**“White Man’s Country”**

**Ulrich B. Phillips**

An Ohio River ferryman has a stock remark when approaching the right bank: "We are nearing the American shore." A thousand times has he said it with a gratifying repercussion from among his passengers; for its implications are a little startling. The Northern shore is American without question; the Southern shore is American with a difference. . . .

Southernism did not arise from any selectiveness of migration, for the sort of people who went to Virginia, Maryland, or Carolina, were not as a group different from those who went to Pennsylvania or the West Indies. It does not lie in religion or language. It was not created by one-crop tillage, nor did agriculture in the large tend to produce a Southern scheme of life and thought. The Mohawk Valley was for decades as rural as that of the Oranoke; wheat is as dominant in Dakota as cotton has ever been in Alabama; tobacco is as much a staple along the Ontario shore of Lake Erie as in the Kentucky pennyroyal; and the growing rich and cotton in California has not prevented Los Angeles from being in a sense the capitol of Iowa. On the other hand the rise of mill towns in the Carolina piedmont and the growth of manufacturing at Richmond and Birmingham have not made these Northern. It may be admitted, however, that Miami, Palm Beach, and Coral Gables are Southern only in latitude. They were vacant wastes until Flager, Fifth Avenue, and the realtors discovered and subdivided them.

The South has never had a focus. New York has plied as much of its trade as Baltimore or New Orleans; and White Sulfur Springs did not quite eclipse all other mountain and coast resorts for vacation patronage. The lack of a metropolis was lamented in 1857 by an advocate of Southern independence, as essential for shaping and radiating a coherent philosophy to fit the prevailing conditions of life. But without a consolidating press or pulpit or other definite apparatus the South has maintained a considerable solidarity through think and thin, through peace and war and peace again. What is its essence? Not state rights--John C. Calhoun himself was for years a nationalist, and some advocates of independence hoped for a complete merging of the several states into a unitary Southern republic; not free trade--sugar and hemp growers have ever been protectionists; not slavery--in the eighteenth centuries this was of continental legality, and in the twentieth it is legal nowhere; not Democracy--there were many Federalists in Washington's day many Whigs in Clay's;. It is not the land of cotton alone or of the plantations alone; Yet it is a land with a unity despite its diversity, with a people having common joys and common sorrows, and, above all, as to the white folk a people with common resolve indomitably maintained--that it shall be and remain a white man's country. The consciousness of a function in these premises, whether said by a demagogue or maintained with patrician's quietude, is the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history.

Indeed, this central theme, “the South is a white man’s country,” arose as soon as the Negroes became numerous enough to create a problem of race control in the interest of orderly government and the maintenance of Caucasian civilization. Slavery was instituted not merely to provide control of labor, but also as a system of racial adjustment and social order. And when in the course of time slavery was attacked, it was defended not only as a vested interest, but with vigor and vehemence as a guarantee of white supremacy and civilization. Its defenders did not always take pains to say that this was what they chiefly meant, but it may nearly always be read between their lines and their hearers and readers understood it without overt expression. Otherwise it would be impossible to account for the fervid secessionism of many non-slave holders and the eager service of thousands in the Confederate army.

The non-slaveholders of course were diverse in their conditions and sentiments. Those in the mountains and the deep pine woods were insulated to such a degree that public opinion hardly existed, and they chose between alternatives only when issues created in other quarters were forced upon them. Those in the black belts, on the other hand, had their lives conditioned by the presence of Negroes; and they had the apparatus of court days, militia musters, and political barbecues as well neighborhood conversation to keep them abreast of affairs. A mechanic of Ikuta, Mississippi, wrote in the summer of 1861:

"I am a Georgian Raised I am Forty years Old A tinner by Trade, I Raised the First Confederate Flag that I Ever Heard Of that was in 1851 in the Town of Macon Miss. Notwithstanding the Many Ridicules I Encounter'd I Told the Citizens that they would All Be Glad to Rally under Such a Flag Some Day which is at present true." This personal tale was told to prove his title to a voice in Confederate policy. His main theme was a demand that the permanent Confederate constitution exclude Negroes from all employment except agricultural labor and domestic service in order that the handicrafts be reserved for white artisans like himself.

Similarly, the overseer of a sugar estate forty miles below New Orleans inscribed a prayer on the plantation journal:

This Thursday, June 13, 1861 is set apart by president Jefferson Davis for fasting and praying . . . My Prayer to God is that every Black Republican , either man woman or chile that is opposed to negro slavery as it existed in the Southern Confederacy shall be troubled with pestilence and calamities of all kinds and drag out the balance of there existence in misray and degradation with scarcely food and raiment enough to keep sole and Body to gather and o God I pray to Direct a bullet or a bayonet to pierce the heart of every northern soldier that invades southern soil and after the body has rendered up its traterish sole gave it a trators reward a Birth In the Lake of Fires and Brimstone my honest convicksion is that every man woman and chile that gave aide to the abolishment are fit subjects for Hell I all so ask the aide the southern Confederacy in maintaining ower rites and establishing the confederate Government.  Amen.

Along with a million other non-slaveholders, this southern white man had a still stronger social belief: the white men's ways must prevail; the engross must be kept innocuous.

In the 'forties when most of the planters were White, some of the Democratic politicians thought it strange that their own party should be the more energetic in defense of slavery; and in 1860 they were perhaps puzzled again that the Bell and Evertt Constitutional Union ticket drew its main support from among the slaveholders. The reason for this apparent anomaly lay doubtless in the two facts, that men of wealth had more to lose in any cataclysm, and that masters had less antipathy to Negroes then non-slave-holders did. In daily contact with blacks from birth, and often on a friendly basis of patron and retainer, the planters were in a sort of partnership with their slaves, reckoning upon their good will or at least possessing a sense of security as a fruit of long habituation to fairly serene conditions. But the poorer white class lived outside this partnership and suffered somewhat from its competition. H.R. Helper in his Impending Crisis (1857) urged them to wreck the system by destroying slavery and when this had been accomplished without their aid he vented in his fantastic Nojoque (1867) a spleen against the Negroes, advocating their expulsion from the United States as a preliminary to their universal extermination. Thus he called hot class war upon a double front, to humble the "lords of the lash" and then to destroy the "black and bi-colored caitiffs" who cumbered the white man's world. By his alliterative rhetoric and shrewdly selected statistics Helper captured some Northern propagandists and the historians whom they begat, but if he made convert among the Southern yeomen they are not of record. His notions had come to him during his residence in California and the North; they were therefore to be taken skeptically. His programs repudiated humane tradition, disregarded vital actualities, and evoked Northern aid to make over the South in its own image. These things, and perhaps the last especially, were not to be sanctioned. In fact, for reasons common in the world at large, the Southern whites were not to be divided into sharply antagonistic classes. Robert J. Walker said quite soundly in 1856:

In all the slave States there is a large majority of voters who are non-slaveholders; but they are devoted to the institutions of the South--they would defend them with their lives--and on this question the South are [sic] a united people. The class, composed of many small farmers, of merchants, professional men, mechanics, overseers, and other industrial classes, constitute mainly the patrol of the South, and cheerfully unite in carrying out those laws essential to preserve the institution. Against a powerful minority and constant agitation slavery could not exist in any State.

It is perhaps less fruitful to seek the social classes at large which were warm and those which were cool toward independence than to inquire why the citizens of certain areas were prevailingly ardent while those in another zone were indifferent or opposed, why for example the whole tier from South Carolina to Texas seceded spontaneously but no other states joined them until after Lincoln's call for troops. The reason lay in preceding history as well as in current conditions. The economic factor of the cotton belt's interest in free trade and its recurrent chagrin at protective tariff enactments is by no means negligible. The rancor produced by nullification and the "force bill" had been revived in South Carolina by the repeal of the compromise tariff in 1842, and it did not then die. In addition, it is certainly true that the quarrels of Georgia with the federal authorities over Indian lands were contributing episodes to make the lower South alert; and the heavy Negro proportions in their black belts, together with the immaturity in the social order, made their people more sensible than those of Virginia to the menace of disturbance from outside.

Slavery questions, which had never been quite negligible since the framing of the Constitution, gained activity from the abolition agitation; and the study of Congressional mathematics focused the main attention upon the rivalry of the sections in territorial enlargement. The North had control of the House of Representatives, as recurrent votes on the Wilmot Proviso showed; and California's admission upset the sectional equilibrium in the Senate. For fire-eaters like Yancy, Rhett, and Quitman. the South should strike for independence before that strength should grow yet greater and consolidated for crushing purposes. But the gestures of Cass, Webster, and Fillmore gave ground for hope that the Northern giant would not use his power against the Southern home rule, and the crisis was deferred. Southern friends and foes of the Compromise of 1850 were alert thenceforward for tokens of Northern will. Events through the ensuing decade, somewhat assisted by the fire-eaters and culminating in the election to the Presidency, converted a new multitude to the shibboleth: "The alternative: a separate nationality or the Africanization of the South."

The tension of 1850 had bought much achievement in this direction. "Southern rights had come to mean racial security, self-determination by the whites whether in or out of the Union, and all things ancillary to the assured possession of these. Furthermore, a program had been framed to utilize state sovereignty whether to safeguard the South as a minority within the Union or legitimate its exit into national independence.

The resurgence of these notions and emotions after their abeyance in 1851 need not be traced in detail. Suffice it to say that legal sanction for the spread of slavery into the territories, regardless or geographical potentialities, became the touchstone of Southern rights; and the rapid rise of the Republican party which denied this sanction, equally regardless of geographical potentialities, tipped the balance in lower Southern policy. Many were primed in 1856 for a move toward secession in case Fremont should be elected that year; and though he fell short of an electoral majority, the strength shown by his Republican ticket increased the zeal of many southerners for independence.

Various editorials in the Northern papers, debates in Congress, and events in Kansas and elsewhere fanned secessionist flames when the stroke of John Brown fell upon Harper's Ferry. This event was taken as a demonstration that abolitionists had lied in saying they were concerned with moral suasion only, and it stimulated suspicion that Republicans were abolitionists in disguise. In December the South Carolina . . . intimated that she was ripe for secession and invited all Southern states to meet in convention at once to concert measures for united action. In February the Alabama legislature asserted that under no circumstances would the commonwealth submit to "the foul domination of a sectional Northern party," and it instructed the governor in the event of a Republican's election to the Presidency to order the election of delegates to a convention of the state to consider and do whatever in its judgment her rights, interests, and honor might require.

There was little to do in the interim but discuss principles and portents and to jockey the situation slightly to prepare for the crisis or try to prevent it according to what individuals might think best. In an editorial of January 9, 1860 on "The new position of the South: Not aggrandizement but safety," the New Orleans Crescent, which was long an advocate of modernization, said:

The South does not claim the right of controlling the North in the choice of a President; she admits fully and explicitly that the Northern people possess the prerogative of voting as they please. But at the same time the South asserts that while the North holds the legal tight of casting her voice as to her may seem best, she has no moral tight to so cast it as to effect the ruin of the South; and it she does so cast it, in full view of its injurious effects upon us, . . . she, in effect, commits an act of convert hostility upon us that will render it impossible for us to live longer in intimate relations.

**II**

While the war dragged on for almost five years, the hopes of independence faded, and queries were raised in some Southern quarters as to whether yielding might not be the wiser course. Lincoln in his plan of reconstruction had shown unexpected magnanimity; the Republican party, discarding that obnoxious name, had officially styled itself merely Unionist; and the Northern Democrats, although outvoted, were still a friendly force to be reckoned upon. In the end, however, die-hard statesmen and loyal soldiers carried on until the collapse.

With President Johnson taking over for Lincoln in 1865, Southern hearts were lightened only to sink again when radicals in Congress, calling themselves Republican once more, slaughtered the Presidential program for Reconstruction and set events into motion which seemed to make "the Africanization of the South" inescapable. To most of the whites, doubtless, the prospect showed no gleam of hope.

But Edward A. Pollard, a Virginia critic of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, took courage in 1868 and wrote his most significant book, The Lost Cause Regained. The folly of Southern politicians in 1861, he said, had made the South defend slavery seemingly "as a property tenure, or as a barrier against a contention and war of races."  What Southerners failed to see, he continued, was that the North viewed the Negro in a similar way to the South. Given enough time, Northerners would come to realize this and return control of the Negro to Southern white men.

Evidence of this, Pollard suggested came with the defeats of proposals for Negro suffrage in seven states from Connecticut to Colorado. From this Northern attitude toward Negroes, Pollard saw promise of effective support and eventual success in undoing Reconstruction. Therefore:

Let us come back to the true hope of the South. It is to enter bravely with new allies and new auspices the contest for the supremacy of the white man, and with it the preservation of he dearest political traditions of the country. "WHITE" is a winning word, and let us never be done repeating it . . .

**A Troublesome Property – By Kenneth M. Stampp**

Slaves apparently thought of the South's a peculiar institution chiefly as a system of labor extortion. They revealed their discontent with bondage in numerous ways and their Southern masters responded with violence and intimidation. Ironically, plantation owners did not hesitate to assert that most of their slaves were quite content with servitude. Bondsmen generally were cheerful an acquiescent - so the argument went - because they were treated with kindness and relieved of all responsibilities; having known no other condition, they unthinkingly accepted bondage as their natural status. According to white Southerners, Slaves also acquiesced because of innate racial traits, because of the "genius of African temperament," the Negro being "instinctively ... contented' and "quick to respond to the stimulus of joy quick to forget his grief." Moreover, the great majority of bondsmen had no concept of freedom and were therefore contented. When visitors in the South asked a slave whether he wished to be free, he usually replied: "No, massa, me no want to be free, have good massa, take care of me when I sick, me no want to be free."

Since there are few reliable records of what went on in the minds of slaves, one can only infer their thoughts and feelings from their behavior, and that behavior indicated that they disliked their condition and used every means possible to resist it. In fact, despite the plantation owners denial to the fact, the slave knew about freedom and south it constantly. Slaves had only to observe their masters and the other free men about them to obtain a very distinct idea of the meaning and advantages of freedom. All knew that some Negroes had been emancipated; they knew that freedom was a possible condition for any of them.

Since slaves had some understanding of freedom, no doubt most of them desired to enjoy these benefits. Some, perhaps the majority, had no more than a vague, unarticulated yearning for escape from burdens and restraints. They submitted, but submission did not necessarily mean enjoyment or even contentment. And some slaves felt a sharp pang and saw a clear objective. They struggled toward it against imposing obstacles, expressing their discontent through positive action.

Slaves showed great eagerness to get any type of freedom that they could—even if it came in small amounts. For example, they liked to hire their own time, or to work in tobacco factories, or for the Tredegar Iron Company, because they were then under less restraint than in the fields, and they had greater opportunities to earn money for themselves. They seized the chance to make their condition approximate that of freedmen.

If slaves yielded to authority, they did so because they usually saw no other practical choice. Yet few went through life without expressing discontent somehow, some time. Even the most passive slaves, usually before they reached middle age, flared up in protests now and then. The majority, as they grew older, lost hope and spirit. Some, however, never quite gave in, never stopped fighting back in one-way or another. The "bad character" of this "insolent," "surly," and "unruly" sort made them a liability to those who owned them, for a slave's value was measured by his disposition as much as by his strength and skills. Such rebels seldom won legal freedom, yet they never quite admitted they were slaves.

Slave resistance, whether bold or mild, created for all slaveholders a serious problem of discipline. Plantation owners often saw the problem discussed in numberless essays with such titles as "the Management of Negroes," essays which filled the pages of southern agricultural periodicals. Many masters had reason to agree with the owner of a hundred slaves who complained that he possessed "just 100 troubles," or with a Georgia planter who said that slaves were "a troublesome property."

The record of slave resistance forms a chapter in the story of the endless struggle to give dignity to human life. Though the history of southern bondage reveals that men can be enslaved under certain conditions, it also demonstrates that their love of freedom is hard to crush. The subtle expression of this spirit, no less than the daring thrusts for liberty, comprise one of the richest gifts the slaves have left to posterity. In making themselves "troublesome property," they provide reassuring evidence that slaves seldom wear their shackles lightly.

The record of the minority who waged ceaseless and open warfare against their bondage makes an inspiring chapter in the history of Americans of African descent. True, these rebels were exceptional men, but the historian of any group properly devotes much attention to those individuals who did extraordinary things, men in whose lives the problems of their age found focus, men who voiced the feelings and aspirations of the more timid and less articulate masses. As the American Revolution produced folk heroes, so also did Southern slavery - heroes who, in both cases, gave much for the cause of human freedom....

According to Dr. Cartwright, there was as a ... disease peculiar to Negroes which he called Drapetomania: "the disease causing Negroes to run away." Cartwright believed that it was a "disease of the mind" and that with "proper medical advice" it could be cured. The first symptom was a "sulky and dissatisfied" attitude. To forestall the full onset of the disease, the cause of discontent must be determined and removed. If there were no ascertainable cause, then "whipping the devil out of them" was the proper "preventive measures against absconding." else than runaway."

The number of runaways was not large enough to threaten the survival of the peculiar institution, because slaveholders took precautions to prevent the problem from growing to such proportions. But their measures were never entirely successful, as the advertisements for fugitives in southern newspapers made abundantly clear. Actually, the problem was much greater than these newspapers suggested, because many owners did not advertise for their absconding property. In any case, fugitive slaves were numbered in the thousands every year. It was an important form of protest against bondage.

Who were the runaways? They were generally young slaves, most of them under thirty, but occasionally masters searched for fugitives who were more than sixty years old. The majority of them were males, though female runaways were by no means uncommon. It is not true that most of them were mulattos or of predominantly white ancestry.

Besides running away, Southern slaves demonstrated their resistance to the Peculiar Institution with more serious activities. Their offences ranged from petty misdemeanors to capital crimes, and they were punished accordingly, but the most common type of resistance and disobedience to white authority was simple petty theft. Let a master turn his back, wrote one planter, and some "cunning fellow" would appropriate part of his goods. Significantly, no slave would betray another, for an informer was held "in greater detestation than the most notorious thief." If slaveholders are to be believed, petty theft was an almost universal "vice"; slaves would take anything that was not under lock and key. Field-hands killed hogs and robbed the corn crib. House servants helped themselves to wines, whiskey, jewelry, trinkets, & whatever else was lying about.

If the stolen goods were not consumed directly, they were traded to whites or to free Negroes. This illegal trade caused masters endless trouble, for slaves were always willing to exchange plantation products for tobacco, liquor, or small sums of money. Southern courts were kept busy handling the resulting prosecutions. One slaveholder discovered that his bondsmen had long been engaged in an extensive trade in corn. "Strict vigilance," he concluded, was necessary "to prevent them from theft; particularly when dishonesty is inherent, as is probably the case with some of them." Dishonesty, as the master understood the term, indeed seemed to be a common if not an inherent trait of southern slaves.

The slaves, however had a somewhat different definition of dishonesty in their own code, to which they were reasonably faithful. For appropriating their master's good they might be punished and denounced by him, but they were not likely to be disgraced among their associates in the slave quarters, who made a distinction between "stealing" and "taking". Appropriating things from the master meant simply taking part of his property for the benefit of another part or, as Frederick Douglass phrased it, "taking his meat out of one tub, and putting it in another." Thus a female domestic who had been scolded for the theft of some trinkets was reported to have replied: "Law, man, don't say I's wicked; ole Aunt Ann says its “allers right for us poor colored people to 'propiate whatever of de wite folk's blessing de Lord puts in our way." Stealing, on the other hand, meant appropriating something that belonged to another slave, and this was an offense which slaves did not condone.

Next to theft, arson was the most common slave "crime," one which slaveholders dreaded almost constantly. Fire was a favorite means for aggrieved slaves to even the score with their masters. Reports emanated periodically from some region or other that there was an "epidemic" of gin-house burnings, or that some bondsman had taken his revenge by burning the slave quarters or other farm buildings. More than one planter thus saw the better part of a year's harvest go up in flames. Southern newspapers are filled with illustrations of this offense, and with evidence of the severe penalties inflicted upon those found guilty of committing it.

Another "crime" was what might be called self-sabotage, a slave deliberately unfitting himself to labor for his master. An Arkansas slave, "at any time to save an hour's work," could "throw his left shoulder out of place." A Kentucky slave made himself unserviceable by downing medicines from his master's dispensary. A slave woman was treated as an invalid because of "swelling in her arms" -- until it was discovered that she produced this condition by thrusting her arms periodically into a beehive. Yellow Jacob, according to his master's plantation journal, "had a kick from a mule and when nearly well would bruise it and by that means kept form work." Another Negro, after being punished by his owner, retaliated by cutting off his right hand; still another cut off the fingers of one hand to avoid being sold South.

A few desperate slaves carried this form of resistance to the extreme of self-destruction. Those freshly imported from Africa and those sold away from friends and relatives were especially prone to suicide. London, a slave on a Georgia rice plantation, ran to the river and drowned himself after being threatened with a whipping. His overseer gave orders to leave the corpse untouched "to let the [other] Negroes see [that] when a Negro takes his own life they will be treated in this manner."

In one dramatic case, a Louisiana fugitive was detected working as a free Negro on a Mississippi River flatboat. His pursuers, trailing him with a pack of "Negro dogs," finally found him "standing at bay upon the outer edge of a large raft of drift wood, warmed with a club and pistol." He threatened to kill anyone who got near him. "Finding him obstinately determined not to surrender, one of his pursuers shot him. He fell at the third fire, and so determined was he not to be captured, that when a effort was made to rescue him from drowning he made battle with his club, and sunk waving his weapon in angry defiance."

Antebellum records are replete with acts of violence committed by individual slaves upon masters, overseers, and other whites. A Texan complained, in 1853, that cases of slaves murdering white men were becoming "painfully frequent." "Within the last year or two many murders have taken place, by Negroes upon their owners," reported a Louisiana newspaper. And a Florida editor once wrote: "It is our painful duty to record another instance of the destruction of the life of a white by a slave."

Many masters owned one or more bondsmen whom they feared as potential murders. A Georgia planter remembered Jack, his plantation carpenter, "the most notoriously bad character and worst Negro of the place." Jack "was the only Negro ever in our possession who I considered capable of Murdering me, or burning my dwelling at night, or capable of committing any act."

At times these acts of violence appeared to be for "no cause" -- that is, they resulted from a slave's "bad disposition" rather than from a particular grievance. But more often they resulted from a clash of personalities, or from some specific incident. For example, a slave who had been promised freedom in his master's will, poisoned his master to hasten the day of liberation. A South Carolina bondsman was killed during a fight with an overseer who had whipped his son. In North Carolina a slave intervened while the overseer was whipping his wife, and in the ensuing battle the overseer met his death.

This most common provocation to violence was the attempt of a master or overseer either to work or to punish slaves severely. An Alabama bonds man confessed killing the overseer because "he was a hard down man on him, and said he was going to be harder." Six Louisiana slaves together killed an overseer and explained in their confession that they found it impossible to satisfy him. Three North Carolina slaves killed their master when they decided that "the old man was too hard on them, and they must get rid of him." During one of these crises an overseer called upon his hands to help him punish an "unmanageable" slave: "not one of them paid the least attention to me but kept on at their work."

Of course, the most severe form of resistance was the slave rebellion. No ante-bellum Southerner could ever forget Nat Turner. Turner was a pious man, a Baptist exhorter by avocation, apparently as humble and docile as a slave was expected to be. There is no evidence that he was underfed, overworked, or treated with special cruelty. If Nat Turner could not be trusted, what slave could? That was what made his sudden deed so frightening.

Somehow Turner came to believe that he had been divinely chosen to deliver his people from bondage, and he persuaded several other slaves to assist him. In due time he saw the sign of which he had waited, and early in the morning of August 22, 1831, he and his followers rose in rebellion. They began by killing the family to whom Turner belonged. As they marched through the Southampton countryside they gained additional recruits, making a total of about seventy. Within two days they killed nearly sixty whites. They could have killed more. They left undisturbed at least one poor white family, "because they thought no better of themselves than they did of Negroes." To justify the killings, members of Turner's band declared that they had enough of punishment.

The Nat Turner rebellion lasted only forty-eight hours. Swiftly mobilizing in overwhelming strength, the whites easily dispersed the rebels. Then followed a massacre during which not only the insurrectionists, but scores of innocent bondsmen were slaughtered.

Nat Turner himself was not captured until October 30, more than two months after the uprising. He was brought to trial on November 5, convicted the same day, and hanged six days later. Thus ended an event which produced in the south something resembling a mass trauma, from which the whites had not recovered three decades later.

Though it was the most disastrous, Nat turner's was not the first insurrection. Several earlier conspiracies, which narrowly missed being carried into execution, might easily have precipitated rebellions much more extensive than that of Turner. One was Gabriel Conspiracy (August, 1800) in Henrico County, Virginia, in which at least a thousand slaves were implicated. The warnings of two black bondsmen enabled the whites to forestall a projected march upon Richmond. A decade later some five hundred slaves in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana, armed with cane knives and other crude weapons, advanced toward New Orleans. But the planters and a strong detachment of troops put them to flight. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free Negro in Charleston, planned a vast conspiracy, which came to nothing after it was given away by a slave. These and other plots were invariably followed by severe reprisals, including the indiscriminate killings of slaves as well as mass executions after regular trials. The heads of sixteen Louisiana rebels were stuck upon poles along the Mississippi River as a grim warning to other slaves.

The shock of Nat Turner caused Southerners to take preventive measures, but these never eliminated their apprehension or the actual danger. Hardly a year passed without some kind of alarming disturbance somewhere in the South. When no real conspiracy existed, wild rumors often agitated the whites and at times came close to creating an insurrection panic. Whether caused by rumor or fact, the specter of rebellion often troubled the sleep of the master class.

In truth, no slave uprising ever had a chance of ultimate success, even though it might have cost the master class heavy casualties. The great majority of the disarmed and outnumbered slaves, knowing the futility of rebellion, refused to join in any of the numerous plots. Most slaves had to express their desire for freedom in less dramatic ways. They rarely went beyond disorganized individual action -- which, to be sure, caused their masters no little annoyance. The bondsmen themselves lacked the power to destroy the web of bondage. They would have to have the aid of free men inside or outside the South.

The survival of slavery, then, cannot be explained as due to the contentment of slaves or their failure to comprehend the advantages of freedom. They longed for liberty and resisted bondage as much as any people could have done in their circumstances, but their longing and their resistance were not enough even to render the institution unprofitable to most masters. The masters had power, and they developed an elaborate technique of slave control. Their very preoccupation with this technique was, in itself, a striking refutation of the myth that slavery survived because of the cheerful acquiescence of the slaves.