period well after the time best represented in the patrol documents. However, their testimony provides helpful evidence about the presence of patrols in enslaved people's lives.

Above all, the VAWP Narratives reveal that the slave society⁵⁸ of antebellum Virginia, while possible to resist, was by no means lenient or tolerant of enslaved resistance. Time and time again formerly enslaved Virginians testified to the brutality of their masters and overseers. Tales of resistance and cunning are intertwined with accounts of cruelty and brutality, work and starvation. Surveillance on the part of overseers and masters was often accompanied by their astonishing neglect of bondpeople's most basic physical needs. Therefore, even though enslaved people knew that their owners, and the patrols, could not be everywhere at once, no enslaved person's

⁵⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8. Berlin eloquently explains the difference between what he termed slave societies vs. societies with slaves. Slave societies were societies that had slavery as their dominant form of labor. Societies with slaves, conversely, were societies in which slavery was one of many forms of labor.

choice to go truant, visit a loved one, attend an illicit meeting, or confront whites face to face was made lightly or without careful consideration .

Henrietta King, a formerly enslaved Virginian born in 1843, began her testimony by stating, “An’ dey was jes’ as bad here ‘bouts.” It is true that enslaved people dreaded being sold to the cotton fields of the Deep South, an increasingly common occurrence in antebellum Virginia. But their desire to remain in Virginia amongst their families does not demonstrate Virginia’s lack of cruelty. Henrietta King continued:

Dere was u young woman named Lucy lived on de nex’ plantation dat was in chile birth an’ in de moanin’s was so sick she couln’t go tuh de field. Wel, dey thought dat huh time was way off an’ dat she was jes’ stallin’ so as tuh git outa wukkin’. Fin’lly de overseer come tuh huh cabin one moanin’ when she don’ line up wid de other field niggers an he dragged huh out. He laid huh ‘cross uh big tebaccy barrel an’ he tuk his rawhide an’ whupt huh somepin terrible.⁵⁹

Lucy’s story does not end with her brutal beating at the start of childbirth. The brutality extends beyond her beating and is visited upon her unborn child. King goes on:

Well, suh, dat woman dragged huhse’f back tuh de cabin an’ de nex day she giv birth tuh uh baby girl. An’ dis ain’t no lie, ‘cause ah seed et, dat chile’s back was streaked wid raid marks all criss corss lak. De nex’ day Lucy died.⁶⁰

Antebellum Virginia slavery was so brutal that an enslaved child could be borne into the world with lash marks on her back. Just as precedent found in early slave codes suggests, overseers and owners were the main disciplinarians in the lives of enslaved people.

⁵⁹ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 190.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 190.

Enslaved life in Southampton County was no exception, despite what whites post rebellion widely claimed, violence at the hands of masters and overseers was a part of the enslaved experience there.⁶¹ When asked about “slavery times” Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd relied often on her mother’s stories to inform her testimony. Having been born in 1854, Mrs. Shepherd was still a child when emancipation came to Virginia’s enslaved population. While she admired her mother’s independent and assertive spirit, Mrs. Hayes did not shy from the truth that most enslaved people faced when they chose to openly challenge their white owners:

In Southampton County there was another woman something like mother in spirit. This woman would work, but if you drove her too hard, she’d git stubborn like a mule and quit. Her name was Miss Julian Wright. Julian worked in the field. She was a smart strong and stubborn woman. When they got rough on her, she got rough on them and ran away in the woods.⁶²

Truancy had been common to Virginia from the colonial period. Enslaved people’s testimonies and narratives are full of cases of individuals who took to the swamps and woods for short periods of time to escape cruel masters only to return later and resume work both with and without punishment. But, Julian Wright’s story in antebellum Southampton County did not end with her voluntary return. Mrs. Shepherd’s testimony continues:

They found her by means of bloodhounds. She was sitting in the top of a tree.

They took her back and chained her by her leg just as though she were a dog.

⁶¹ Drewry, *Southampton Insurrection*, 27. Drewry’s account of enslaved life in Southampton echoes sentiment at the time of the rebellion that Southampton was full of kind and lenient masters. Drewry makes note of Joseph Travis’s kindness to Nat Turner, for example, again and again.

⁶² Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 259.

The band was very tight, too tight, and the chain cut a round around her ankle. No one paid any attention to her and the sore became worse. Vermin got in the wound and ate the flesh from around the bone...After several months they freed her from the chain...After the war she came to Norfolk to live. The deep scars could be seen still on her back and her anklebone was bare of flesh.⁶³

While defiance was possible and even admired, it had consequences. Miss Julian Wright's body continued to testify to the brutality of Virginia slavery long after emancipation. While the testimony that denotes the cruelty of individual masters substantiates Virginia slavery's brutality, it does not denote the surveillance slave's endured in the wider white community.

The testimony of formerly enslaved Virginians bears witness to the violence of slave patrols.⁶⁴ Even though patrols were given orders to turn all truants they encountered over to a local justice, enslaved people expected that patrols would punish them before returning them to their owners. Allen Crawford, born in 1835, who grew up in Southampton County remembered that:

Paterrollers would whip you ef they caught you 'dout a pass. Ef you had a pass, didn't whip you—jes would git in touch wid you marster and tell him dat they had on of his niggers, de he'd let him go.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 259.

⁶⁴ Slave narratives produced in the 19th century, to my knowledge, contain no antidotes about slave patrols. While most 19th century narrators do discuss the practices of slave catchers, local slave patrols do not play a role in their narratives. The heavy presence of slave patrols in the narratives of formerly enslaved persons interviewed by the WPA in the mid-20th century may be the result of the age of most interviewees. Many, if not all, were children at the time of their enslavement. Their fear of slave patrols and second hand tales of patrol brutality could very well be the result of cautionary tale telling on the part of the adults in their lives.

⁶⁵ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 75.

Being caught by a patrol was no light matter. Mrs. Fannie Berry remembered that brutality at the hands of patrollers caused one woman to commit suicide:

Poor A'nt Nellie! De pattyrollers whipped her one day. She took an went up in the barn—hid in de hay. When night come she crawled out an' went out in the woods an' climbed top of a hill an' rolled down... we didn't think de gal wuz gwine kill herself like she had tol' me day befo': "Fannie, I don' had my las' whippin'. I gwine to God."⁶⁶

Any confrontation with patrollers usually meant immediate violence and whatever punishment an enslaved person's owner decided to mete out. Enslaved people were very aware of the consequences of being apprehended along the road or at an illicit meeting.

It is not surprising that bondspeople's primary strategy for subverting the patrol system was to simply do their best to avoid the patrols entirely. They would plan meetings on nights when they knew no patrol would ride out. They would pass word to one another that, while a meeting would be held, the patrols were going to ride allowing each other the chance to decide if the risk was worth taking. Mrs. Bird Walton remembers her mother receiving warning right under her mistress's nose. While working in the kitchen alongside her mistress, Jerry the Footman asked Mrs. Walton's mother, "Howdy, Mary, did you know dey was bugs in de wheat?" "Bugs in the wheat" or "Weeils in the Wheat" was a folk expression and code for patrollers riding out. Upon hearing the code in passing conversation, Mrs. Walton's mother decided not to attend the party, her mistress none the wiser.⁶⁷ Being aware of when and where troops would be on patrol could not have been hard information to come by as local men were used for local

⁶⁶ Ibid, 34.

⁶⁷ Purdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 298.

patrols. Certainly, enslaved people on any patroller's farm would have known that their master planned to ride out on patrol in sufficient time to warn the community.

Some bondspeople chose to attend meetings and travel despite the known presence of patrols throughout the antebellum period, in spite of the white community's cycle of vigilance and apathy. Enslaved people developed strategies for hiding their meetings and remaining aware of patrols' whereabouts. As a general precaution, lookouts were be posted and pots used around the meeting space to catch sound.⁶⁸ Lookouts ran as decoys, leading patrols into obstacles like brambles placed along the roadway or into rivers where they could be thrown from their horses.⁶⁹ Additionally, lookouts sometimes crippled horses patrollers dismounted in pursuit of truants or meetings.⁷⁰ Each strategy was devised to help as many attendees avoid the patrol as possible with the logic being that while the patrols may catch some, they could not catch everyone.

Along with evasion techniques and the use of lookouts, African Americans relied on acts of spontaneous kindness and solidarity on the part of other African Americans. Not all who offered help to those avoiding the patrols planned on doing so. At times African Americans were called to help others spontaneously. Mrs. Jennie Patterson, born around 1846, remembered:

One night I was fast asleep an' heard a rap—bump, bum—on my do'. I answered, "Who's dat?" De answer was, "hush, don' say nothin', but let m in!" Dat 'oman was out a breath, wisperin', "Can I stay here all night?" I told her she could, so dar de 'oman done slept right dar 'hin' me in my bed all night

⁶⁸ Ibid, 93, 141.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 93, 157, 214-215.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 75.

an' I didn' know she had runed away an' 'scapin'. I took an' heard de horses an' talkin' in de woods. Dogs barkin'. Ha! Ha! Ha! I peeped out de window an' saw dem white folks go by an' ain' never dreamed of em lookin' fer de 'oman whar was over 'hind me. Next morning she stole out from dar, an I, Baby, ain' never seen her no more. You see we never tole on each other.⁷¹

Mrs. Patterson opened her door and shared her bed. She did not plan or conspire with anyone but herself and as a result the woman she sheltered found rest. While there is no way to know who her guest was or even who she was running from, Mrs. Patterson's story demonstrates the extent to which enslaved people could depend upon the black community to offer them refuge and help.

More common than stories of offering shelter are stories of providing sustenance to both truants and runaways. For example, Lorenzo L. Ivy remembers being told about his grandmother's frequent truancy in nearby woods, "My mamma say she used to always put out food fo' her an' she would slip up nights an' git it."⁷² Enslaved people calculated the risk of traveling while patrols were about knowing that they could rely on already established networks of support.

There were moments when enslaved people chose to confront whites directly. These instances were rare. In most cases enslaved people opted for evasion. However, some evasion techniques included the possibility of harming patrollers. Betty Jones remembered:

...one night de patterrollers come when we was havin' a big meetin' in one o' de cabins. Dey had a big wooden log stuffed wid mud in de fire. Dat make a

⁷¹ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 220.

⁷² Ibid, 154.

lot o' hot coals to use. Jes' as we heard 'em, ole man Jack Diggs an' Charlie Dowal shoveled fire an' coals right out de door on 'em debbils. Dey runned from de fire, an' we runned f'om dem. Ain' nobydy git caught dat time.⁷³

In the case of Jones' meeting, those involved purposely created hot coals meant to help them fight off the patrol long enough to facilitate escape. This plan was not spontaneous. Those involved in the meeting not only planed to shove hot ash and coals on any threatening patrol but also agreed on taking the risk that such a direct confrontation involved. Any misstep could have meant severe punishment for all involved.

By the mid to late antebellum period, the time period that most ex-slave testimony represents, the networks of resistance were firmly established. While it could be that Turner's Rebellion along with the spike in the intrastate slave trade both encouraged runaways and inspired a more vigilant patrol, what the ex-slave narratives reveal along side tales of brutality are the strategies of resistance used to cope with the violent system under which they lived. Connecting the words of ex-slaves who were not living at the time of Turner's Rebellion would be a bit cavalier. However, we do know that Turner's Rebellion was planned during an illicit meeting very near Turner's owner's home. The conspirators stole a pig from a nearby farmer's stock and spent the entire night discussing and planning their intended actions without interruption while enjoying a pig roast. In the early hours of the morning on August 22st, 1831, they entered Sally Travis's home and killed her, her husband, and her infant in their sleep. The patrol system of Southampton County did not stop General Nat and his men. For generations to come the enslaved of Virginia would remark that whites were not "smart enough for old Nat". While it is impossible to know if the enslaved people of Southampton County in the early

⁷³ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 180.

antebellum period used the same techniques as those who came after them, I would like to suggest that each generation's tactics were related and that what ex-slaves' testimonies provide are helpful views of what was possible for enslaved people in antebellum Virginia.

Conclusion:

I was bred an born and reared within three miles of Nat Turner's insurrection— Travis Place.”-Allen Crawford, b. 1835

Allen Crawford was actually owned by Peter Edwards, a man whose farm was visited by slave rebels in 1831. The Travis place and the Francis place were only a few miles away from Crawford's birthplace. Having been born only four years after the rebellion, Crawford's experience as a youth in Southampton County helps to piece together what the rebellion meant for the African American community after Turner's Rebellion was subdued. He remembered:

Lawd yes! I know something about the paterrollers. There were three sets of dem in slavery working like shift—1 set go 'round 'bout six O'Clock 'till nine O'Clock. Nine O'Clock 'nother set travel and the third ones, see, had to stay wid the horses when they left 'm, 'cause niggers would cripple 'em...⁷⁴

The patrol system that Crawford remembers from the 1840s and 1850s in Southampton looks nothing like the patrols attested to in documents available for decade before Turner's Rebellion. The patrols were more consistent and involve three waves of patrollers per evening. While Crawford notes that, "Paterrollers would whip you ef they

⁷⁴ Ibid, 75.

caught you ‘dout a pass,” he is also sure to mention that enslaved people were known to cripple and steal the horses of patrollers.⁷⁵ The vigilance of patrollers appears to have been met with resistance nonetheless.

It is impossible, given the sources available, to demonstrate with certainty the continuity and change of the patrolling system in Southampton throughout the Antebellum period. However, the evidence available reveals a considerable amount more than previously considered about the patrol system that enslaved people evaded and faced down when weighing the option of rebellion. The chief means by which whites, those with and without enslaved property, attested to safeguarding against slave rebellion was the deployment of slave patrols. To defend themselves in the event that what they termed “the unthinkable” happened, white Virginians maintained and perpetuated a vibrant militia culture built on white male solidarity across class lines. These two institutions, the militia and the slave patrol were connected in that they were comprised of the same men in any given locality in Virginia. Men eligible for militia duty and service were obliged to serve in local slave patrols, regardless of their slave holding status. They patrolled the area from which their militia units were mustered, following natural borders and neighborhood boundaries. As the sources demonstrate, the patrols searched some spaces but left many places untouched.

While whites represented their efforts to control the population as extreme and all-powerful, the ideology of white supremacy necessitated a certain amount of slippage. In actuality whites could not keep watch over African Americans at all times. They were vigilant during working hours and, at least in the early Antebellum period, somewhat less vigilant once the work day was done. The prerogative of power in this context was to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

define reality in the face of any and all resistance. The actions of enslaved and free African Americans in antebellum Virginia were conscious decisions to act under a brutally violent system at certain times and in certain spaces permeable and possible to subvert. What African Americans possessed then was something more complex than agency. What they enacted was far more nuanced than resistance or rebellion. In the dissonance between African American definitions of space and white perceptions of African Americans in space lies the *place* where Turner's Rebellion occurred.

Chapter 3: Enslaved Women and Southampton's Labor Economy

Lord, I done been thew somepin'. When I'se five years ole I had to wuk...A Few years after dat I was put out in de fiel's to wuk all day. Sometimes I wished I could run away...

- Miss Caroline Hunter, Born 1847 near Suffolk, VA. (149)

The kitchen was an intimate space. Every day that summer Charlotte used the knife to chop and to slice and to prepare. The kitchen was never without tasks to complete. It was there that she made meals with the other women, but more than that, it was the site of preparation for future meals: canning, salting, churning, and seasoning for the smokehouse. The knife could cut the extra crust away from a pie pan. The knife could strip kernels from a corncob. The knife could chop vegetables for a stew. The knife could section cornbread in a skillet for table. Charlotte was handy with that knife. There was too much to keep watch over in a kitchen with an open hearth to allow for sloppy knife work. Charlotte knew what she was doing.

Charlotte's mistress, Lavinia Francis, found herself at the other end of that knife on the morning of August 22, 1831. The two women had likely worked in that kitchen together. They'd probably shared the knife while working to finish any number of projects and tasks. But then and there, Charlotte came toward her, knife in hand, saying, "I thought you were dead." But Lavinia wasn't dead. She'd just crawled out of a cubby in her attic, eight months pregnant and disoriented in the August heat. She may have had had no idea where her husband or mother-in-law were, but she did know that her two nephews and the overseer were dead in the front yard. And then and there, Charlotte was about to send her and her unborn child to join them. Lavinia knew what Charlotte was doing.

Ester thought Lavinia was dead too. She thought that the group of rebels killed her when they searched the house. When the young Mrs. Francis burst into the kitchen, perspiring and disheveled, Ester registered her presence just as Charlotte did: while standing over their mistress's belongings—her dresses and jewelry, strewn across the kitchen floor. Ester had most likely helped the eighteen-year-old Lavinia pack the very clothing they were going through, as she'd journeying with her from North Carolina to her new life in Virginia with Nathaniel Francis. As Ester bickered with Charlotte over each piece and to whom they rightfully belonged, she had memories of each object that Charlotte did not. Ester knew what she was doing as she stepped between the knife and Lavinia, allowing her mistress to flee into the swamps before Charlotte could get to her.⁷⁶

What transpired in the Francis kitchen on a morning in August 1831 between Lavinia Francis and two enslaved women, Ester and Charlotte, was not a national event. It was a brief encounter in which each woman's experience and relationship with the others came to bear. What happened between those three women was only tangentially related to Nat Turner and his then growing rebel army who traveled through their neighborhood killing almost every white person they encountered. The debates that would later shake the Old Dominion to its foundation by challenging slavery as the commonwealth's dominant labor system were far removed from that morning. For the

⁷⁶ For additional narrative accounts of the Francis story see: Stephen B. Oats. *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 77-78. For an account that includes local lore, the testimony of locals who lived through the event, but a distinctly pro-Jim Crow bias, see: William Sidney Drewry. *The Southampton Insurrection*. (Washington, D.C.: The Neal Company, 1900) 45-50. Additionally, see Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, 66. Allen Crawford, the former slave quoted in this passage, grew up near the Francis farm. Though he was born in 1835 and his testimony about the rebellion comes from stories his mother told him, he speaks candidly about Lavinia Francis and the events that took place in the Francis kitchen during the Southampton Rebellion.

three women who met in the Francis kitchen, their relationships to each other were of much more consequence as the Southampton Rebellion took place.

In Search of Southampton: Enslaved Women, Labor, and Intimate Spaces

The Southampton Rebellion began out of the sight of Southampton's white community. But it took place primarily during working hours at the county's many sites of labor. As the previous chapter demonstrates whites certainly acknowledged, if only tacitly, that after the workday was done, watching over every activity of African Americans wasn't tenable or even desirable. Whites hoped that when they weren't present the memory of past violence would take up the space they left physically vacant while not overseeing the activity of the enslaved and free African Americans who lived on their farms and in their neighborhoods. But, during the workday, most African Americans were in constant contact with the whites that lived on and owned the county's farms and plantations. This was especially true in the neighborhood most affected by the Southampton Rebellion because of the prevalence of small and mid-sized farms and plantations there. To excavate how the culture of pervasive resistance manifested during working hours, we must first consider the labor that African Americans performed. Labor was, after all, their primary activity. Most antebellum southerners, black and white, spent their days laboring. Very few, individuals could truly claim a life of genteel leisure. No, the reality of practicing mixed agriculture on the small to mid-sized farms of Southampton County, Virginia, was that everyone, male or female, black or white, young and old, contributed to the economic viability of each home place.

African American women were called upon to perform a diversity of tasks and it was this labor that defined their daily activities. From field to house to dairy to weaving

cottage, African American women were not relegated to "house work" or "field work" as they often were on the South's largest plantations. They were expected to participate in both as needed in addition to performing each farm's processing labor: labor that took place in each farm's liminal spaces—spaces neither located in the master's house nor the master's fields. While much is made of the greater mobility of enslaved men, this tenet of enslaved life did not hold true when within the boundaries of the homeplace. In the larger scope of antebellum Virginia's rural slave society, enslaved men certainly had more reasons to be off of a plantation than enslaved women. For example, enslaved men were often occupied driving goods to market, plying a trade, and working along Virginia's many rivers and waterways.⁷⁷ However, on the small to midsized plantations of Southampton, enslaved men were found in the fields with very few exceptions. On farms where the number of men of working age was often numbered under ten individuals, a number that included white slave owners and their white overseers, men simply could not be spared. As a general rule, enslaved men were more often mobile off of the plantation. Women were more mobile within a plantation's borders. Women's mobility was linked to the types of labor they were called upon to perform and translated into access to each farm's black and white residents that black men simply could not achieve. I argue that the specific labor regime present in Southampton County afforded enslaved women access to each farm's public and private spaces making them invaluable to the Southampton Rebellion's efforts.

The needs of midsized farms necessitated a more fluid assignment of enslaved labor as tasks in the agricultural cycle necessitated more or fewer enslaved people to tend

⁷⁷ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2004) 28.

to each crop. As a result, enslaved women were required to navigate a diversity of geographies on any given farm more often than their counterparts on larger plantations. When we juxtapose the experiences of enslaved women on the small farms that dotted the rebellion route with the testimonies enslaved women gave in the rebellion's aftermath, we begin to piece together enslaved women's unique position as intermediaries in a number of social spaces connected to their function as laborers in Southampton County. Enslaved women, and their enslaved experience, connected field to house, white to black, slave to free, and insurgent to much needed intelligence and support. Whites were not completely unaware of enslaved women's unique position in both white and Black human geographies. When Southampton's whites sought to make sense of the rebellion that left around sixty whites dead, they asked enslaved women to testify in court in case after case.

The value of women's labor can almost never be underestimated in early antebellum Southampton. There, women, black and white, labored constantly. Few if any of the county's white women, even those of means, could have escaped the necessity of housework. Some were able to afford help with their household tasks but on the small and mid-sized farms of Southampton, securing field labor would have been prioritized over the purchase of a household staff. White slave owners required enslaved women to be versatile and to drift between domestic labor and field labor as needed. While labor was gendered, drudgery was raced. Enslaved women were required to perform the arduous tasks in service of a farm's domestic economy and its agricultural economy. Through the economy of necessity enslaved women possessed access to a number of geographies, physical and social, on the farms where they were enslaved.

Understanding the cycle of agricultural labor and domestic processing work helps to define enslaved women during the hours upon hours when they were under the close watch of their white owners. The realities of life on the small or medium sized farms in Southampton involved a labor system in which enslaved women worked daily in close proximity to white women, white men, black men and black women. The county's unique cash crop, cotton⁷⁸, only enhanced the level of access women had to their home-places. They had intimate contact and access to white households, their masters, mistresses, and children. The Southampton Rebellion was an intimate rebellion.⁷⁹ Often the facilitators of the community's intimate connections were enslaved women, with or without their consent. Enslaved women's unique placement in the labor regime of Southampton's agricultural cycles gave them access to intelligence about all of Southampton's social communities.

⁷⁸ While cotton was not a rare cash crop by the early 19th century in the American South, cotton production was never widespread in Virginia. Southampton County, as will be discussed in the next section, was one of a handful of Virginia counties where cotton culture thrived.

⁷⁹ Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 3.

Domestic Geographies and Access:

Cotton and Mixed Agriculture in Southampton County

Got to have good pickers fo' "Ginny [Virginia] cotton. Ole Marse would go down to Car'lina an' hire pickers to come an' help when he got a good crop. We'd do some kind of pickin' den. No'th Car'lina niggers used to say dey could outpick 'Ginny niggers, an' some of 'em could too, but dey warn't many could outpick me.

-Susan Mabry⁸⁰

Along a tiny band of soil located in the southeast corner of the state, cotton culture was important to only a few of Virginia's antebellum counties. There in the far southern sections of Mecklenburg, Brunswick, Greensville, Southampton, Nansemond, and even Norfolk counties, Virginia farmers practiced cotton culture.⁸¹ It is easy to overlook Virginia's tiny cotton belt. While Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are certainly known as cotton producers, historians most often associate Virginia with another cash crop: tobacco. Nevertheless, these counties rest at the northern most border of the Middle Coastal Plain, a soil belt that stretches through the cotton region of North and South Carolina as far as the eastern cotton region of Georgia. Southampton's famed sandy loam was and is soil akin to some of the richest cotton soil in the United States.⁸²

On larger plantations throughout the antebellum South, skill level and not gender often dictated what tasks an owner assigned his or her enslaved labor force.⁸³

⁸⁰ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 199.

⁸¹ Rupert B. Vance. *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929) 14. Also, http://www.familyhistory101.com/maps/va_cm.html, was consulted for county names and boundaries circa 1830.

⁸² Ibid, iii and 14.

⁸³ Daina Ramey Berry. *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 24-28.

Additionally, historians have long known that women were used more often as field labor than domestic labor. This section addresses the question of how the domestic and agricultural economies of small and medium sized plantations influenced the work regimes, and by extension the level of access, of enslaved women in Southampton County.

Unlike the country's major cotton regions further south, Southampton County, Virginia, was not the home to many sprawling plantations boasting enslaved labor forces in the hundreds. While the county had its gentry who did own significant land and slave holdings, the majority of landowners directly effected by the Southampton Rebellion, like the vast majority of landowners in the county, had small plantations or farms with fewer than twenty slaves. Most practiced some form of mixed agriculture. In truth, while cotton was widely cultivated in the county, antebellum Southampton was better known for its apple brandy than its cotton production.⁸⁴

It is important to investigate how each crop in the cycle of mixed agriculture shaped and defined labor cycles and, by extension, enslaved life in Southampton County in order to gain a clearer picture of the lives of enslaved women. When thinking about the cycles of agricultural life in Southampton, it is important to consider not only the demands of cotton culture but also the relentless pace of mixed agriculture. Each crop had its cycle of planting, tending, lying in and harvest. Hands were not wedded to the gang system prevalent on larger plantations throughout the South. For the majority of the enslaved in Southampton County, work regime ebbed and flowed along with the cultivation of multiple crops. For enslaved women the cycle did not end with the harvest of each new crop. In conjunction with fieldwork, enslaved women were literate in any

⁸⁴ Drewry, *Southampton Insurrection*, 104.

number of domestic skills. These skills most often coincided with each farm's processing needs. In the case of cotton, beyond tending in the fields and harvesting, the cash crop needed to be ginned, carded, and spun. Additionally, apples and garden produce needed to be preserved. Dairy work, for example, did not cease because the cotton was in or the brandy distilling. While cotton got to lie in, the women of Southampton County received no such respite.

Women participated in every aspect of cotton culture. They labored in the fields. They ginned the harvest. In many cases in antebellum Southside Virginia, they produced the thread, cloth and garments clothing the home-place. Though related to the cotton varieties found in the Deep South, Southside Virginia cotton was unique. In Southampton County the cotton was “small an’ scrummy an’ stick to de plant like green bark.”⁸⁵ Unlike with modern crops, that are shaped more by bioengineering in agricultural labs than by natural selection, antebellum crops had greater variation by region. Therefore, it was possible that the variety of upland cotton that survived and flourished in Virginia in the antebellum period was somewhat different from the upland cotton found in Louisiana or Georgia. Different environmental factors lead to the evolution of a crop that could survive in Virginia’s climate, with Virginia’s bugs, and Virginia’s weather cycles. According to enslaved people from Virginia’s Southside, in Virginia, “Cotton plants was small and scrummy wid little buds...”⁸⁶ Smaller plants meant a longer “chopping” period. Sticky cotton bolls meant more work, which required greater skill, at harvest time.

The harvest lasted from September through as late as November. Harvesting cotton, with its prickly bolls and proximity to the ground between knee and hip height,

⁸⁵ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 199.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 288.

was the most notoriously arduous task required to cultivate the crop. In Southampton where the cotton bowls were, “small an’ scrummy an’ stick to de plant like green bark,”⁸⁷ the harvest required particularly skilled hands. On larger plantations the gang system was the most favored system of labor organization. On smaller farms, where the hands were much fewer, everyone was used to harvest the cotton crop. In fact, some farmers turned to hired labor in addition to their small enslaved labor forces. Susan Marby testifies to her master’s practice of going to North Carolina to hire additional hands.⁸⁸ Though these additional hands helped to bring in the harvest in a timely manner, they did not alleviate the workload of female field hands.

While evidence for the specifics of cotton processing in Southampton is sparse, there is significant evidence throughout the cotton South for the role that enslaved women played in processing cotton and other “slave crops”. In Virginia, a state with a long tradition of tobacco culture, slave owners often delegated tasks of processing tobacco for market to enslaved women. Many descriptions of tobacco cultivation, including the testimonies of enslaved people, specify that the long processing phase of the tobacco growth cycle was performed by women. Gabe Hunt, an enslaved Virginian remembered that after the harvest of the tobacco crop, “Den de women would take each leaf up an’ fix de stem ‘tween two pieces of board, den tie de ends together. Den hand’em all up in dat barn an’ let it smoke tow days an’ two nights. Got to keep dat fire burnin’ rain or shine, ‘cause if it go out, it spile de tobaccy.”⁸⁹ Women were responsible for drying, curing, separating, grading, and packaging tobacco for market. Women’s role in the processing of cash crops is also evidenced in other “slave crops.” Women processed

⁸⁷ Weevils in the Wheat, 199.

⁸⁸ Weevils in the Wheat, 199.

⁸⁹ Weevils in the Wheat, 148.

rice for market in South Carolina, pounding the grain just as their ancestors had before them in West Africa.⁹⁰ Women milled cane and distilled rum in the Caribbean.⁹¹ And throughout the cotton South, women ginned, carded, and spun cotton. It is therefore reasonable to believe that enslaved women played a role in the processing of Southampton cotton for market. Unlike tobacco processing labor, which produced a product for smoking and chewing, cotton processing labor produced the fiber that laborers ginned, carded, spun, wove, cut and sewed into clothing. The production of clothing, even after the advent of factory made pieces, was almost exclusively the domain of antebellum women. In other words, labor in the cotton fields produced a commodity processed and worked with by women, more analogous to the produce of dairy work than tobacco work.

Throughout the antebellum period Southern cotton farmers made use of homespun material. While decades earlier Eli Whitney's famous 1793 invention, the cotton gin, may have given rise to the economic flourish of the cotton South, the industrial technology that would transfer production of cotton textiles from home to factory did not develop until the 1810s.⁹² Even after the advent of factory equipment able to produce yarn from American upland cotton in 1813, store bought yarn would not prove economically advantageous and in wide use outside of the Northeast until the

⁹⁰ Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2002) and Daina Ramey Berry. *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 24-28.

⁹¹ Barbra Bush. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*. (Indianapolis: Indiana, 1990.)

⁹² Victor S. Clark. *History of Manufactures in the United States, 1607-1860*. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1916) Accessed through Google Books, 319.

1830s. Even then, many Southern planters continued to use homespun cloth to clothe their enslaved laborers.⁹³ Women performed the overwhelming majority of the labor needed to produce cloth from raw cotton. While the tasks of weaving and spinning will be addressed in the next chapter because they were preformed by many free African American women, ginning and carding deserve special attention at present.

Whitney improved upon an ancient design and produced a cotton gin that used teeth to pull cotton fiber free of cottonseed. Cotton gins, or devices used to separate cotton fiber from cottonseed, were in use in East and Central Asia as well as Africa long before the Common Era. Often women were responsible for using roller gins to separate out cottonseed. Just as in ancient times, women in the cotton South were responsible for some ginning work. Whitney's invention most famously expedited the time needed to process raw cotton. The gin was much easier to use and required much less physical exertion. Unlike the large roller gins of the past that required prime, often male, hands to operate them successfully, the saw gin could be and was operated by enslaved women. Ginning was only the first step in processing the raw fiber after harvest. This labor was almost exclusively the labor of women and children.

All available hands participated in the process of removing seed particles left behind after ginning by hand called moting. This made moting the final processing step engaged in by both men and women. Once enslaved laborers moted the harvest they either packed the clean fiber for shipment to industrial centers in the northeastern United States and across the Atlantic or began the process of spinning cotton fiber into yarn. The evidence for Southampton County indicates that some of the county's cotton remained in Southampton for processing throughout the antebellum period and was processed by free

⁹³ Ibid, 439-440.

and enslaved African American women in the county.⁹⁴ This processing work would have taken over the late autumn and winter months occupying women long past the time for fields to lie fallow after the harvest.

Of course the cycle of agriculture on most Southampton farms was not dictated by one, but by many crops. Some crops, like corn or garden produce had work cycles that could be scattered between cotton planting, chopping, and harvest. Farmers left Southampton's other major export, hogs, to roam area forests to forage for their own keep and slaughter season fell in late winter, well before planting season. But other crops contended with the cotton fields for attention. Tending the county's famous orchards, from which came famed apple brandy, overlapped with cotton's harvest in autumn. Other work performed exclusively by women—dairy work, laundry, and food preparation—posed constant labor demands.

While historians have made much of enslaved women's restricted mobility outside of their home-places, the realities of labor needs on the South's small and medium sized farms and plantations gave enslaved women good plausible reasons to be in almost any location on a given farm. The labor they performed gave them access to work spaces, living spaces, and proximity to whites that differed greatly from that given to enslaved men. I am not suggesting a change in the status of enslaved women given their versatility in a small plantation's labor economy. Having the ability to spin, sew, and later launder clothing on the home-place did not elevate enslaved women's place in their own communities. That is, enslaved men did not necessarily approach enslaved women as social equals or social betters. A slave owner's ability to assign greater

⁹⁴ Southampton County (Va.) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1754-1860. Library of Virginia.

monetary value to an enslaved woman because she could harvest cotton at an alarming rate or bake the best pies in the county did not make her worthy of social esteem.

Antebellum ideals of white womanhood in the American South purported to esteem exactly the opposite: women who did not perform manual labor were socially esteemed. The versatility required of enslaved women on small and medium sized farms was considered drudgery.

The labor that enslaved women's white owners coerced them into performing provided them access that enslaved men were not granted. It gave them reason to be in the plantation kitchen, the orchard, the garden, the moting floor, the weaving cottage, the slave quarters, the white residence, and in transit between them all. In each labor site they came into contact with a given farm's residents and neighbors. And so, even under the watchful eyes of mistresses' intent on maintaining an efficient domestic economy, enslaved women maintained access if not mobility.

The key to this type of mobility's advantage was the consent of the white population. Just as the region's many enslaved black watermen needed mobility along the James River to make their labor profitable to their owners, enslaved women required mobility around the home-place, and whites granted it to them. Of course, access does not denote action or agency. The primary occupation of enslaved women, as described previously, was strenuous labor. However, even during said labor regime, African Americans passed intelligence and maintained the resistance network described in the previous chapter.⁹⁵ Enslaved women's access was an asset to that network even when it wasn't an asset to an individual personally.

⁹⁵ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 298. An excellent example of this phenomenon is included in the previous chapter. An enslaved man passes information about local slave

Notably, it was the knowledge of enslaved women's access to the home-place that propelled them into Southampton's one room courthouse in September of 1831. Time and time again, the county's justices heard the testimony of enslaved black women about their whereabouts during the rebellion. Their unique access to the liminal spaces within their community gave them a role in the trials that followed the rebellion. While the record of their testimonies remains a law clerk, or clerks', attempt at flattening a very complex story, each testimony reveals something about the unique position of enslaved women during Turner's Rebellion.

Geographies and Access: Enslaved Women and the Trial Record

The trials came quickly. Rebels or not, slaves were valuable property. And the young men who filled Jerusalem's jail were prime hands. August was quickly fading into September. And September signaled that the harvest was almost upon the county. Those accused of conspiring to rebel needed to be tried, convicted, valued, and executed by the county court system to ensure that the owner's of Southampton were reimbursed for the execution of their valuable property. And so a court comprised of the most prominent men of Southampton, set about the business of passing judgment on the enslaved men brought before them.⁹⁶ For some, the gallows would be the ultimate outcome of the trials

patrols in code to an enslaved woman who is working right beside their mistress. Notably, their mistress questions his presence near the kitchen, an indication of the lack of mobility of enslaved men in comparison to enslaved women.

⁹⁶ Hening, *The New Virginia Justice*, 543. "Sect. 30. The justices of every county and corporation shall be justices of *Oyer and Terminer*, for the trial of slaves, which trials shall be by five at least, without juries, upon legal evidence, at such times as the sheriffs or other officers shall appoint, being not less than five nor more than ten days after commitment to prison. No slave shall be condemned, unless all the justices setting shall agree in opinion that the prisoner is guilty, *after allowing him counsel in his defense, whose fee, amounting to five dollars, shall be paid by the owner...*"

that lasted into December. For others, the Justices assembled meted out a brutal type of mercy by transferring defendants out of the state—another kind of death. Among the many testimonies that rotating justices heard, day after day, were those of enslaved women who witnessed the rebellion. Their testimonies often reveal their access to the many spaces on the farms where they resided and give clues to their possible involvement in Turner's Rebellion.

The trial record remains one of the best clues that historians have as to the events of two days in August 1831. Modern day stenography would have preserved, verbatim, the words of all who appeared in court. The realities of hurried trials amidst anxiety over the pending capture of the rebellion's leader resulted in records that are, at times, only approximations of the goings on in court. Expediting the trials ensured that formal judicial methods supported by the County's elite, and not vigilantly justice, ruled the county in the wake of the rebellion's trauma. The court's justices heard the testimony of a number of Southampton's citizens, slave and free. They assigned council for those indicted. Notably, they dismissed a number of cases that they found to have no merit and transferred, according to the law, the cases of free persons of color to the state's courts in Richmond. The court's justices did their best to maintain order in the wake of their communities collective trauma—trauma that often took its toll on the shape of the hearings the Justices carefully presided over.

At first glance it would appear that women were indeed everywhere—everywhere and in opposition. All but one of the enslaved women called to the witness stand gave testimony for the prosecution. All of the cases in which women testified resulted guilty verdicts. Only two of those verdicts included the justices' recommendation to transfer the

defendant out of state, staying his execution by hanging. Of course, the trial record, and even the trials themselves, were meant to flatten a story made infinitely more complex because of the community that produced it. Keeping the access that women had to the county's many geographies while taking a closer look at women's testimony juxtaposed with other valuable sources about the county reveals the spaces that women inhabited in the county and gives clues to their involvement in Turner's rebellion.

Porter's House: Venus and the Female Network of Intelligence

There is a road in present day Southampton County, Virginia, named Porter's House Road. Like many of the county's roads, it takes its name from one of the many sites important to Turner's Rebellion. Richard Porter's house still stands there, granted with a lean, along the roadside. Even in its present state of dilapidation it remains a bit stately. The house still communicates the status of Richard Porter and his family. The now overgrown house still bears the hallmarks of rising gentility with two stories, a number of windows, and an ornate front door. Richard Porter owned 30 slaves in 1830 and supported a household of 47 persons. Among those considerable slave holdings was a woman named Venus. She was the first enslaved woman to appear before the court in September of 1831, and her testimony in conversation with the rebellion's other key source material provides an excellent example of the ways that women's testimonies reveal their access to the County's many geographies.

Venus first testified for the prosecution in the case of Jack, an enslaved man owned by the late Catharine Whitehead. The charge levied was serious:

...feloniously/ consulted, advised and conspired with each other and divers other slaves to rebel and make insurrection and for making insurrection and taking the lives of divers free white persons of the Commonwealth.⁹⁷

Once Jack was convicted to hang, the court turned to his companion, Andrew, also a slave of Catharine Whitehead. Using Venus's testimony, the court convicted Andrew to hang as well.

It could not have been far from the court's mind that the farm that Jack and Andrew were both enslaved on was the site of considerable brutality. Rebels severed their mistress' head . Nat Turner himself bludgeoned their mistress's daughter with a sword by until, giving up on the dull sword, Turner struck her deathblow with a fence post. Though the trial proceedings make clear that neither man in question was present during the violence on their place, the justices still levied a guilty verdict. According to testimony by another enslaved man on the Whitehead place, Jack and Andrew fled the approaching rebels. Additional testimony placed them all over the county trying desperately to save themselves from being confused for rebels. Even though none of the witnesses testified to seeing either man with known rebels or to seeing either man commit a murder or act of rebellion, the court sentenced them to death. The testimony Venus offered then was not the final nail in Jack and Andrew's respective coffins.

Her appearance in court appears to have remained inconspicuous to her white male contemporaries. Remaining inconspicuous was to her benefit in a county rife with vigilantly violence and justices living under the pressure to execute slave rebels. Her testimony was echoed in the testimonies of the trial's successive witnesses: Andrew and

⁹⁷ Tagle, 177-178.

Jack rode around the neighborhood asking after the whereabouts of Turner and his band of rebels. It is clear, however, that Jack and Andrew were not the only visitors received at the Porter place during the rebellion.

Nat Turner's Confession reveals that Venus was perhaps more savvy and circumspect, than obedient and aligned with the white power structure. Porter's House, the plantation on which she was enslaved, is noted by Turner as an important gathering place in the midmorning hours of the rebellion's earliest events. And so, while her testimony may have been inconsequential for Jack and Andrew given the court's determination to convict them, her story does give us a clue as to one way enslaved women were involved in the rebellion and managed to navigate both the geography of resistance and the geography of accommodation simultaneously.

Her testimony was simple: the defendants rode up to her master's house around 9 o'clock in the morning and asked after the white people on her plantation. She told Jack and Andrew that the Porters were gone. Her conversation with the men continued:

They then enquired where the black people were (meaning the negroes that had been/ there,/ and were in insurrection). She told them they had/ gone/, the prisoner and Andrew said they were going on after them, that the negroes had left word for them to go on after them and they did not know what else to do, and they went off, the witness understood that the prisoner and Andrew were going to join the insurgents they were both on one horse.⁹⁸

As confirmed in additional testimony, Jack and Andrew then rode off in search of Turner and his men with little success. Venus' testimony in Andrew's subsequent case is

⁹⁸ Tragle, 180.

identical to that in the case of Jack. Her place in the story of Turner's Rebellion could end right there. Venus, though, was an enslaved woman well equipped to pass valuable intelligence.

According to Turner's published confessions, he reached the Porter house just after he and fifteen to twenty men made their sunrise call at the Whitehead place. Turner himself was in the group of men who arrived at Porter's doorstep. He testified, "On my reaching Mr. Porter's, he had escaped with his family. I understood there, that the alarm had already spread...."⁹⁹By that point the rebels had divided, regrouped, and divided once more to cover more ground in the neighborhood. Turner's visit to Porter's House provided him with the first indication that whites in the county knew violence was afoot. It was there that he decided, "to bring up those sent to Mr. Doyel's and Mr. Howell Harris'," that is, the group who split from him at the Whitehead place. It was there that he decided to continue on to the Francis place in hopes of meeting up with the rest of his men. We know that around one to two hours later Jack and Andrew rode up to Venus at Porter's house.

Venus never mentions meeting Turner nor describes the group of "the negroes that had been/ there,/ and were in insurrection," before Jack and Andrew arrived on horseback. Turner confesses only that he, "...I understood there, that the alarm had already spread," without mentioning who, exactly, conveyed the information he needed to plot his next move. I would like to suggest that it was Venus who encountered Nat Turner at Porter's House. Venus passed along the intelligence that her master and his family had fled. She told Turner that the alarm was out. She then waited and passed along

⁹⁹ Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 50.

the same information to Jack and Andrew, men who, "...the negroes had left word for..." making her court appearance circumspect, indeed.

Venus then acted as a woman with access to multiple geographies. Her presence at the Porter home went unquestioned because she must have had some labor related reason for being there. Her role in passing along intelligence to two groups of rebels was only possible because she had access to both the home of her owners and the community that the enslaved rebels belonged to. Finally, her ability to remain quiet about whom else she happened to see on the morning of the rebellion denotes her ability to also remain silent when faced by men who desperately needed information about the scope of the alarm in the county. She did not have to help them. But, it appears that she did.

The rebels left the Porter farm for the Francis farm just up the road. When they started their journey to the Francis place they had already murdered a number of Nathaniel Francis's family members. In fact, as they set out from Porter's house he had just received word of the carnage at his sister's place and set out through the swamp to see about her. Red, his brother Salathiel's slave, managed to make it just ahead of Nat Turner to the Francis farm and was stuffing Lavinia in an attic cubby hole just as Turner and his men decided to try to regroup in the Francis' front yard. In the moments that Venus made the choice to pass along valuable intelligence enslaved women on the near by Francis farm were mere moments away from making their own choices about how to navigate the geography of rebellion and the multiple geographies of their home place.

The Francis Farm: Access to Domestic Space

The events that took place at the Francis farm are as fresh in contemporary historical memory in Southampton County as they are laid plain in the rebellion's many relevant historical documents. Both oral tradition and the historical record reveal a vivid portrait of the many intimate connections on a fairly typical Southampton County home-place. It is clear that while the Francis family was surprised to find that a slave rebellion was ravaging their neighborhood, the enslaved people on their place were not only well aware of the violence in progress but were participants in it. Five of the Francis's eight male slaves were indicted and convicted of conspiring to rebel. According to oral history and family legend, the farm's enslaved women were also sympathetic to the rebellion's cause. Their actions during the course of the rebellion reveal one way that enslaved women could have made quick use of their intimate access to the whites that owned them.

Lavinia and Ester entered a modest home in the fall of 1830.¹⁰⁰ The building itself, with two rooms downstairs and a second floor little better than a loft, already housed five people: Nathaniel, his mother, their overseer, and his two orphaned nephews, both under the age of ten. Nathaniel's brother, Salathiel, and sister lived nearby on farms. His brother was attempting to make a small farm profitable with the help of a handful of enslaved people. His married sister, Sally, owned the man soon to become Southampton's most famous resident, Nat Turner. The family had a wealth of community ties but was by no means rich. While the presence of an overseer and Ester, a domestic slave, might denote the Francis' up-and-coming status, they were far from landed gentry. The Francis

¹⁰⁰ Francis Family Bible Record, 1805-1929. Library of Virginia (<http://image.lva.virginia.gov/BibleII/35575.pdf>)

household also included fifteen enslaved people and six free people of color.¹⁰¹ Nathaniel owned seven men as well as Charlotte and Ester, indicating that he prioritized the farm's fieldwork.¹⁰² Also indicative of Francis's financial status and agricultural goals was his employ of three free adults of color. Like many households in the county, free people of color were often used as cost-effective supplementary labor.

Work on the Francis farm was diverse, especially for women. Most farms of this size practiced mixed agriculture, but their pace of life was still dictated by the county's demanding cash crop: upland short staple cotton.¹⁰³ Other crops, like corn and garden produce, had work cycles that could be scattered between cotton planting, chopping, and harvest. Tending the county's many orchards, from which came its famed apple brandy, overlapped with cotton's harvest in autumn. But, most important, work performed exclusively by women—dairy work, laundry, and food preparation—posed constant labor demands throughout the cycle of sowing, tending and harvesting. Of course, there were also always children underfoot. The Francis farm was home to eleven children under the age of ten, Nathaniel's two nephews and nine African American children. Even if the latter were put to work around the age of five, they still required supervision—most likely provided by the farm's women.

On the Francis farm five women—two white, two enslaved, and one free—performed all of the domestic labor and processing work for a farm of twenty-seven. Historians have long known that most enslaved women were field laborers. But the needs

¹⁰¹ 1830 Federal Census, State of Virginia, 259. (Accessed via Ancestry.com)

¹⁰² Here I consider working age to be the second available age category for enslaved people (aged ten to twenty four and above) though children much younger were used for agricultural tasks.

¹⁰³ Rupert B. Vance. *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929) iii and 14.

of a small to midsized plantation were not the same as a large plantation. The labor of white women and free women of color seems to have been clearly denoted. Free women in the county worked almost exclusively as domestics or spinsters processing cotton. And white women of Lavinia's class were usually spared field labor. The needs of midsized farms necessitated a more fluid assignment of enslaved labor as tasks in the agricultural cycle necessitated more or fewer enslaved people to tend to each crop.¹⁰⁴ Additionally labor related to the cotton crop was not limited to fieldwork in the traditional sense.

Cotton required a number of intermediary processing steps to render it profitable: ginning, moting, carding, spinning, dyeing, weaving, cutting forms, and sewing. These steps, if performed on site, were almost exclusively performed by women. The labor that Charlotte and Ester performed daily put them in proximity to a number of spaces on the Francis farm. They, more than any of the other of the farm's residents save its lone free woman, had access not only to the most farm spaces but the most farm residents.

The enslaved women on the Francis farm had access to both the farm's white household and the community of African Americans who lived and worked there.

Charlotte resided on the Francis farm before Ester arrived with Lavinia in 1830. One can only speculate what social upheaval occurred upon the arrival of the new Mrs. Francis and her maid from North Carolina. Lavinia's pregnancy would have required more

¹⁰⁴ Southampton County (Va.) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1754-1860. Folder: List of Free Negroes, Nottoway Parish, 1817, 1821, 1822, 1826 and Apprentice and Indenture of Colord Children, 1820-1859. Barcode Number: 1119722, 1119725, 1185512. Library of Virginia. Evidence of the occupations of free women of color in the county indicates that they were hired to perform spinning and domestic labor: perhaps one of many subtle distinctions between them and enslaved women. Within this collection of records there are free person of color records that pertain to St. Luke's Parish in the 1820s. Each document lists the name, place of residence, and occupation of each person of working age. Free women are almost universally listed as "spinsters." Indentures for free girls of color indicate that they were trained to perform domestic/housekeeping labor and not field work.

adjustment still as she adapted to the limits her condition put upon her productivity, especially in Southampton's sweltering summer months when she entered her final stages of pregnancy. Charlotte was privy to all of these changes between the fall of 1830 and summer of 1831. Along with her connection to the changes in the farm's white household, Charlotte knew the black men who worked in the fields of the Francis farm. Of the seven men of working age that Nathaniel Francis owned, five were tried for participating in the rebellion. Sam was present at the rebellion's launch point: cabin pond. He was a leader of the uprising and must have been privy to extensive planning information. Dred was quick to join the rebels once they appeared at the Francis farm. The remaining three men from the Francis place who were later indicted were boys really, barely teenagers who, according to their trial record, were forced into the mounting rebel band when they visited the Francis farm.¹⁰⁵ Charlotte knew them too. She'd fed them and helped to put clothes on their backs season after season. And as they left her sight to move on to the next farm on the rebels' path, she set to work preparing for them to return.

The Francis farm was a short walk through the woods to the Travis place, home of Nathaniel Francis's sister, her new husband, and a reclusive slave named Nat Turner. The Travis farm was also home to six enslaved women of working age. Given their white owner's kinship ties and their farms' proximity to one another, it is not unimaginable that Charlotte and the other women on her farm were at least familiar with the women on the

¹⁰⁵ For a narrative account see again, Oats, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, 78. For the trial records of Sam, Dred, Nathan, Tom, and Davy see, Henry Irving Tragle. *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*. (Amherst: UMass, 1971) 190-192, 198-201. While the court found Nathan, Tom, and Davy, guilty, the justices recommended that the governor commute their death sentences to transfer from the state. Sam and Dred, however, were executed.

Travis place. If they weren't brought together regularly through informal domestic economy or their white owners' visits with one another, they certainly ran into each other at church the Sunday before the rebellion.¹⁰⁶ Ester, though a newcomer, would have been connected to this larger black community as well. She may not have been as privy to information as Charlotte, but she too belonged to the black community that produced the Southampton Rebellion. She too lived on a farm near the rebellion's epicenter, connected to prominent male rebels both through her residence on the Francis place and her owner's kinship ties. Both women, through their daily labors, would have had contact with a number of communities on theirs and surrounding farms.

Given the Francis farm's proximity to the rebellion's epicenter and the fact that two of its most prominent male rebels resided on Nathaniel Francis's property, it is hard to imagine that the women of color on the Francis place did not know about the rebellion's imminence. Their workdays took them all over the farm and brought them into contact with other community members throughout each day. August, the month in which the rebellion took place, was a time in the agricultural cycle called "laying in." While the men of the farm enjoyed relative mobility to hunt, fish, and steal pigs to roast while fomenting the rebellion, the farm's women continued about their business all over the farm's landscape. This made them arbiters of key information at the same time that it

¹⁰⁶ We know that enslaved people attended secret meetings and held church in the woods and swamps of Virginia from extensive testimony that can be found in, Charles L. Perdue, Jr, Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976) Additionally, Southampton's churches had both black and white members. See, Randolph Ferguson Scully. "'I Come Here Before You Did and I Shall Not Go Away,': Race, Gender, and Evangelical community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion." *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, No. 4, (2007).

rendered them beyond suspicion. Lavinia was shocked upon encountering Ester and Charlotte dividing her belongings for a reason.

"Wicked"¹⁰⁷ Charlotte and Loyal Ester: Toward a Continuum of Resistance

A careful examination of what took place in the Francis kitchen exemplifies one way to begin to define a continuum of resistance. While many narratives of the rebellion present Ester and Charlotte as opposites, I propose that they were instead allies who chose to take different actions along a continuum of resistance. Each woman chose to act as an individual and as a member of Southampton's African American community. In mere moments, they each made choices that reflected the diversity of African American women's responses to and participation in the Southampton Rebellion.

The event that would later terrify the nation arrived on the small legs of an enslaved boy, someone Nathaniel recognized from his sister's place. The message he brought was alarming but almost unbelievable. Nevertheless, Nathaniel cut out into the woods to check on his sister, his mother close behind. And not a moment too soon, Red Nelson, a mixed-raced slave of Nathaniel's brother, Salathiel, came close on the messenger's heels, rebels close behind him. Red grabbed Lavinia and stuffed her in an upstairs cubbyhole where she promptly passed out from fear and the heat. Red assured the arriving rebels that there was no one else on the Francis place after they'd dispatched the overseer and little boys in the front yard. The rebels searched the house anyway. They even felt around in the cubby where Lavinia lay unconscious just out of their reach. Satisfied that no one was left they moved on. The event took less than half an hour. In

¹⁰⁷ Drewry. *The Southampton Insurrection*. 48. Drewry refers to Charlotte as "wicked Charlotte" in his account of the event. Drewry casts Ester and Charlotte as foils.

most narratives, the rebels left the Francis place when that group of men rode off to the next farm. But, I posit, not before speaking with Charlotte. They told her that they'd return. And, evidently, she had reason to believe them because when Lavinia came to and stumbled upon a commotion in the farm's kitchen, dinner was on the hearth. The rebellion, then, was not quite over on the Francis place.

Charlotte and Ester reacted and responded to Lavinia's presence in mere seconds, but their actions were informed by their relationships both with their mistress and with the African American community that they belonged to. Charlotte chose to charge at her mistress, knife brandished and ready. Ester's decision to stop her often obscures her other resistive actions in traditional accounts of the incident. Perhaps watching a woman, eight months pregnant, whom she'd known her whole life, be murdered in front of her was too much for Ester. But she certainly wasn't searching for Lavinia after the rebels visited the farm. She didn't hide Lavinia in the cubbyhole. She was busy in the kitchen with Charlotte when Lavinia finally appeared. Notably, though she stopped the murder, Ester didn't follow Lavinia into the woods to help her survive in Southampton's swamps. She didn't advise her as to the whereabouts of her husband. No, Ester remained in that kitchen. Maybe Ester and Charlotte fought over who would have Lavinia Francis's belongings, but there is no evidence that the dinner on the stove was a point of contention between them. Ester, then, clearly expected the rebels to return for food and she sided, for the moment, with them. The women, then, were not foils acting in opposition. When it came to matters of the rebellion and their support for it, they appear to have been in agreement.

The women on the Francis farm, white and black, had long-standing, complex relationships with one another. It is easy to cast Ester and Charlotte as antagonists at first glance—one chose to violently attack her mistress while the other facilitated her mistress's escape. It is just as easy to think of the entire black community of Southampton as "for" or "against" the rebellion. Though both were African American, Ester and Charlotte were individuals with unique experiences of race, gender, and slavery. When confronted with Lavinia's survival, both chose to act, not in opposition, but along a continuum of action. Given the complexity and nuance of interpersonal relationships coupled with a closer examination of both Ester and Charlotte's reported actions, it makes more sense to think of them not in opposition but as choosing from a lexicon of action along a continuum of resistance long present in their community. Resistance was pervasive but survival was the prerogative. Allegiances and alliances were necessarily malleable and individual. Ester might have had scruples that Charlotte did not share. Each woman had a different relationship with Lavinia Francis. In the end, Ester's one act of mercy probably saved her life. Charlotte later met a grisly end at the hand of Nathaniel Francis.¹⁰⁸ Their story is often distilled into their conflicting choices with regard to their mistress. But placing this moment in the context of their neighborhood, their many relationships, enriches our understanding of women's diverse responses to the rebellion.

¹⁰⁸ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, 85. According to local lore, which Drewry relies upon heavily in his account, Charlotte was tied to a tree and then shot numerous times. Nathaniel Francis fired the first shot and the militia followed suit. According to local legend, a Francis family story still told in the county to this day, the tree Charlotte was tied to died as a result of the amount of shot in its trunk after Charlotte's execution.

Access and Participation:

Enslaved Women and Violence in Turner's Rebellion

The Barrow farm was just up the road from the Francis place. Thomas Barrow belonged to the same class as Nathaniel Francis. He too initially ignored rumors of a slave insurrection. He reacted quickly enough to the sight of black men on horseback headed his way that, like any good white antebellum southern man, Barrow had time to set about the business of defending his home. He hoped to hold the advancing insurgents off long enough to allow his wife, Mary, time to escape out the back of their house. As she later recalled, she indeed fled out the back of her house and it was there that an enslaved woman named Lucy reached out and held on to her arm. Lucy deterred her mistress for only a moment before another enslaved woman, called "Aunt" Ester, grasped her mistress's other arm and shuttled her off to safety. Though Mrs. Barrow could not say that she knew what Lucy's intentions were in the confusion of flight, yet another enslaved woman's testimony clarified the situation. Bird's testimony revealed that Lucy meant to detain Mrs. Barrow long enough for her mistress to join in her husband's fate. Lucy was the only woman arraigned and charged with conspiring to rebel in Southampton County courts.

The story of Lucy and "Aunt" Ester parallels that of Ester and Charlotte well enough to beg the question: had her owner not murdered Charlotte, would there have been another woman's trial recorded in the historical record? While that question only leads to a series of unproductive hypotheticals, it is clear that the enslaved women of the county had reason enough to want their white owners dead. Of course, the contrasting behavior of Ester and Lucy also begs attention. Both Ester and Lucy lived in and

navigated the same geographies of labor and intimacy with their owners. Lucy was well acquainted with the other enslaved people on the place. She was convicted by the court in large part because of testimony linking her to known rebels. Bird testified that Lucy had money hidden in a bag of feathers and that the room in which she and this small savings were discovered was also occupied by, “another (Moses since hung).” Bird also told the court that she saw Lucy speaking with the rebels on the Barrow’s porch after they killed John T. Barrow.¹⁰⁹ Moses was the slave of another Barrow, Thomas Barrow. Moses’s trial eighteen days before Lucy’s, he was charged with joining in with the rebels voluntarily. Though Hark, a prominent slave in the rebellion, testified that Moses eventually left the group and Delsey, a slave woman on the Vaughn farm, testified that he was forced to join the rebels, Moses was convicted and sentenced to hang.¹¹⁰ By the time Lucy was charged in court he had already been executed. Lucy’s connection to Moses and reported fraternizing with others identified by the court as rebels won the prosecution’s case. She was sentenced to hang and was later executed, her intimate connections to both the white and black communities of Southampton County having been her undoing.

Speaking for the Defense:

Delsey and Access to the African American Community

The Rebecca Vaughn house was the last cite where whites were killed during Turner’s rebellion. After the violence there the white militia had organized and began the job of hunting down and engaging the insurgents. The modest house, comprised of two ground

¹⁰⁹ Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt*, 208.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 230.

floor rooms and a loft, still stands. Though the local Southampton County Historical Society recently moved the structure from its original sight, the house remains much as it did in the 1830s. A widow, Rebecca Vaughn, her two sons, and her niece, lived with her twelve slaves on a modest farm.¹¹¹ All of the farm's white residents, including an overseer, were murdered. While the house's status as the final location of insurrection related slayings makes it worthy of historic preservation in present day Southampton County, the importance of the Vaughn House to this study lies in its black residents. While Rebecca Vaughn did not live to see the trials that followed the rebellion, the enslaved people who lived with her and her family remained. Delsey, an enslaved woman from the Vaughn farm, was the only enslaved woman to testify for the defense. Her testimony links her not only to Moses, a slave rebel, but also to Lucy from the Barrow farm just down the road.

Delsey's story highlights another set of connections women's access to diverse geographies facilitated. She was not connected to the rebellion through her actions or through baring whiteness to her owner's murder. Her court testimony involved her intimate connection to Moses, a man arraigned by the court. Moses was the same man Lucy was alleged to have hid money and provisions with on the Barrow place. At the time that Delsey testified on his behalf, Lucy had not yet been set before the bar. Most of the witnesses in Moses's trial testified to his participation in the events at Dr. Simon Blunt's house, a farm that the insurgents visited after they committed the Vaughn murders. Delsey testified that Moses was not a member of the insurgency for the entire first day of the violence but that he came to the Vaughn farm on, "...Monday evening the

¹¹¹ The 1830 census accounts for only one free white boy between the ages of fifteen and nineteen and two white women on Rebecca Vaughn's place. Drewry and Oats both mention Rebecca Vaughn as having two sons. Oats, 86. Drewry, 61.

day before the attack was made at Doct. Blunts the next morning...”¹¹² She continued that:

...after being there about three quarters of an hour, the insurgents were seen coming about three hundred yards off—that the prisoner remained until they came up altho’ he was mounted—that they required the prisoner to go with them which he objected to that they threatened him gave him arms and he went off with them.¹¹³

One wonders if the court later made the connection that Delsey was inaccurate in her testimony. Moses, as would later be attested to in Lucy’s trial, was present at the Barrow farm, a location visited by the insurgents four houses before insurgents arrived at the Vaughn place. Though Delsey’s testimony is meant to confirm that Moses was not a willing participant in the rebellion, the court record reveals that under cross examination the prosecuting brought to light that, “Whitness thinks prisoner could have escaped while the insurgents were coming up.”¹¹⁴ Despite Delsey’s testimony, Moses was hung.

Her testimony suggests an intimate connection with Moses. Why did he ride ahead to see Delsey and wait with her until the insurgents arrived? He must have visited before because his presence did not alarm Mrs. Vaughn or the overseer who were taken by surprise by the rebels who murdered them. The Vaughn farmhouse was not large. Though some accounts of the Vaughn murders note that Mrs. Vaughn was on her porch as the rebels arrived, it is hard to imagine a porch on the humble structure.¹¹⁵ If Delsey and Moses waited near enough the house for rebels to spot him, his presence must not

¹¹² Tragle, 183.

¹¹³ Ibid, 183.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 183

¹¹⁵ For an additional narrative account see: Oats. *The Fires of Jubilee*, 86.

have been a surprise to the white residents of the farm. Additionally, the court accepts Delsey as a valid witness who would not only recognize Moses but could be relied upon to communicate his whereabouts during the rebellion. In many other court cases the record explains a witnesses' familiarity with a given defendant. Not so when Delsey took the stand. The court did not question her proximity to the Vaughn Farmhouse. She wasn't arraigned and charged with participation in the Vaughn murders though she, like Lucy after her, confirmed that she conversed with a known slave rebel and was present during the violence. Was she his mother, his sister, his lover or childhood friend? Was she owned by the same master as Moses and simply hired out to the Vaughn family?

It is impossible to know much beyond the fact that the Rebecca Vaughn's household included five enslaved females between the age of ten and fifty-four. Any of them could have been Delsey given that the trial record does not provide a description of her. All that the court record really reveals is that she knew him and he felt the need to ride ahead to wait with her while the carnage at the Vaughn home ensued. Somehow, somewhat miraculously, Delsey navigated the courtroom geography and gave a testimony in defense of Moses.

Delsey's case, provides a glimpse of the ways African American women navigated a number of geographies in the rebellion's aftermath. In many ways it was they who were left to learn Southampton's changing terrains post rebellion. The courtroom was one of those new terrains. Suddenly, if only for a moment, the white male elite listened to the enslaved women of the county. Their words were considered so valid that the court used them to sentenced men to hang. There, in a geographical location designed by the elite to flatten collective memory into a narrative of black vs. white,

enslaved women labored and bore witness to the complexity of Southampton's layered geographies.

Conclusion:

In September of 1831, it was time for the residents of Southampton County to reap what they had sewn. The cotton was about to come in as was the produce of the county's orchards, the wheat fields. Women all over the county prepared to preserve the last of their garden's produce and cornfields were turned under. Women looked out on the cotton patches awaiting harvest and thought of the long hours of spinning ahead. Soon women black and white would sit down together once again to set about clothing the county. That is, if the trials would ever end and if the blood shed would let up. Outside the courtroom, right across the Nottoway River, it was harvest time and Nat Turner, the rebellion's purported leader, was still at large. He was truant during Venus's testimony. When Delsey tried in vain to defend Moses in court and later while Lucy stood at the bar only to ride atop her own coffin to be hung, Turner evaded capture. The white elite, time and time again, did nothing to limit enslaved women's access to their home-places. The necessity of female labor and the access it entailed remained important to a community in crisis. And so, even as old geographies evolved into tighter surveillance and an increasing threat of violence, Turner relied on a long established female geography to keep him safe.

The story of Lavinia, Ester, and Charlotte doesn't conclude when Lavinia fled into the swamps of Southampton. Just as the story of the rebellion never really concluded for those who survived its violence—the death of nearly sixty whites, an uncountable number of African Americans, and the official executions that followed hasty trials. One

month after the rebellion was subdued, Lavinia Francis recorded the birth of her son, William, in the Francis family Bible. The farm had lost five prime hands to death sentences in the county courts by the time the baby arrived. Charlotte, another key laborer, was also gone. Nathaniel, in a fit of rage, had murdered her in cold blood. The farm faced the reaping season without six laborers. The only members of Lavinia's new family to survive the rebellion were her husband and mother-in-law. The others, Nathaniel's nephews, his brother, his sister, and his brother-in-law, were all murdered. Of course, there was Ester. She lived too. And the baby, William, was there now because Ester had given Lavinia time to flee. But voids left by the loss of life, both white and black, on the Francis place could not be filled with this one new life. Grief hung like a shadow over his birth. Lavinia wrote, "William Samuel Francis son of Nathaniel Francis and Lavinia Francis his wife was born 27th of Sept 1831- 1 mo and 7 days after insurrection."¹¹⁶

Ester lived to hold the next generation of slave owners in her arms. She probably attended his mother during his birth. She lived to watch the farm recover from the loss of labor and kin. For her, the rebellion was intimate indeed. She knew the murderers and the murdered. But, most importantly, she had to live among the survivors. The laws that Virginia's legislature passed did nothing to change her status as property. The hyper local, what happened in a few moments in the Francis kitchen, was much more important to her experience of the rebellion and its many kinds of violence. The rebellion took place largely in intimate, nuanced, complex, personal moments like the encounter between three women in the Francis kitchen or Venus's decision to pass along information from

¹¹⁶ Francis Family Bible Record, 1805-1929. Library of Virginia (<http://image.lva.virginia.gov/BibleII/35575.pdf>)

the porch of Porter's house. Enslaved women may not have been members of the Southampton Rebellion's infantry and cavalry, but they did play active roles in the rebellion's supply corps and intelligence network. Attending to their lives and their choices reveals the breadth of resistive action that was possible and that took place before, during, and after the arrival of the rebellion's male participants on a given farm. When we look at women, we don't just discover their gendered experience; their lives open up a whole community of networks and experiences that have so often gone overlooked in traditional histories of the Southampton Rebellion.

Chapter 4

Free Issues: Free People of Color in Antebellum Southampton County

I was never a slave. My people was what you call free issues. I was free born.

-Molly Booker¹¹⁷

The Francis farm was home to 27 people by 1830. The census for that year notes in flat detail each resident's age, sex, and race. Thus far, the farm's white and enslaved African American's have been the focus of this study. They belonged to the two groups that most traditional narratives of Turner's Rebellion acknowledge were in conflict. The Francis household presents a rich micro history of the macro event. The enslaved people on the Francis place were participants in the insurgency. It's white members appeared in prominent sites now noted for their significance to the rebellion's narrative: Cross Keys, the Travis farm, in the militia, and in Southampton County's court house. And yet, in all of the considerable coverage the Francis farm has gotten throughout the rebellion's historiography, rarely has more than a mention of the farms six free Black inhabitants been made. But, as the most traditional of sources, the census, reveals in sharp relief—as many free Blacks as whites populated the Francis farm in 1830.

The census includes no additional identifying information beyond each free person's age, sex, and race. The court records for the trials that took place after the rebellion make no identifiable mention of any of these free people appearing in court. Yet, there they were in 1830—three adults and three children. Of the three adults, one

¹¹⁷ Charles L. Perdue, Jr, Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 54. Molly Booker, born in 1850, was a free woman of color who spent her adult life in Virginia. Her father was a resin distiller. While her story does not exemplify the specific experience of free Negroes in Southampton County, her narrative does provide valuable terminology.

was a woman between twenty-four and thirty-five. The documents reveal neither a name nor any other identifying information for her. She doesn't appear in Drewry's turn of the century narrative. But, suddenly, through acknowledging her presence on the Francis farm, the story of Lavinia Francis's escape takes on yet another dimension. Was this free woman present when Mrs. Francis appeared in her kitchen and blanched at the sight of her open hope chest? Did this free woman of color fight over Lavinia's wedding dress as well? Did she help make the wheel of cheese that Mrs. Francis ran off with into the swamp? Did she later attend to Lavinia Francis when she delivered her first born? While these questions have no demonstrable answers, the free black community's access, like that of enslaved black women, played an important role in both white's imaginings of Turner's Rebellion and the county's continuum of resistance.¹¹⁸

Virginia's free blacks bore the brunt of the rebellion's consequences. While the state legislature did question, if briefly, the continuance of slavery as Virginia's dominant labor system, the policy implemented post-rebellion by Virginia's white elites was aimed at restricting the rights of free people of color and removing them from the state. Though enslaved African Americans were executed, sold south, and murdered by vigilantes, the system of slavery remained in tact. Historians have long known that white Virginians responded with relative ambivalence and, more than once, defended local free blacks in hopes of keeping them, and their labor, in Virginia.¹¹⁹ Almost from slavery's inception

¹¹⁸ See the Fifth Census of the United States: Ancestry.com. *1830 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fifth Census of the United States, 1830. (NARA microfilm publication M19, 201 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C., 259.

¹¹⁹ Luther Porter Jackson. *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860*. (New York: Appleton, 1942); Melvin Patrick Ely. *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War*. (New

the colony's, and later the state's, African American population was a mix of free, nominally free, and enslaved people. And throughout Virginia's history whites were simultaneously uneasy with the presence of Free Blacks and cognizant of the labor they performed and intimate connections they had to Virginia's local communities. For Southampton County the population of free people of color was a distinguishing feature in the early 19th century. The story of free black life in Southampton County is both rich and complex. It is multigenerational story of tenuous status that was antithetical to the white power structure.

Denoting agency often results in the obfuscation of oppression. And so this chapter cannot begin without a concise summation of the character of freedom for free African Americans in antebellum Southampton County. Freedom in Southampton County meant living among slaves and performing similar labor. It meant that there were very few occupational options: farming almost universally for men and spinning exclusively for women. It meant living with and knowing the struggles of the enslaved. It meant being subjected to surveillance by the white community, not enjoying full citizenship, and being subject to violence and humiliation. Yet, the relative mobility and access to multiple geographies that free people of color possessed, served as an asset to the black community.

Whites were wary of free people of color, at least in theory if not in lived reality, because their free status upset the social balance of Virginia's slave society. Yet, free people of color were everywhere in antebellum Virginia. They had long been a feature of the state's demography and, as was to be expected, played an important roll in the state's

York: Knopf, 2004); and Ira Berlin. *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. (New York: New Press, 1974, 2007).

labor economy. White Virginia's relationship with free people of color is best described by historian Suzan Lebsock when she notes, "In practice, periods of relatively benign neglect alternated with spells of close surveillance and sudden repression. In law, the story was one of progressive deterioration."¹²⁰ Virginia's leaders pared down the rights, privileges, and occupations open to free people of color by enacting a series of laws aimed at exclusion and, in some cases, expulsion. After the Southampton Rebellion, it was Virginia's free people of color who weathered the most change in their status and daily lives. Enslaved people were subject to the same dominion and insecurity that they had experienced as enslaved people before the rebellion. Free people of color, however, lived through escalated violence and serious changes to their legal status.

Free people of color were of special interest to Virginia's legislature and the state's various white communities. This was partially because most white Virginians were not willing to accept that the root of the rebellion was the oppressive economic system that the state's economy relied on, but would rather point the finger elsewhere. Free blacks were easy targets and, at least legally, more vulnerable than their enslaved counterparts who as property, ironically, enjoyed minimal legal protection as the possessions of their owners. White suspicion was not simple hysteria and anxiety over a population with no connection to the rebellion. Free African Americans participated in the Southampton Rebellion. Their presence in Southampton, as in many Virginia counties, was visible and long caused whites to worry about their influence over the enslaved.

¹²⁰ Suzanne Lebsock. *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. (Norton, 1985) 90-92. Lebsock's chapter concerned with free women of color outlines concisely the shifting legal status of free people of color in Virginia before the Southampton Rebellion in 1831.

The Southampton Rebellion did not mark the first twinges of anxiety on the part of the state's ruling classes. Laws were passed to govern the lives of free blacks at the end of the 18th century and again at the start of the 19th century. One of the outcomes of the American Revolution was a brief spike in manumissions throughout the southern states.¹²¹ In the 1790s Virginia's free black population grew and whites in power responded by asserting their authority through restrictive legislation. In 1806, newly passed state law required freed African Americans to leave the state one year after their emancipation. Free blacks could not carry firearms without the written testimony of a white person to his or her character and the written consent of a court. Many counties required that free people of color register with the county court. As discussed in chapter two, county officials all over Virginia authorized the patrolling of slave quarters *and* the homes of free people of color. A number of Virginians, and some prominent residents of Southampton County, were involved in the colonization movement, a movement aimed at moving free blacks out of the state and into settlements in West Africa.¹²² The events of the Southampton Rebellion merely catalyzed a reexamination of the state's policy towards free people of color, policy that had long been a part of the state's legal and political discourse.

But laws and political discourse, as Lebsack notes, tell us little about the daily lives of free people of color in Southampton County. Neither do the trial records produced in the rebellion's wake. Of the fifty trials conducted in Southampton's County

¹²¹ Luther Porter Jackson. *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860*. (New York: Appleton, 1942), 171-172.

¹²² Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 22. After the Southampton Rebellion about one fifth of the free population took advantage of the state's colonization networks and fled the county. For more on the American Colonization Society in Virginia, see also, Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860*, 3 and 10.

Court, four were interviews conducted by court officials of free men.¹²³ The charge against these men and their testimonies were not recorded in Southampton. Barry Newsom, a fifth man and apprenticed to Peter Edwards, had a hearing at which some testimony was heard. In all five free men of color were sent to Richmond for further examination. There are no surviving records of the trials they were given in Richmond after their cases were transferred there according to a law that required free blacks to be tried at the state level. Secondary source material does reveal the ultimate outcome of for each of the free men of color indicted in Southampton County. Four were released after their trials in Richmond and one was sentenced to hang.¹²⁴ Historians have long acknowledged the presence of free people of color in the county and their involvement with the rebellion. But the contours of their lives, of the lives of the other free blacks who lived and worked in the county, remain obscured by the towering figure of Nat Turner in the historiography and the meager information available in the official court documents concerned with the rebellion's free African American participants.

Much like the lives of enslaved women, free people of color's lives were defined by labor. To uncover their stories and their roles in community life, we have to look beyond the official record and towards their daily occupations, their residences, and their

¹²³ Under Virginia Law at the time, Slaves charged with conspiring to rebel were tried by a special court of *Oyer and Terminer*: courts presided over by a panel of justices with no jury participation. Free people of color could only be tried at the state level for capital offenses. See, William Waler Hening, *The New Virginia Justice, Second Edition*, (Richmond: Johnson and Warner, 1810), 543. (accessed through Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=ji0OAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&authuser=0#v=onepage&q&f=false>)

¹²⁴ Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 21. See also, Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County Virginia*, (Southampton County Historical Society, 1979), 116. Greenberg sights Parramore as his source while Parramore gleaned information about the trials from newspaper accounts and not court documents. Therefore, while the outcome of each man's trial is known, the details of their individual trials are not. For information on Barry Newsom see, Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 239.

connections to other community members. This chapter begins, then, with the living arrangements of free people of color. Once placed, physically in the county, this chapter endeavors to recover the laboring lives of the free community as a way of determining their level of access to both the white and enslaved communities of Southampton County. Finally, this chapter looks closely at the free community present along the rebellion route and the appearance of free people of color in court in the rebellion's aftermath. By looking beyond the flat chiaroscuro of census data, this chapter demonstrates the unique contours of free African American life in Southampton County and the role of free people in the black community's continuum of resistive action.

A Note About The Sources:

The two major sources employed in this study are the federal census data of the first through fifth censuses and the existing free person of color registries for the eighteen twenties, the decade before Turner's Rebellion occurred. Both sources have their advantages and shortcomings. The Federal Censuses provide a wealth of basic information that can be easily compared on a national and intrastate scale. Though the populations each census is concerned with change and evolve over time, constants like the accounting for enslaved and free African American populations across decades is invaluable for this study. The census provides both a feast and a famine of detail. For example, while households are carefully accounted for in terms of gender, age, race and free or enslaved status, only the heads of households are named. In the third census (1810) enslaved people are not distinguished by any of these markers and simply lumped together under the category "slaves". A careful look beyond the general tallies of overall

population reveals that free persons of color were often categorized as part of white-headed households in the county.¹²⁵ Their names are not recorded and the shape of their family groups is often obscured as a result. In short, the federal censuses are not perfect documents that reveal the entirety of the free African American experience in Southampton County. What they do provide are the broader outlines of a population and the means by which to compare Southampton County to other Virginia Counties.

The free negro registries available for Southampton County present their own set of positives and disappointments. There are actually two sets of free negro registries available for the county. The first is a more general document that records, uninterrupted, the county's free negro population from around 1791 through 1865. This set of ledgers records each entrant's number in the register, age at registration, name, color, height, who manumitted them, and the date. At times this ledger includes distinguishing marks. What this document does not reveal is any information pertaining to each entrant's location and occupation in the county. While the document allows one to "see" the free population of Southampton County because of its wealth of physical descriptions, it would prove a tedious general study.

The second set of registries is specific to county parish. Nottoway Parish, to the north of the Nottoway River, and St. Luke's Parish, to the south of the Nottoway River. Each have their own separate registers taken down by county officials in each. The number of registries available for both parishes is about equal. There are more registries available for Nottoway Parish for the years pertinent to this study, a disappointing fact for this study because Turner's Rebellion occurred in the south of the county in St. Luke's

¹²⁵ Henning, *The New Virginia Justice*, 74. This was common throughout the state and especially in Southampton where the aforementioned labor economy made "living-in" an attractive option for white employers.

Parish. There remains only one ledger for St. Luke's Parish in the 1820s: the registry for 1822, almost a decade before the rebellion in 1831. It is possible to tell that these registries were most likely taken annually from the thirteen that survive. Each record, in the style of the federal census, records the name of heads of families. In earlier parish registries wives of free men of color were named as well as spouses and, occasionally, children who were of working age. But by the second half of the 1820s most households are recorded by naming only the their head. Ages and genders are rarely given for the children listed. Despite those regrettable shortcomings the documents do provide other types of information. Each family head's occupation and place of residence are recorded. For earlier registries married women are also listed with an occupation.

Using all three sources in juxtaposition provides an incredibly fruitful study of the free population of Southampton County. What the census provides in substantiating the presence and residences of free people of color, the registries flesh out in stunning detail. What the documents in communication demonstrate is the integral involvement of free people of color in both white and Black Southampton County. The following section will deal with the more basic contours of these communities while subsequent sections will develop the implications of a free black presence in Southampton County.

Different from Slaves: Living Arrangements and Access

"No, none of us was ever slaves. A white woman asked me several weeks ago had I been a slave. I tol' her, 'No.' Den she asked how did we all get long makin' a livin'. I got fretted an' said, 'No, I've never been hungry in my life. Yes, I was a free Negro.' My mother an' gramma work for us five children." - Mrs. Octavia Featherstone (b. 1860)¹²⁶

Of the three major demographic groups in the Southampton County, whites, free blacks, and the enslaved, the free black population went through the most change between 1800 and 1830. Demographically speaking, their population jumped in these decades from about 5.9% of the total population to near 10.85%, an increase from 829 people to 1,745 people. This swell in population was the result of natural increase, a rash of manumissions in the Early National period, and immigration from other areas. Of course to the black community, specifically, these percentages meant something different. While free blacks were 10.85% of the total population, they were almost 20% of the black population by 1830.¹²⁷ But stark numbers and percentages tell a very flat story. They indicate presence but not participation in Southampton's many communities. They suggest clarity of status and denote community boundaries that were never as ridged as the columns of the census. They do nothing to substantiate access and confluence between the world of the enslaved, free African Americans and whites.

The presence of Free African Americans in antebellum Southampton County can be simply explained: whites found free black labor to have utility and so free blacks were

¹²⁶ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 90.

¹²⁷ Henry Irving Tragle. *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831*, 15.

allowed to live in the county. Unlike slaves hired from elsewhere for the season who had owners invested in them remaining alive, free people of color had no such legal attachment to whites. Their lives were expendable and unprotected in a way that enslaved peoples' lives were not. Free African American labor was cheaper than the purchase of new prime field hands and required the assumption of less liability than the hire of enslaved people from neighboring farms or counties. Free African Americans were everywhere in the county because there was work everywhere the county.

In the 1810s, 20s, and 30s, Virginia was a state in economic transition. For many whites with middling class status, migration to the West and Old Southwest provided a viable means to achieve upward mobility. As many old tobacco regions in the state experimented with wheat cultivation and the profitability of maintaining large enslaved workforces came into question, slave sales out of Virginia increased as the new Cotton Kingdom began to establish itself. For the small and midsized plantations that comprised the majority of Southampton County, integrating free African American labor and with the maintenance of a modest enslaved workforce proved much more economically viable.¹²⁸ This trend took hold in the period throughout the state but Southampton remains particularly exemplary given its notably large free Negro population.

As discussed previously, most farms in the county were engaged in some form of mixed agriculture. The few plantations that raised the county's cash crop, cotton, were mostly located in the southern half of the county, St. Luke's Parish. But St. Luke's, the site of the Southampton Rebellion, was mostly home to yeoman and small to midsized

¹²⁸ Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860*, 34. Jackson provides a detailed description of Virginia's position in the political and economic life of the United States in the early-19th century. He makes careful note of how soil exhaustion, white migration, and the expense of slaves left a labor niche for free people of color first in rural and later urban contexts in the state.

plantation owners. Additionally, St. Luke's was the site of the county's Indian reservation, often called simply Indian Land. There the remaining members of the Nottoway Indian tribe resided under the watchful eye of county officials. The documents pertaining to St. Luke's Parish are of the greatest interest to this study as, given the documents available, only the most cursory comparison of the two parishes can be accomplished at present. What the registries available for the 1820s reveal is a diversity of living arrangements. Free African Americans resided on their own land, on land owned by other free African Americans, within free black households, on land owned by whites, in white households, on land designated poor land, and on "Indian Land". The free blacks of antebellum Southampton County did not live in their own enclave, town or settlement. They lived amongst both free whites and enslaved blacks. Their living arrangements give a clue as to the access free blacks had to both the white and enslaved black communities, their ability to navigate their tenuous status as nominally free, and illuminates the types of surveillance and control that whites subjected free African Americans to.

The one available free negro registry that notes the residence of free people of color in St. Luke's is dated 1822. While a registry from 1821 speaks to the social landscape of 1821 and not necessarily to that of 1831, it speaks to the social landscape of the county during a formative period in the lives of future rebellion participants.¹²⁹ This survey taken almost a decade before the Southampton Rebellion demonstrates the living arrangements of free people of color during the young adulthood and youth of the rebellion's participants. The registry reflects the diversity of living arrangements of free people of color in that year thus: In St. Luke's Parish in 1821, 71% of the population

¹²⁹ Nat Turner, for example, was twenty-one years old in 1821 when this registry was taken down. That year, Turner testified to going truant and returning to his owner having received a vision about his importance as a leader.

lived on white owned land, 12% lived on Black owned land, and 3% were listed as transient. The remaining 14% of the registered free people of color in St. Luke's have their residence listed as "Indian Land".

Most free people of color in 1820s Southampton County lived on land owned by whites. There were many reasons why free blacks lived on white owned property and within white households. On the most practical level, raising the capital to purchase land and work it was no easy feat for any yeoman, especially if her or she was African American, in antebellum Virginia. While some free African Americans worked as tenants on white owned land, it was far more common for them to live with whites and work alongside them and any enslaved people present. For free African Americans, a hiring contract did not necessarily translate into waged labor. The most popular form of hired free black labor required white employers to provide room, board, and up keep, often similar to that provided for enslaved labor. This was especially popular in Southampton County both within its apprentice system and its hiring system.¹³⁰ With an unwaged norm in the practice of hiring it is not surprising then that free Negroes appear in the census entries of the middling white citizens and the most prominent plantation owners alike throughout the antebellum period in Southampton County. Even the Urquharts, one of the county's oldest families with holdings that included enslaved people by the hundreds, employed free African American labor.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860*, 72.

¹³¹ Mary Louisa Urquhart Bryant. "Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Urquarts in Southampton County Virginia," *Southampton county Historical society Bulletin*. No. 7. Part B, (October 1997). John Urquhart's (sometimes spelled Urqhart or Urquhard in the documents) name appears as the owner of ten free negro's place of residence. John Urquhart, his father and sons, were some of Nottoway Parishes' few large slaveholders. The family was not only wealthy they were politically important. John served as a member of the Virginia Convention of 1829-1830. His son, Richard A. Urquhart, was a

Factors beyond the financial struggles of many rural free African Americans also determined where they lived. Some free people of color lived and worked on white farms to be near their enslaved family members. The local ministers of the poor indentured others as children to local whites to pay off their parent's debts or house them because they'd been orphaned. Others still sought employment on white farms to ply their trade. Therefore as a result of a diversity of circumstances, the free African Americans of Southampton County did not live in their own enclave.

Even those free African Americans who lived on black owned farms in the 1820s lived in close proximity to whites and enslaved blacks. To be clear, those listed as living on their own land were a very few of the free black population. While roughly 12% of the free blacks listed in St. Luke's Parish lived on black owned land, that 12% represents only fourteen individual households. Of those fourteen households, only three resided on their own land. Within the few free black households that held their own land, children, those younger than working age, accounted for more than half. The remaining eleven households lived on land owned by other free blacks. For example, Jonas Cosby, a resident of St. Luke's parish in 1821, lived with his wife and their four children. Cosby had done well for himself after being manumitted in 1807 by his owner's will¹³². He was

physician and served as a justice at Nat Turner's trial. Two of the free negroes listed as living on property of John Urquhart's, a shoemaker and his wife, share the Urquhart surname. As a shoemaker, perhaps Jim Urquhart was able to eventually purchase his own freedom along with his wife's. Of the others listed, four are "ditchers", perhaps engaged in work along the riverbanks for the Urquhart family. The remaining four persons listed, two men as farmers and two women as spinsters, all share the surname, Green. Notably these four do not represent two couples; none are listed as each other's spouses. One of the ditchers also has the surname Green. It is possible that they are all related. Unfortunately, the documents available do not provide information about any of the free people of color living on Urquhart property. It is impossible to know if they were free born or manumitted by the Urquharts.

¹³² Free Negro and Slave Records, Free Person of Color Registry, May, 1807.

not only a property owner but also a landlord. Nine free people of color, without the surname Cosby, have their place of residence listed as property he owned. In 1820, Cosby's household lists ten members, all free people of color.¹³³ His entire immediate family of six is accounted for and an additional four free people of color are also included. Six of the members of the household were occupied with agriculture, according to the census meaning six residents were of working age. James Hunt, the only man listed as a resident of Cosby land, is the second free man between the ages of 26-44 listed in Cosby's household. The third male of working age is most likely the teenaged son of Cosby and his wife. Of the three women listed, Mrs. Jonas Cosby is certainly one. Tamar and Lotty Bryd, along with Tamar's child most likely round out the household in 1820, with Tamar and Lotty accounting for the household's additional adult laborers. Evey Artis, a single woman with four children by 1821 when she's listed in the free negro registry of the parish, lived on land owned by Cosby but, according to the census, did not contribute to Cosby's agricultural production. Artis could have worked as a spinster on any number of farms near Cosby's land.¹³⁴ Often black land holdings were surrounded by

¹³³ Ancestry.com. *1820 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by Family Search. Original data: Fourth Census of the United States, 1820. (NARA microfilm publication M33, 142 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹³⁴ Free Negro and Slave Records. Free Person of Color Registry, St. Luke's Parish, 1822 and Ancestry.com, *1820 United States Federal Census*. The fourth census (1820) is organized alphabetically making it impossible to tell who Cosby's neighbors were at the time the census was taken. Artis's occupation is listed as spinster in the free negro registry of 1822. It is possible that she worked for one of Cosby's neighbors but resided in her own cabin somewhere on Cosby's property. Artis, sometimes spelled "Artist", is a common surname among the free blacks of Southampton. It is possible that Evey Artis also had the support of a countywide kinship network along with whatever employment she found in the county as a spinster.

white landholdings, a geographic reality that was not hard to achieve in a county where black landowners were hard to come by.

Perhaps the closest neighborhood, then, to a free black enclave existed on Indian Land. Twenty-two households resided on land designated for use by the Nottoway. Notably, only three of those households are listed as headed by a free black couple. Apparently single free African Americans headed the remaining households. The most obvious explanation for this is that the register was meant to document the residences of free Negroes and not their Native American spouses, employers, or extended kin. For example, Sally Buck, Mary Turner, Eliza Turner, and Lisa Woodson all resided on Indian land with their children. None of these women is listed as having a spouse and none of their children have fathers listed. It is certainly possible that these women were married to native men or had children by them. Of course, the children could also have been the result of liaisons with African American men or white men in the community. Similarly, the eight single free men of color listed on Indian Land could have been connected to native women. Whether free people of color had intimate relationships with Native Americans or not, Indian Land had the most concentrated population of free African Americans in the county. Further research may uncover how this community developed and illuminate the relationship between African Americans, free and enslaved, and the local Native American Population.

While the registry available for St. Luke's speaks to the diversity of living arrangements of free African Americans pre-Southampton Rebellion, questions remain about how the neighborhood that produced the rebellion changed between the early 1820s

and the early 1830s. Federal census records shed some light on the proximity in which free blacks and the enslaved lived in 1830. Just as in 1821, the neighborhood where Nat Turner lived and grew up was home to a diversity of living arrangements. By 1830, around one hundred free people of color, many of whom were children, resided in the neighborhood immediately affected by the Southampton Rebellion.¹³⁵ A few, like Aaron Norfleet and Charles Hurst, lived on their own land, scattered between white neighbors. In the area of James W. Parker's land and Rebecca Vaughn's home place, two important sites during the rebellion, a small enclave of four free black households was established in 1830.¹³⁶ Others free people of color are counted as part of nine separate white households. Edwin Barns, for example owned only two elderly slaves in 1830 and seems to have drawn labor from the eleven free people of color who resided on his farm.¹³⁷ As previously mentioned, Nathaniel Francis's place included a number of free people of color. While free blacks were certainly a demographic feature of the neighborhood, most lived on the peripheries of it in households that neighbored but did not fall victim to the rebellion.

The range of free African Americans living arrangements denotes their close proximity to a number of Southampton's communities. All free people of color lived with or near whites and enslaved African Americans. While this fact is important, perhaps of

¹³⁵ Ancestry.com. *1830 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fifth Census of the United States, 1830. (NARA microfilm publication M19, 201 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. See pages 259 and 260. The Fifth Census was recorded by residence. This number was generated by counting the number of free people of color who appear on the two pages where white farms affected by the rebellion are listed.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 259. The heads of household listed were: Thomas Artis, Temperance Artis, Samule Ben and Matilda Artis.

¹³⁷ Ibid 259-6.

greater note is what living arrangements denote about the working lives of Southampton's free people of color. Labor defined their lives and placed them in proximity to both whites and enslaved blacks. Very few free blacks lived on black owned land meaning that most free blacks, including those who resided in St. Luke's parish, depended on whites for subsistence. While their places of residence speak to one dimension in which free people of color were connected to enslaved people, their work lives and place in the labor economy establish definite proximity and contact with both whites and enslaved blacks.

Free Black Labor in Southampton:

Some o' de niggus in it wuz set fre, some tu'ned free, an' some wuz free bo'n. My ol boss ustuh hire some o' em to wuk at harves time. –Archie Booker (b.1847)

Us was different from de slaves, cause us was "free-born" an' got to be paid fo' workin'.
-Tom Hester (b. 1848)¹³⁸

Free women of color, in both Nottoway and St. Luke's, are almost always listed with the occupation of spinster. At first glance this almost universal distinction seems to denote a very limited existence for free women of color. However, the occupation of a spinster provided access and mobility to free women of color that free men simply could not claim. Historians have long emphasized the access that free men of color had to skilled trades. This access represented a unique type of economic mobility and independence for free black men. In contrast, historians represent the economic opportunities of free women of color as bleak at best. The labor market in a rural antebellum Virginia county like Southampton was somewhat different than that of one of Virginia's port cities or free black enclaves. Southampton County had one of the largest

¹³⁸ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 53 and 137.

free black populations in the state in 1830. Like all labor, that performed by free people of color was gendered. Unlike, their enslaved counterparts, however, free women seem to have negotiated widespread relief from fieldwork as one benefit of freedom. As a result they, and not their free male counterparts, had the greatest relative mobility in the county because of the type of labor they performed.

Almost every free man of color registered in the county was listed with the occupation of farmer beside his name. In 1822, 88% of free men of color in St. Luke's Parish were listed as farmers.¹³⁹ Only three men of the remaining 12%, have a skilled trade listed as their occupation: two shoemakers and one tailor. The remaining men were ditchers, one was a waggoner, and all of the others had no occupation listed. Given what the census reveals about the living arrangements of free blacks, most men, then, labored on white owned farms often alongside enslaved men and women. Of the entire population of free men of color, only four could boast some modicum of mobility as an extension of his work. If the living arrangements present in the 1830 census denote where and how most free men were employed, the situation by the time of the rebellion had not changed for free men. Most still lived within white households and worked white land placing them under the surveillance similar to that that enslaved field workers were subjected to. There was really only one place that black men, enslaved and free, were expected to be found in antebellum Southampton—the fields.

Free women of color, in both Nottoway and St. Luke's, are almost always listed with the occupation of spinster. At first glance this almost universal distinction seems to denote a very limited existence for free women of color or, perhaps, a catchall category for women who labored. Yet, in St. Luke's Parish, Jinny Briggs, a free woman who

¹³⁹ Free Person of Color Registry, St. Luke's Parish, 1822.

resided on land owned by a white man, James Brett, is listed as a farmer. Molly Mckill is listed as a waiter and a spinster. Nine women have no occupation listed at all. Six of those women were married to free black men, one lived on her own land, and the remaining two share a surname with the white male owner of their residence.¹⁴⁰ It is clear then that the occupation spinster really did denote a type of labor.

In 1822, ninety-three women are listed as spinsters in St. Luke's Parish. Eighty of them are single women or, at least, women not listed as the spouse of a free man of color. However, given that nineteen of those women had children, their listed marital status does not tell the full story of free women's connections to the county's male population. Married to free men or not, the majority of free women resided and worked on white owned property. While there, they explicitly performed labor outside of the fields as was noted before, free women who performed field labor were denoted as farmers. Just like their enslaved counterparts, free women of color had reason to be in a number of locations on a given farm throughout the day.

Their labor in the weaving cottages, attics, and parlors of the county, spinning fiber into thread first marks them as free women able to negotiate what labor they would perform. Yet just like enslaved women, their inevitable contributions to the demanding cycle of domestic labor brought them into contact with the full spectrum of Southampton's residents. For those women who lived among whites on farms where the luxury of using enslaved labor for household tasks was not universal, it seems impossible that free women avoided contributing to the domestic labor on a given farm. Free women who resided on their own or black owned land introduce yet another possibility for

¹⁴⁰ Free Person of Color Registry, St. Luke's Parish, 1822.

mobility. Most of these women were listed as spinsters. It is possible that these women traveled to white farms to help with spinning or brought work home away from white residences. This made them well suited to gather, process, and articulate intelligence. In the military sense of the term, intelligence is much more than information. Intelligence is both the collection of knowledge and the report of said knowledge in an advisory capacity. Just like Venus, the enslaved woman discussed in the previous chapter, free women gleaned and passed along intelligence. Therefore it is more than possible that, just as free men joined ranks with enslaved men during the rebellion, free women enlisted in the rebellion's supply line and intelligence network.

Something Awful: Free People of Color and the Trial Record

"De paddyrollers useto bother my father somepin' awful. Dey'd come an' beat him anytme. Once he went an' got his bossman to run dem away. Dey waited years until de war come an' de bossman went to war. Den dey come one night an' got paw right out of bed, took him out in de road an' beat him terrible. Dey tol' him dey's beatin' him fur tellin' his ole bossman dat time. Momma an' we all kids stood in de door an' cried. Don' know whether hit helped much er not but we all stood dere an' cried jes' de same. Momma begged fur him right hard too." - Mrs. Mollie Booker (b. 1850)¹⁴¹

The cotton was nearing maturity by September of 1831. As the heat of August began to relent ever so subtly to a hint of the crispness of the harvest season to come, Eliza Crathenton found herself in court called upon to testify in front of some of Southampton County's most prominent men, the justices of the county court. Perhaps she marveled just a bit at the request of the council for the defense of Hardy, an enslaved man owned by Benjamin Edwards. Of course, she could have volunteered her knowledge of the man charged with, "consulting, advising, and conspiring to make insurrection & murder."¹⁴² Either way she sat in the close air of the tiny courthouse on September 6, 1831, sixteen days and twenty-two criminal trials after the chaos erupted in Southampton County, and spoke in Hardy's defense. She testified that, "The prisoner and two others told her they meant to join Genl. Nat. and she dissuaded them from it."¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 58.

¹⁴² Tragle. *The Southampton Slave*, 202 and 235. Tragle's transcription of the full trial record can be found on page 202 while the trial appears on page 235 as part of Tragle's chart of the entirety of the court proceedings related to Turner's Rebellion.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 203.

Eliza Crathenton was the only free woman of color to appear in Southampton's courthouse after the rebellion. Her testimony is only one sentence long. But that one sentence makes her conspicuous, just as it must have at the time. Free people of color were subjected to incredible vigilantly violence through out the South after the rebellion subsided. It is hard to determine the extent of the violence free African Americans endured post-rebellion. This stems mostly from the practice of listing enslaved people and free people simply as "suspected rebels" making it hard to determine who was free and who was not. For example, one militia company from outside of Southampton decapitated at least about fifteen suspected rebels and placed them on pikes at a crossroads known to this day as Blackhead Signpost. While there is record of this event, it is unknown which unfortunate African Americans met this horrific end.¹⁴⁴ Crathenton's decision to speak in defense of a man on trial for involvement in the rebellion denotes two things: one, that she possessed great courage, and two, that Hardy's defense thought she possessed some credibility as a witness.

Crathenton's story represents only one of many ways that free people of color experienced and acted during the rebellion and its aftermath. Given their place as integrated laborers and residents of the wider African American community, free black involvement in the rebellion was inevitable. In all, five free men were examined by the court for possible involvement in the rebellion: Arnold Artes, Thomas Hathcock, Exum Artist, Isham Turner, and Berry Newsom.¹⁴⁵ Hathcock, Artist, and Turner would all

¹⁴⁴ Greenberg, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 19; See also, Oats, *Fires of Jubilee*, 99-100. Oates describes the further exploits of this unit. Two columns of calvary murdered upwards of forty African Americans while patrolling the county post rebellion.

¹⁴⁵ Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 234-243. Thomas Hathcock's surname is sometimes spelled "Haithcock." Tragle believed that Barry Newsom was a white man.

eventually be released. Newsom, however, was hung on May 11, 1832.¹⁴⁶ It is not hard to imagine how it is that free men ended up in the ranks of the enslaved rebels. These men worked alongside enslaved people and were connected to the enslaved community economically and socially. They suffered under the same system of surveillance and control. What is hard to imagine is that they were the only free men involved. State law dictated that only Virginia's state courts could try free people of color. Nevertheless, county officials examined each man. All were later transferred to Richmond to be tried by the state's superior court. As previously mentioned, the records of their examinations and subsequent trials in the state capitol are unavailable. As a result, it is impossible to say with certainty the extent of each man's involvement. What is more certain is how free people of color fared after the rebellion.

Perhaps more important to free African Americans' experiences in the wake of the rebellion was what whites *perceived* them to be capable of contributing to resistive violence. Free people of color provided a convenient scapegoat for white anxiety. Those most vulnerable to violent extralegal action and the laws that resulted in the expulsion of Virginia's free black population, were those with the least impetus to participate in the rebellion: free black landowners. They stood to lose property, the ability to visit kin on neighboring farms, and their lives. Additionally, everyone, especially those who sought employment on white farms, suffered from white suspicion post-rebellion. For example,

However, given the extensive system of indenturing free black children, it seems likely that Newsom was a free black apprentice of Peter Edwards.

¹⁴⁶ Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 116.

while Nathaniel Francis had six free people of color in residence on his farm in 1830, by 1840, the only African Americans on the Francis place were enslaved.¹⁴⁷

Post-rebellion the free black population of the county lived in fear of violence. Some sought refuge with area whites sympathetic to their fate. For some, the situation was so untenable in Southampton that they immigrated to Africa. By late October, 1831, 245 free blacks set sail for Liberia. By the close of 1832, sixty-six free blacks left Norfolk for the shores of Africa.¹⁴⁸

It is hard to gauge how life changed for those who chose to remain in Southampton. While source material denotes escalated violence, their means of survival is hard to determine. One way to look at how life changed for free African Americans in Southampton is to look at accounts of former slaves who lived in Virginia well after the rebellion took place. Those WPA informants asked to recount their free childhoods in antebellum Virginia remembered a number of social restrictions in the lives of free blacks post-rebellion. Mrs. Mollie Booker, born in 1850, remembered that, "We couldn' go to any dances, 'cause dey woul'n' allow us on de plantations," she continued recalling that, "Free issue couldn't go to church. I never went to church 'till after I was grown. White folks watched you all de time."¹⁴⁹ Archiald Milteer, born in 1845, recollected that, "White folks shunned them. Wouldn't let them associate with slaves—wouldn't let slaves go to their houses."¹⁵⁰ Just as the system of slave patrolling in the county changed post-

¹⁴⁷ Ancestry.com. *1840 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Sixth Census of the United States, 1840. (NARA microfilm publication M704, 580 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴⁸ Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 115-116.

¹⁴⁹ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 54 and 55.

¹⁵⁰ Purdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 213.

rebellion, it is reasonable to assume that white relationships with free blacks also shifted and changed in the county. Whites were prepared to do without free blacks and their labor, they were not prepared to do away with the rebellion's actual cause: slavery.

But what of Eliza Crathenton's involvement in the trials? She wasn't accused of participating in the rebellion. She wasn't sent to Richmond for trial. Yet, she appears at once as an anomaly in the trial record and a significant window into the free black experience of the rebellion. Again, what is important in the case of this lone free woman to make an appearance in the county's courts, is what white's acknowledged her to be capable of contributing to the rebellion. Just as important is what they chose not to acknowledge. Crathenton, circumspect as she may have been, appears as an arbiter of intelligence. That is, not simply as someone with information but also as someone with the capability to advise members of the African American community. The justices of the court tacitly acknowledge this fact by admitting her as a witness in an enslaved man's defense. The key to her defense of Hardy and the other men who approached her: "she dissuaded them."¹⁵¹ And the justices must have taken her testimony seriously, Hardy's sentence was recommended for commutation to transfer from the state instead of death by hanging.¹⁵² We do not know why Crathenton came to Hardy's defense or what reason she gave him not to join in the mounting rebellion. But we do know that not one but three men sought her advice and that even the court recognized that her advice was taken seriously. Much like her enslaved counterparts, Venus and Charlotte, Eliza Crathenton was a source of vital information and counsel.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 203.

¹⁵² Ibid, 235.

Conclusion:

"Runaways use to come to our house all de time to git somepin to eat. Dey stayed in de woods a long time an' dere beards grewed so long dat no one could very well recerginize dem. Dey actually looked like wild men."-Mrs. Mollie Booker (b. 1850)¹⁵³

Southampton County's free community of color was also involved in the enslaved community's culture of survival and resistance. We know that at least six free men stood trial for their possible participation in the rebellion. Countless others, certainly, met justice outside of the courtroom's walls. Eliza Crathenton's brief appearance in the trial record gives us one clue as to how free women could have participated in the rebellion. But the details of free African American involvement remain unknowable when the rebellion's traditional sources are consulted.

What is clear is that free people of color were vital to the county's labor economy and to its African American community. Often their living arrangements and labor integrated them with enslaved labor. Their labor and living arrangements also brought them under the same surveillance as enslaved people. All but a very few free people of color lived and worked as one of a few working aged laborers on the county's small to midsized farms. The pace of mixed agriculture dictated their lives just as much as it dictated the lives for enslaved people and whites. As a result, much like enslaved women, free people of color had access to a range of community spaces and geographies. This made them the prefect arbiters of information, suppliers of support, and, at times, willing participants in the rebellion.

This role in their community was not overlooked by the white power structure. Instead, whites focused on what they perceived to be the free community's agency and

¹⁵³ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 54.

involvement in the rebellion as a way of muting the nagging knowledge that enslaved people had fomented a rebellion against them. Ultimately, the institution of slavery changed very little in the wake of the rebellion, whereas life for free people of color in Virginia was forever altered.

Postscript:

Sunday, 5 May 1850....*A Dream on Friday night last I thought th earth was splitting open in every direction so as to swallow up houses and it alarmed me much for it seameth they was no direction that I could turn my head But confusion presented it self to me and the only person I recognised was a servent man Called Halcum Davy belonging to Mr Little he seameth not to be alarmed at all But the seaned [scene] was so gloomy to me that I was much interrupted Though the sign of it I know not*

*-Daniel Cobb*¹⁵⁴

As his biographer recounts, Daniel Cobb was twenty at the time of the Southampton Rebellion. He served in the local militia that put the rebellion down. While his diaries prove a treasure trove of information about antebellum farming and life in 1840s and 50s Southampton County, Cobb never mentions the Southampton Rebellion by name. He does, on occasion, mention local fears about possible slave insurrections elsewhere and, as in the passage quoted from Daniel Crofts's transcription above, Cobb had more than one apocalyptic dream that involved local enslaved people.¹⁵⁵

Cobb was not the only white survivor of the rebellion to experience emotional difficulty in its wake. Harriet Whitehead, who during the rebellion survived by hiding in the same room her sister was being murdered in, recounted that even over a decade after the rebellion she still had sudden fits of anxiety and bouts of depression. Levi Waller, who lost a number of family members in the rebellion, and William Harrison along with another man and woman were reported as "temporarily deranged" for four days after the

¹⁵⁴ Daniel W Crofts. *Cobb's Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842-1872*. (Athens: University of Georgia, 1997) 92.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 84-87.

rebellion's conclusion.¹⁵⁶ As mentioned before, the rebellion even marked the lives of those unborn at the time it occurred. Lavinia Francis carefully noted that her son William was "...born 27th of Sept 1831- 1 mo and 7 days after insurrection."¹⁵⁷

The rebellion resulted in more than one kind of death. Along with those murdered during the course of the rebellion, black and white, were those executed in its aftermath. Add to them the number of young men who had their sentences commuted to transfer out of the state. Add yet another staggering number of nearly one fifth of the surviving free People of Color who fled to Liberia. And then, when that brutal arithmetic is fully considered, imagine for a moment living in the spaces, the tasks, and places left behind by those who were suddenly gone. It is there, in that Southampton County, that most of the women this study has considered lived.

African Americans, enslaved and free, and whites, from the wealthy to the impoverished, were connected through the county's labor economy, familial ties, and many informal economies. Often, on the county's many small and midsize farms and plantations—the majority of farms in the county—Southampton's black and white residents lived in close proximity; at times in the space of one room with a small loft. The court records available often only hint at these living arrangements and the intimacy, real and imagined, of everyday life in the rural antebellum countryside. Therefore, searching through the diversity of sources available for the county outside of those related to post-rebellion court proceedings is both fruitful and long overdue.

¹⁵⁶ Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 116-118.

¹⁵⁷ Francis Family Bible Record, 1805-1929. Library of Virginia (<http://image.lva.virginia.gov/BibleII/35575.pdf>)

When women, their lives and experiences, are considered fully, we gain a vantage point that brings a complex community into view. Women played a vital role in the culture of evasion and subversion maintained by the African American community. Their roles in the culture of resistance were directly related to their laboring lives as workers with access to intelligence that men could not approach. Free people of color worked alongside whites and enslaved blacks throughout the county. Free women of color, much like their enslaved counterparts, worked as versatile laborers with access to a variety of intimate spaces. Their access was enhanced by the relative mobility of free status. Women's contributions to the African American community would have been well known to every man who joined the mounting band of rebels in 1831. We know that some men sought out women's counsel. Other male participants entrusted women with valuable information to be passed on to those who followed behind them. Others still looked forward to the food being prepared by Charlotte and Ester on the Francis place.

Asserting that African Americans cultivated a culture of resistance is not to dilute the risk incurred or the intentionality of each action, no matter how small or "every day." Some might argue that if resistance is everything and everywhere then it is nothing and nowhere at the same time. I argue that violent rebellion and "everyday" forms of resistance exist on the same continuum of resistive action—a continuum that both men and women shaped and defined. Enslaved and free, African Americans chose daily, hourly, and moment by moment, which calculated risks to take. As one survivor of Virginia's slave society put it, "No slave in those terrible days staked anything on chance in the open. He always knew or felt that what he had was a sure white man fooler."¹⁵⁸

Resistance was pervasive but survival was the prerogative.

¹⁵⁸ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 155.

This study is by no means exhaustive though I intend it to be suggestive. As the project expands in to a manuscript I hope to include two other groups present in this community: children and the Nottoway who lived on "Indian Land" in the neighborhood of the rebellion. The research presented here is meant to convey the importance of focus on the communities that produced the Southampton Rebellion, communities that become much more accessible when women's lives are considered. When the broad community of Southampton County is fully considered we excavate the tangible ways that African American men and women negotiated together the task of survival. Of course, the study also excavates the less tangible—the shape of grief in the wake of great loss communitywide, the unspoken testimonies that court records provide, and the intimacy of every encounter during the rebellion. It is in those less tangible spaces of negotiation that the real narrative rests. It is my hope that this study is the first step towards that narrative's articulation.

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