The Right to Read: Literacy, Slavery, and the Fight for Freedom in Early Virginia

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ABSTRACT

In early America, literacy was more than a basic skill; it was a marker of power, privilege, and, most importantly, freedom. While the Founding Fathers celebrated education as essential to liberty, the new nation simultaneously denied it to the hundreds of thousands it enslaved. Colonial Virginia, the birthplace of both American ideals and chattel slavery, makes this tension visible as Enlightenment rhetoric, economic dependence on enslaved labor, and Christian duty collided. Events such as Gabriel's Conspiracy, the Haitian Revolution, and Nat Turner's Rebellion exposed the profound threat that educated people of color posed to the foundations of slaveholding society. Primary sources, including runaway advertisements, racially motivated legislation, and correspondence among colonial elites, reveal how the spread of knowledge was carefully regulated. Although most surviving documents were produced by white authorities, they inadvertently reveal the power attributed with written knowledge. Drawing on both primary sources and recent historical scholarship, this project argues that restrictions on enslaved literacy were not incidental but central to maintaining the ideological and economic foundations of slavery in the Revolutionary era and the early republic.

In early America, spanning the colonial period through the early republic, the ability to read and write was more than a basic skill; it was a gateway to power, autonomy, and freedom. While the Founding Fathers proclaimed education as essential to liberty, the new nation simultaneously denied it to the hundreds of thousands it enslaved. This contradiction reveals a central paradox from the 1760s to the 1830s, in which freedom relied on the subjugation and enforced ignorance of others. Using Virginia as a case study, home to over 40% of the enslaved population in the United States, reveals how Enlightenment rhetoric, economic dependence on enslaved labor, and Christian ideology collided to shape attitudes toward Black literacy.[1] To trace these dynamics, this study primarily draws on documents produced by white Virginians, such as political writings, legislation, runaway advertisements, and trial records. While these sources are deeply shaped by the biases of enslavers and cannot be read as neutral accounts, they provide

[1] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*: *The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (W. W. Norton, 1975), 5-6.

insight into understanding how power was constructed, justified, and enforced through literacy restrictions. Building on existing scholarship on slavery, education, and resistance, this paper traces how literacy in Virginia became increasingly restricted over time, arguing that it functioned both as a tool of oppression enforced by the white elite and as a means of empowerment for enslaved communities. Repression and resistance converged most dramatically in Nat Turner's Rebellion, where religious interpretation, literacy, and revolt intersected, revealing the profound threat that intellectual autonomy among enslaved Americans posed to the foundations of slaveholding society.

At the heart of Colonial Virginia lay Enlightenment thinkers united under ideals of reason, natural rights, and human equality. However, these notions of human progress fueled a racialized understanding of intelligence that justified the exclusion of Black Americans from education. The Enlightenment's urge to categorize through the guise of the scientific method placed "things, phenomena, and experiences into their proper place,"[2] allowing human beings to be arranged into hierarchical groups. As a result, Enlightenment language became a tool to rationalize restrictions on enslaved literacy. This is evident in the elite perspective presented in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* from 1785. He argued through "suspicion only" that Black people were "inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind."[3] Framed as empirical observation, Jefferson claimed enslaved communities had been observed for a century and a half, and even after "mixture with whites," their alleged inferiority could not be attributed solely to "their condition of life."[4] He further suggested that these supposed differences posed a "powerful obstacle" to emancipation.[5] While Jefferson masked his racism in the language of scientific inquiry, his views represented only one strand of a broader plantation society. Many enslavers did not rely on moral or intellectual justification, but instead on government-supported systems that preserved their economic and social power.[6] Restricting literacy became central to this effort, as preventing enslaved people from accessing Enlightenment texts helped suppress resistance. In this way, Jefferson's arguments functioned alongside a larger system of policies and practices that controlled who could read, learn, and ultimately claim freedom.

In practice, this goal was realized through religious institutions that framed literacy as a means of moral discipline and religious indoctrination rather than empowerment or autonomy. A particularly revealing example is the founding of the Williamsburg Bray School in 1760. Trustees such as Robert Carter Nicholas, an elite Anglican and respected Burgess, doubted the intellectual

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[2] Annette Gordon-Reed, "The Enlightenment in Early America," *William & Mary Law Review* 66, no. 3 (2025): 678, https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmlr/vol66/iss3/3.

[3] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1787), 141, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/lhbcb/04902/04902.pdf.

[4] Ibid., 139.

[5] Ibid., 142.

[6] Gordon-Reed, "The Enlightenment in Early America," 681.

capacity of Black students.[7] In a 1762 letter from co-trustees Nicholas and Reverend William Yates to Reverend John Warring, they express how pleased they were "with the Scholars' Performances, as they rather exceeded our expectations."[8] Behind this language lay racial assumptions of intelligence that underestimated the ability of Black children. Further revealing their intentions, they present the school as a charitable effort meant to improve enslaved children's "happiness" through religious teaching, while also making them more "handy & useful" to their enslavers.[9] Thus, the trustees' goals primarily centered around fostering "better" servants while fearing that too much learning might threaten the social order. They warn that expanding the "understandings of negroes" might make them "more impatient of their slavery" and increase the likelihood of rebellion.[10] In response to widespread anxiety and the controversial nature of educating enslaved people, Yates and Nicholas defend the benefits of granting Black children a Christian education through a regulated structure.

Religious frameworks within the Bray School also aimed to provide Black children with a Eurocentric and sanitized Christian education. As part of this system, the curriculum required students to be "faithful & obedient to their Masters,"[11] and they were closely monitored in their behavior, appearance, and daily routines. Yet, even within these constraints, families found ways to use schooling as a means of resistance. Yates and Nicholas observed that parents recognized the value of education and sometimes enrolled children for practical reasons rather than strictly spiritual ones. They note that several enslaved parents removed their children from school "so soon as they began to read," before they could fully benefit from "Principles of Christianity."[12] Enslaved parents strategically sent their children to the Bray School, not to receive religious instruction, but rather to escape plantation labor and learn how to read. In the Bray School's fourteen-year history, it had a significant impact in enabling self-liberation through literacy since "as many as four hundred scholars, if not more, received biblical instruction through letters."[13] Despite this wide reach, enslaved students were granted limited access to literacy for reading religious doctrines, while writing remained largely restricted to free and elite whites, reinforcing racial hierarchies and social boundaries.

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[7] Antonio T. Bly, "In Pursuit of Letters: A History of the Bray Schools for Enslaved Children in Colonial Virginia," *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (November 2011): 429–459, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41303896.

[8] William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas, letter to Rev. John Waring, September 30, 1762, *William & Mary Bray School Records Project*, William & Mary Libraries, https://digital.libraries.wm.edu/robert-c-nicholas-william-yates-bray-associates-september-30-1762.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Bly, "In Pursuit of Letters," 446.

As literacy expanded and print culture continued to grow in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slaveholders increasingly associated education with rebellion. News surrounding moments of collective resistance, such as the Stono Rebellion, Haitian Revolution, and Nat Turner's Rebellion, now had the ability to spread across plantations via the written word. All led by literate individuals, these events heightened white anxieties that education could foster political awareness and organized resistance. However, compared to reading, writing "was almost invariably perceived by southern slaveholders as intrinsically dangerous,"[14] because it enabled communication, record-keeping, and the circulation of ideas. While reading could be framed as a tool of religious discipline, writing represented a far more threatening form of intellectual autonomy. This distinction reveals how literacy operated both as empowerment and as "a means of social control,"[15] depending on who possessed it and for what purpose. When examining this access to education, it is important to ask not only "what is being read," but, more crucially, "who is doing the writing?"[16] By restricting writing for enslaved people, white authorities sought to prevent students from documenting their own experiences. As a result, the white elite class remained the sole producers of knowledge, print culture, and written records, reinforcing their control over historical memory and intellectual authority.

[14] Jennifer E. Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108, no. 2 (1998): 309, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=44525153&site=eds-live&scope=site.

[15] Ibid., 310.

[16] Ibid., 311.

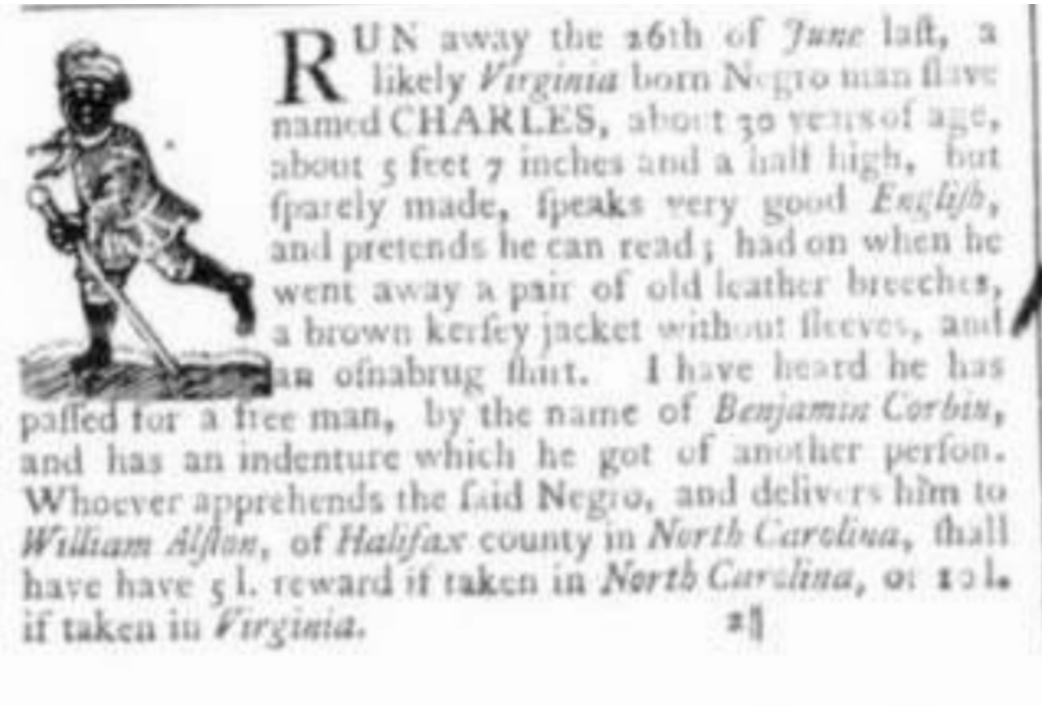

RUN away the 26th of *June* last, a likely *Virginia* born Negro man slave named CHARLES, about 30 years of age, about 5 feet 7 inches and a half high, but sparely made, speaks very good *English*, and pretends he can read; had on when he went away a pair of old leather breeches, a brown kersey jacket without sleeves, and an osnabrug shirt. I have heard he has passed for a free man, by the name of *Benjamin Corbin*, and has an indenture which he got of another person. Whoever apprehends the said Negro, and delivers him to *William Alston*, of *Halifax* county in *North Carolina*, shall have have 5 l. reward if taken in *North Carolina*, or 10 l. if taken in *Virginia*.

Figure 1. Advertisement from the Virginia Gazette, "Pretends He Can Read," August 15, 1766, via History Commons.

Despite white efforts to control the written record, literacy continued to serve as a powerful means of self-liberation. One example is seen in Figure 1, showing a *Virginia Gazette* runaway advertisement dated August 15, 1766.[17] Printed in Williamsburg for Virginia's elite readership, the notice reflects how enslaved people were cataloged by height, age, and physical traits to assert ownership. These descriptions reduced individuals to property that could be identified, tracked, and returned. Notably, the advertisement claims that Charles "pretends he can read" and had passed under a false name.[18] This attempt to redefine his identity and claim literacy symbolized characteristics associated with freedom. Skills such as reading, speaking "very good English,"[19] or forging handwritten travel passes required for Black Virginians communicated intellectual ability and autonomy. However, for enslavers, literacy represented a direct threat to their authority and a potential pathway to liberation, a fear reflected in the appearance of similar warnings in runaway notices about educated individuals. Between 1760 and 1776, approximately 5.8% of 881 advertisements examined from Colonial Virginia mentioned literate runaways.[20] While this percentage is relatively small, its significance lies in how often literacy was singled out as a

[17] *Virginia Gazette,* "Pretends He Can Read." August 15, 1766. From History Commons, *The Virginia Gazette,* 1736-1780*, https://history-commons.net/artifacts/12118610/the-virginia-gazette-august-15-1766/13012385/view/?page=8.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Antonio T. Bly, "'Pretends He Can Read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730–1776," *Early American Studies* 6, no. 2 (2008), 267, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23546575.

defining characteristic. The repeated emphasis on reading and writing reveals that literacy was feared beyond its practical use, as it disrupted the system of racial hierarchy that chattel slavery depended on. Literacy enabled enslaved people to move more freely, forge passes, and resist white authority. These threats would soon be translated into formal legal efforts to suppress education through the communal spaces where it spread.

The fear of literacy and collective organization became explicit in Virginia's legal response to enslaved resistance, as reflected in the Virginia General Assembly's passage of "An act further declaring what shall be deemed unlawful meetings of slaves."[21] Within the act, enslaved people were prohibited from gathering at night for religious meetings or other assemblies. If an "unlawful assembly" was discovered,[22] local justices could issue warrants on the spot and authorize punishments of up to twenty lashes. Lawmakers justified these restrictions through a moral framework, describing such gatherings as a "considerable evil to the community,"[23] and positioning themselves as protectors of social order, virtue, and the common good. While this framing positioned collective activity as inherently dangerous, it was passed in response to growing fears of rebellion. For instance, one example is the unsuccessful Gabriel's Conspiracy, planned by a literate enslaved Virginian in 1800. Just hours before it was to take place, the conspiracy was revealed, prompting the arrest of more than seventy enslaved men and the execution of twenty-six.[24] In the aftermath of this suppressed resistance, Virginia authorities used moral panic to justify repressing physical gatherings along with intellectual and spiritual autonomy. Nighttime worship and communal gatherings often provided one of the few opportunities for enslaved people to read scripture, exchange ideas, and learn together. Therefore, by directly criminalizing these spaces, the law restricted literacy as well, demonstrating how the state used political power to preserve slavery.

Yet even as colonial and state governments attempted to limit literacy through law and punishment, enslaved people continued to pursue education as deliberate acts of resistance. Beyond acts of self-liberation, literacy also functioned as a tool for community building and collective resistance. Even limited literacy could be used to interpret passes, understand laws, and share critical information.[25] These skills enabled communication across plantations and fostered networks of shared knowledge that were difficult for slaveholders to fully monitor. For instance, at Jefferson's Monticello estate, archeologists uncovered "237 unidentified slates, 27 pencil leads, 2 pencil slates, and 18 writing slates."[26]

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[21] Virginia General Assembly, *An Act Further Declaring What Shall Be Deemed Unlawful Meetings of Slaves* (January 24, 1804), in *The Statutes at Large of Virginia*, ed. Samuel Shepherd (Richmond, 1836), https://encyclopediavirginia.org/11749-ba054100ff77971/.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Michael L. Nicholls, "Gabriel's Conspiracy (1800)," Encyclopedia Virginia, last modified December 7, 2020, https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/gabriels-conspiracy-1800/.

[25] Bly, "Pretends He Can Read," 264.

[26] Ibid.

These findings display evidence of enslaved people "practicing letters in the quarters and probably sharing the skill."[27] Practices were intentionally discreet, with some individuals writing in the dirt as a temporary and easily erasable form of learning to avoid punishment.[28] Such strategies highlight the risks associated with literacy along with the ingenuity and determination of enslaved communities. In this way, literacy became a quiet form of resistance that challenged systems designed to suppress both education and freedom.

The pursuit of literacy and religious knowledge by enslaved people was not only defined by silent acts of defiance but also inspired direct organization that terrified slaveholders. This culmination of education, faith, and empowerment in Virginia became most visible in the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831. In addition to being the deadliest revolt of enslaved people in American history, Nat Turner's literacy challenged assumptions of Black intellectual inferiority.[29] From an early age, Turner learned to read and write. His desire to learn largely revolved around his interest in Christianity, as "themes of religion and intelligence were intertwined" throughout his life.[30] In fact, Turner's enslavers noted that he demonstrated "a remarkable mind, even as a young child,"[31] a recognition that simultaneously acknowledged his intelligence and underscored its perceived danger. Literacy became a "crucial part of Turner's own unfolding sense of identity,"[32] enabling him to see himself beyond the label of property imposed by white enslavers. Turner instead understood himself as an individual capable of interpretation, leadership, and moral judgment. Furthermore, his engagement with scripture fostered a worldview that emphasized liberation. Unlike the form of religious instruction promoted by the Bray School, where reading was intended to reinforce obedience, Turner used biblical texts to construct sermons advocating for abolitionism. Thus, Turner's literacy combined with his religious foundation "set him on the path to eventual rebellion."[33] Through preaching and ministry, Turner assumed a leadership role within enslaved communities, often speaking during Sunday services and spreading a message that framed slavery as incompatible with Christian morality. This role also allowed him to move more freely in Southampton County, increasing his impact geographically. His sermons were rooted in biblical interpretation and emphasized freedom for enslaved Virginians through rebellion if divinely sanctioned. As a result, his ability to interpret scripture independently and persuade others exemplified why slaveholders viewed Black literacy as inherently threatening.

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[27] Ibid., 282-283.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Charles Terry, "A Rebellious Education: Enslaved African Americans and the Fight for Literacy," (PhD diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2022), 2, https://hdl.handle.net/2142/115385.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 3.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

After the rebellion in August, Turner went undiscovered for three months, and his eventual capture in November 1831 generated widespread attention in print culture. Accounts of the rebellion were published and written most notably by white Southampton attorney Thomas R. Gray in *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* exemplifying white efforts to control the narrative surrounding the uprising. Gray's "Note to the Public" claims to present Turner's words "fully and voluntarily," yet the text is saturated with racialized language that portrays Turner and his followers as "savages."[34] *The Confessions* are cast by Gray as a cautionary narrative, urging that "each particular community should look to its own safety."[35] His control over the text proves that even when Turner's voice entered the public record, it did so only through white mediation, reinforcing elite authority over authorship, interpretation, and historical memory. This central challenge in reconstructing Nat Turner's Rebellion reflects broader themes of bias and power present across histories documented through a racially motivated lens. At the same time, *The Confessions* remain the closest available glimpse into the ideological and religious motivations behind the rebellion. By aiming to separate Gray's voice from Turner's likely ideological and religious motivations, *The Confessions* can be interpreted as evidence of self-determination. Even if imperfectly preserved through white authorship, it offers a glimpse into how Turner himself understood his actions.

The narrative presented in *The Confessions* shows how Turner's religious convictions were closely tied to the strategic planning of the rebellion. Turner "came to believe that he had a calling from God to strike back against the institution of slavery," framing his resistance as a religious duty.[36] He was highly attuned to signs and omens, interpreting natural and celestial phenomena as messages from God that confirmed his mission. In his *Confessions,* he explained that he was prompted "not to wait longer" once "the sign appeared again in the heavens."[37] He began planning for the rebellion through a strategic and intentional design. On August 21, 1831, Turner met with six other enslaved men to finalize their plans, deliberately keeping the group small to avoid detection, further illustrating the organizational capacities that literacy and education made possible. He swore his fellow conspirators to secrecy, likely drawing upon shortcomings in earlier failed uprisings such as Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800.[38] This tactical planning contradicted white portrayals of enslaved people as incapable of foresight or complexity. Thus, Turner's actions revealed how literacy, religious authority, and organization could converge to produce coordinated resistance rather than isolated defiance.

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[34] Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), Electronic Texts in American Studies, no. 15, deposited by Paul Royster, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/15.

[35] Terry, "A Rebellious Education," 3.

[36] Ibid., 4.

[37] Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

[38] Terry, *A Rebellious Education,* 5.

Following Turner's *Confessions,* his fate was quickly determined in the courtroom. Tried on November 5, 1831, before the Southampton County Court of Oyer and Terminer, Turner was charged with "conspiring to rebel and making insurrection."[39] The court also ordered a "sufficient additional guard" to prevent any attempt at rescue, reflecting the broader panic surrounding his influence.[40] Central to that fear was Turner's literacy, which allowed him to articulate religious justification for rebellion that resonated with other enslaved people. In the trial, witnesses repeatedly emphasized that Turner "seemed to command the party,"[41] highlighting that his authority lay in his intellectual and spiritual leadership. The court and its witnesses aimed to undermine Turner's religious autonomy, noting that he "pretended to have had intimations by signs & omens from God."[42] By reducing Turner to a criminal and valuing him "to the sum of three hundred and seventy five dollars,"[43] the legal system stripped him of humanity and intellect. Turner's public hanging on November 11, 1831, thus marked the formal conclusion of the rebellion. However, its legacy continued, as his execution functioned as an attempt to silence literate resistance and reassert control over knowledge, scripture, and authority in the slaveholding South.

From the 1760s to the 1830s, fears of rebellion by the white planter class were prevalent beyond moments of violence, found in everyday efforts to regulate education, movement, and communication. From the Bray School to restrictive laws on Black gatherings and enforced illiteracy, these systems worked together to sustain slavery by limiting both physical mobility and intellectual agency. Christianity, often used by white elites to promote obedience and justify hierarchy, also became a site of tension, most strikingly in Nat Turner's Rebellion. This struggle over spiritual authority was inseparable from literacy, as the ability to independently read and interpret religious texts challenged the moral framework that upheld slavery. Despite constraints, enslaved people continually resisted by using literacy and religious interpretation to build community, assert autonomy, and challenge the moral logic of bondage. The consequences of systematic silencing persist in the historical archive today, where the absence of enslaved voices reflects the enduring legacy of systems designed to suppress them. In this way, early American democracy was not simply founded on ideals of liberty, but on deliberate exclusions that determined whose voices and knowledge would be preserved.

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[39] *Trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner* (Southampton County, Virginia Court of Oyer and Terminer, November 5, 1831), Nat Turner Project, https://www.natturnerproject.org/southampton-ot--trial-of-nat-alias.

[40] *Trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner* (Southampton County, Virginia Court of Oyer and Terminer, November 5, 1831), Nat Turner Project, https://www.natturnerproject.org/southampton-ot--trial-of-nat-alias.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

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