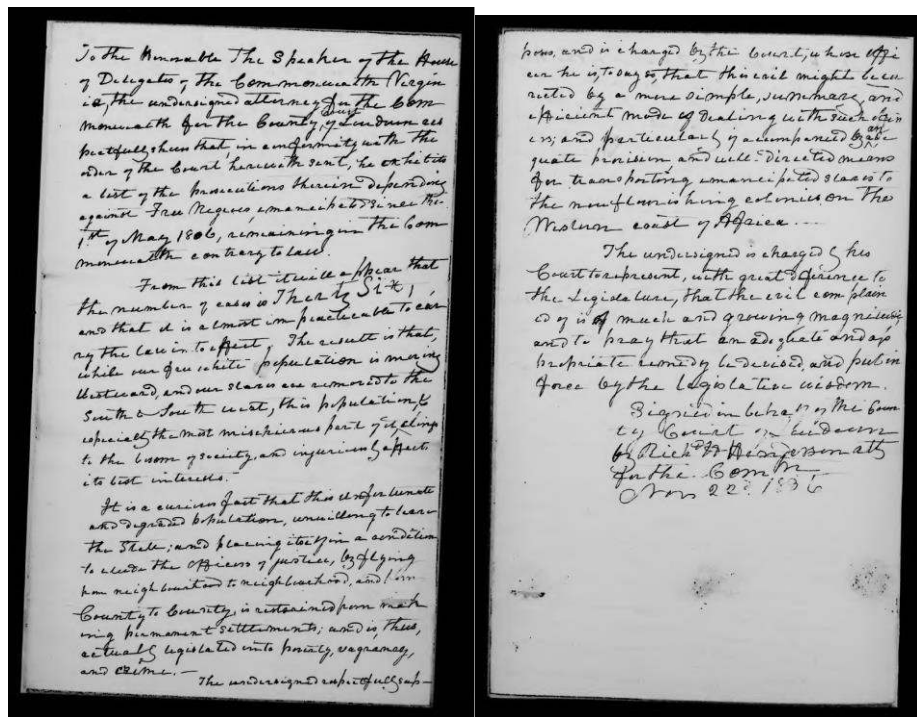


The Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 in Virginia's Southampton County, which took the lives of 50+ whites and resulted in the execution or lynching of 100-200 African Americans, generated mass hysteria among Southern whites. The threat of mass insurrections by the enslaved, especially in isolated plantations or communities where whites were in a distinct minority, terrified enslaving and non-enslaving whites alike. In response to cries for stricter controls on the African American population, the Commonwealth passed a series of laws severely limiting the activities of both the enslaved and free people of color. Among other things, teaching free and enslaved blacks to read and write and preaching by black ministers were banned. (Turner had learned to read and write while enslaved and incited insurrection based in part on his reading of the Bible.) Literacy among free black children declined as a result.



1836 Petition

PETITION FROM COUNTY COURT TO EXPEL "FREE NEGROES" TO AFRICA (1836)

Robert A. Pollard

Leading citizens of Loudoun County were alarmed. The presence of many free blacks in the County, some of them of no fixed address, seemed to threaten public order. As evidence, the Loudoun County Court in 1836 attached a list to the Virginia General Assembly of 36 such individuals to a petition asking that the state expel them to Africa:

To the Honorable the Speaker of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the undersigned attorney for the Commonwealth for the County Court of Loudoun respectfully submits that, in conformity with the order of the Court herewith sent, he exhibits a list of the prosecutions therein depending against Free Negroes emancipated since the 1st of May 1806, remaining in the Commonwealth contrary to law.

What was their offense? In order to curb a spike in manumission of the enslaved that had occurred after 1790, the Virginia General Assembly had decreed that any African American who was emancipated after May 1806 had 12 months to leave Virginia or face re-enslavement. Although the free blacks on the list allegedly fit that description, the County had found it “almost impracticable to carry the law into effect.”

So what danger exactly did these individuals pose by remaining in Loudoun? The petitioners feared that as the free black population multiplied, the demographic balance would shift against whites, perhaps raising the risk of a Nat Turner-like rebellion. For some years, the depletion of local soils, the availability of richer land further west, and the explosive growth of new cotton plantations in the Deep South had contributed to a relative decline of agriculture in Loudoun. Meanwhile, for various reasons, an estimated 3,000 whites had emigrated from the County in the 1830s alone.* If whites could not control the free African American population, their insubordination might spread to the enslaved.

The result is that while our free white population is moving westward and our slaves are removed to the South and to the West, this population [of free blacks], especially the most mischievous part of it, clings to the bosom of society and injuriously affects its best interests.

The County cloaked its advocacy for expulsion in humanitarian grounds, arguing that the inability of “this unfortunate and degraded population” to support itself condemned free blacks to a life of “poverty, vagrancy, and crime.”

It is a curious fact that this unfortunate and degraded population, unwilling to leave the State and placing itself in a condition to elude the officers of justice, by flying from neighborhood to neighborhood and from County to County is restrained from making permanent settlements and is thus actually legislated into poverty, vagrancy and crime.

The petition concludes with a plea for the state to implement and pay for their removal:

[T]his evil might be corrected by a more simple, summary and efficient mode of dealing with such offenders and particularly if accompanied by adequate provision and well directed means of transporting emancipated slaves to the new flourishing colonies on the Western coast of Africa.

The undersigned is charged by his Court to represent, with great deference to the Legislature, that the evil complained of is of much and growing magnitude and to pray that an adequate and appropriate remedy be devised and put in place by the Legislative wisdom.

Signing the petition was the County's Commonwealth Attorney, Richard Henderson, whose property in Loudoun included many enslaved. Ironically, Henderson had briefly flirted with abolition. In December 1831, months after the Nat Turner rebellion, he had chaired a committee that petitioned Loudoun delegates to the General Assembly to abolish slavery in Virginia.

The state legislature had rejected that proposal, and likewise turned down the 1836 petition. It did, however, appropriate \$18,000 annually for five years to support voluntary emigration (each adult would receive only \$30), and larger sums (\$30,000 annually for five years) in the early 1850s. Yet reports of the conditions in Liberia from the few African Americans from Loudoun who had emigrated there discouraged others from following their example. As harsh as their lives were, the great majority of Loudoun's free blacks elected to remain in the land of their birth.

*For information on the 1806 law, reaction to the Nat Turner rebellion, and the petitions regarding free African Americans to the General Assembly, see Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, pp. 25, 264-268, 275-276, 280-282, 286, 290, 410(ftn37); also, Poland, *From Frontier to Suburbia*, pp. 143-146.

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