The Rebellious Slave
by Scot French

- About the Book
- About the Author
- A conversation with Scot French
- Advance praise for The Rebellious Slave

"French's work...will re-ignite debate not only about the insurrection but about slavery itself." — Tony Horwitz, The New Yorker

"An illuminating exegesis on slavery and American popular culture alike." — Kirkus Reviews

About the Book

How did the bloodiest slave uprising in American history — once thought to have involved hundreds of conspirators, black and white, free and enslaved — come to be known simply as Nat Turner's Rebellion? And why does the enigmatic figure of the rebellious slave, summoned forth in William Styron's novel The Confessions of Nat Turner, resonate so powerfully across American cultural history?

The historian Scot French examines the enduring significance of this event as a cultural landmark and moral touchstone in The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory. French charts the meaning that the idea of his subject has held throughout American history in the eyes of often conflicting constituencies. The result is a fascinating, nuanced account of American race relations and white and black attitudes toward violence as a political means.

Turner, a charismatic preacher and self-styled prophet from Southampton County, Virginia, supposedly led a small army of enslaved men and boys on a twenty-four-hour rampage that left fifty-seven white people dead and the slaveholding South convulsed in panic. A large force of state militiamen, federal troops, and armed volunteers converged on the region and crushed the insurrection. Turner himself, after eluding capture for more than two months, finally surrendered to a local farmer who found him hiding in a cave. A Southampton County lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, interviewed Turner in his jail cell and recorded his "Confessions," to this day accepted as the most accurate and authoritative account of the uprising.
The Rebellious Slave, French's revisionist account of the actual rebellion, makes the novel case that this revolt was actually part of a larger slave conspiracy. Scot French looks at the symbol, icon, and legend Nat Turner became. In its selection of critical junctures in time, the book constitutes an insightful, and pointed, story of race relations throughout our history. The Rebellious Slave is an important and necessary book — truly a rewriting of slave history.

About the Author


A conversation with Scot French

Q) In our popular culture and the history books, Nat Turner is viewed as something of an archetype: a contradictory mix of courageousness and depravity. What do these opposite views reveal about the people who hold them?

A) Like other "great men" of history who are associated with slavery, rebellion, and civil war (John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis), Turner is a polarizing figure. What we think of these men and their place in the American pantheon reveals a great deal about who we are as a people. I'm interested in what these images can tell us about the culture, society, or — more broadly — the spirit of the age that produced them.

Q) In The Confessions of Nat Turner the rebel is depicted as a prophet and bloodthirsty murderer. In either case, he is a man apart. What did your research reveal about the true nature of Nat Turner?

A) Unfortunately the "real" Nat Turner of history is lost to us. All we have to work with are sketches, more or less true to life, drawn by people with varying degrees of proximity to the man and the event that bears his name. Personally, I was far more intrigued by the minor characters, the bit players, in the great historical drama known as Nat Turner's Rebellion. In fact, my book reveals far more about them — or, rather, us — than it does about the enigmatic figure of Turner himself.

Q) What did the "master narrative" provide to the slaveholders that proved so powerful to their sense of themselves and their place in society?

A) The "master narrative," which placed Nat Turner at the center of a local conspiracy and suppressed rumors of wider slave unrest, served the interests of white and black Southerners alike. For the slaveholders, it deflected attention away from the oppressive conditions that produced slave revolt and placed the blame for the 1831 uprising on a single deranged religious fanatic. For the slaves and free persons of color, who suffered gross
persecution in the aftermath of the rebellion, the narrative exonerated all but Turner and a few "deluded wretches" of crimes against the white ruling class.

Q) What sources did you use to flesh out the true Nat Turner? What did your visits to Southampton County, Virginia, reveal? What of the mysterious "trunk" and skull? What do these rumors reveal about the enduring mystery of the man?

A) Rather than search for the "true" Nat Turner, I set out to trace the changing image and reputation of the most famous rebellious slave in American culture and society. I wanted to know what people living in very different places and times made of Turner and the event that bears his name. I quickly discovered, for example, that Turner's Rebellion looked very different to a slave girl named Beck than it did to Thomas R. Gray, the white Southampton county lawyer who recorded Turner's "Confessions" for posterity. It took a great deal of painstaking research in court and church records to reconstruct Beck's testimony and reestablish her central role in the drama — all but neglected in standard histories of this event.

My visits to Southampton County introduced me to descendants of slaves and slaveholders who served as guardians of Turner's memory and gatekeepers of the historical record. The late Gilbert Francis, a local lawyer whose great-grandparents narrowly escaped death at the hands of Turner and his men, regaled me with stories of his dealings with white Klansmen, black radicals, and Hollywood filmmakers alike. Another Southampton County native led me on a wild but fruitless search for a trunk said to contain Turner-related papers dating back to 1831.

I devote a few pages in the epilogue of my book to the enduring mystery of Nat Turner's skull, which somehow made its way from Southampton County, Virginia (where it was kept by local residents as a relic), to Wooster, Ohio (where it was displayed in a college library and natural history museum), to Gary, Indiana (where it supposedly resides today, a prized artifact of a newly established civil rights museum). To me, the story of Nat Turner's skull illustrates the changing fortunes of the rebellious slave, once the property of Southampton County slaveholders, today the revered icon of the Civil Rights and Black Power generations.

Q) How has the image of Turner been adapted to the times: slavery and Civil War; Reconstruction and Jim Crow; Civil Rights and Black Power?

A) Well now, you'll just have to read the book to find out, won't you?

Q) What made William Styron's novel The Confessions of Nat Turner so controversial? What did that work bring to your research, and what contact have you had with the novelist?

A) Styron chose to make Turner a figure with whom he — and many liberal white Americans of his day — could identify: a plantation slave with a twentieth-century intellectual's grasp of history and an ironic sensibility. Invoking artistic license, Styron built his story around what he imagined to be Turner's sexually charged relationship with a beautiful white girl named Margaret Whitehead. This was hardly the pious black Christian martyr celebrated in Negro History Week pageants or the black revolutionary so widely admired by Malcolm X and others! Needless to say, Styron caught hell from black critics. But he also caught hell from the descendants of slaveholders who felt that Styron defamed their ancestors as well.
I devote considerable attention to Styron's motives in writing *The Confessions* and the social and political context in which it was received. Styron made himself and his papers at Duke available to me without restriction, which was a tremendous boon to my research. I admire his willingness to revisit what was obviously a very painful episode in his life.

**Q)** Does "historical relativism" mean that the truth of the past is largely unknowable by those in the present? Will society's search for a "usable past" put out of reach an understanding of the motives of those, like Nat Turner and others who led the rebellion, who made specific choices in a specific environment that still echo today?

**A)** Historical relativists do not believe that the truth of the past is largely unknowable by those in the present. They simply believe that the records of the past can yield no single, timeless, unassailable "truth" about what really happened. The best one can hope for is a reasonably accurate recounting of events built on solid evidence. The most persuasive truth claims are based on evidence, which is always open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Sometimes historians find new evidence, throwing old conclusions into doubt and raising provocative new questions. Sometimes historians ask new questions, casting old subjects in a new light. I like to think I've done a little of both.

**Q)** Ever since the decades-old rumors about Strom Thurmond's mixed-race daughter were proven true, I have been wondering what you think of this present-day white archetype and how his control of his personal history sheds light on Southern (and white) historical narrative.

**A)** Though Thurmond was able to control his own personal history for many years, the "truth" of his relationship with Essie Mae Williams was well known to many people for many years — one might call it an open secret. The same might be said of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, so long affirmed in African-American oral tradition, so long denied by Jefferson's white descendants and admiring white biographers. Only now are we, as a society, facing up to the uncomfortable "truths" about our shared past under slavery and segregation. But it's still a very painful subject, and many of us — black and white — would rather forget that it ever happened.

**Q)** History and storytelling are clear passions — not just in your professional work, but also in your spare time. You collect antique typewriters, boxes of family letters, diaries, and photographs dating back to the early eighteenth century. What is it about the implements of storytelling that so captivates you?

**A)** They make me feel connected to people and places I’ve never known. There’s something incredibly moving in finding a mark or trace that someone left — perhaps unwittingly — for posterity. It’s up to me, as a historian, to make sense of that artifact, to give it life by incorporating it into my life story.
Advance praise for *The Rebellious Slave*

"In this beautifully written narrative, Scot French unfolds the story of how Americans have imagined Nat Turner over the last 170 years. With a subtle touch, French evokes the fears and hopes that have swirled around one of the most enigmatic figures in American history. No one has looked so deeply into the public memory of race and violence in this nation." — Edward L. Ayers, author of *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863*

"Far more compelling than a traditional biography, Scot French's innovative probing of our collective memory opens new avenues of debate, even as it details and evaluates earlier portrayals of the black insurrectionist as both incubus and icon. *The Rebellious Slave* is a most welcome contribution to African-American literary and cultural studies." — William L. Van Deburg, author of *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture*

"Nat lives! Scot French brilliantly demonstrates how the image of Nat Turner could be used and abused, fashioned and refashioned, but never coopted or rendered passé." — Daryl Michael Scott, author of *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996*