Turner, Nat

(b. Oct. 2, 1800, Southampton county, Va., U.S.—d. Nov. 11, 1831, Jerusalem, Va.), black American bondsman who led the only effective, sustained slave rebellion (August 1831) in U.S. history. Spreading terror throughout the white South, his action set off a new wave of oppressive legislation prohibiting the education, movement, and assembly of slaves and stiffened proslavery, antiabolitionist convictions that persisted in that region until the American Civil War (1861-65).

Turner was born the property of a prosperous small-plantation owner in a remote area of Virginia. His mother was an African native who transmitted a passionate hatred of slavery to her son. He learned to read from one of his master's sons, and he eagerly absorbed intensive religious training. In the early 1820s he was sold to a neighbouring farmer of small means. During the following decade his religious ardour tended to approach fanaticism, and he saw himself called upon by God to lead his people out of bondage. He began to exert a powerful influence on many of the nearby slaves, who called him "the Prophet."

In 1831, shortly after he had been sold again--this time to a craftsman named Joseph Travis--a sign in the form of an eclipse of the Sun caused Turner to believe that the hour to strike was near. His plan was to capture the armoury at the county seat, Jerusalem, and, having gathered many recruits, to press on to the Dismal Swamp, 30 miles (48 km) to the east, where capture would be difficult. On the night of August 21, together with seven fellow slaves in whom he had put his trust, he launched a campaign of total annihilation, murdering Travis and his family in their sleep and then setting forth on a bloody march toward Jerusalem. In two days and nights about 60 white people were ruthlessly slain. Doomed from the start, Turner's insurrection was handicapped by lack of discipline among his followers and by the fact that only 75 blacks rallied to his cause. Armed resistance from the local whites and the arrival of the state militia--a total force of 3,000 men--provided the final crushing blow. Only a few miles from the county seat the insurgents were dispersed and either killed or captured, and many innocent slaves were massacred in the hysteria that followed. Turner eluded his pursuers for six weeks but was finally captured, tried, and hanged.

Nat Turner's rebellion put an end to the white Southern myth that slaves were either contented with their lot or too servile to mount an armed revolt. In Southampton county black people came to measure time from "Nat's Fray," or "Old Nat's War." For many years in black churches throughout the country, the name Jerusalem referred not only to the Bible but also covertly to the place where the rebel slave had met his death.

Turner has been most widely popularized by William Styron in his novel The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967).

BIBLIOGRAPHY.