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GABRIEL'S CONSPIRACY

A Documentary History

EDITED BY PHILIP J. SCHWARZ

University of Virginia Press *Charlottesville and London*

To the memory of Professor James Morton Smith, my mentor

University of Virginia Press

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P R E F A C E

Documents concerning the important 1800 plot of enslaved Virginians to rebel against slavery have appeared in such publications as the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Michael Mullin's *American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History*, and as part of a Library of Virginia exhibit in 2000. But there has never been a publication devoted solely to the many documents associated with the events of 1800. Nor has there been any attempt to publish all the documents. One reason for this lack of an adequate documentary collection is that, until recently, not very many people even knew about the plot. Another reason is that Gabriel's plot has generally been overshadowed by the Nat Turner Revolt (1831). Too, the silence about Gabriel and his allies could have resulted from white people's ignorance about enslaved people, or from the urge to deny the evidence that enslaved African Americans would, and could, on behalf of their freedom, mount a threat of the dimensions and seriousness of Gabriel's Conspiracy. Finally, while there was clearly a conspiracy to rebel, which spread fear and even terror, not a single enslaved African American involved in Gabriel's Rebellion attacked any white person. By contrast, Nat Turner and his fellow rebels killed nearly sixty white people, and certainly a greater number of black people were executed or lynched thereafter.

The many social, legal, political, and intellectual changes that have occurred during the two centuries since 1800 have necessitated a thorough documentary history of the 1800 events and the people involved in them, and recent scholarship concerning the event has become deeper and more comprehensive. An interpretation of Gabriel's Revolt by the Meadow Farm Museum in Henrico County, Virginia (near Richmond), as well as other lectures on Gabriel himself, have served to increase the general public's knowledge of the episode. Henrico County's creation of Spring Hill Park, which is associated with Gabriel's rebellious conspiracy; the county's sponsorship in 2000 of a panel discussion concerning Gabriel; an in-depth study of some aspects of the revolt by a local historian; a Library of Virginia exhibit about Gabriel, Nat Turner, and John Brown; a continuing Library of Virginia online exhibit of a few of the Gabriel documents; and a description of Gabriel's Conspiracy in a Richmond Slave Trail Commission Trail Marker—"Richmond's African Burial Ground"—also have piqued general interest. There has been some newspaper coverage as well.

The late Professor Armstead Robinson, during his tenure as director of the Carter Woodson Center at the University of Virginia in the 1980s, began a documentary collection concerning Gabriel, but Robinson's untimely death ended that project. Some years later, the Library of Virginia's Division of Publications also proposed to launch a documentary history of Gabriel's Rebellion. Dr. Gregg Kimball of that institution took charge of the project and advanced the collection and photocopying of numerous documents. Later, the need to concentrate on developing the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* terminated the Library of Virginia's Gabriel project. Since that time, Professor Douglas Egerton and I, two historians whom Dr. Kimball had recruited to edit and write an introduction to the documents, have carried the planning for a published documentary edition forward. At the University of Virginia Press, editor Richard Holway was instrumental in the decision to finally publish the collection. After making several significant contributions, Professor Egerton had to leave completion of the book to me. Library of Virginia staff—among them, Amanda Morrell, Tricia Noell, and Dawn Tinnell, who all hold a master's degree in history from Virginia Commonwealth University—frequently helped me find documents.

Several other institutions and people have contributed to this volume. The supreme commentators were the members of FLEA—the Fall Line Early Americanists—who, fortunately, crushed my urge to write an interpretive essay rather than an introduction to the documents. In addition, the Library of Virginia lunch group—the late Sara Bearrs, Brent Tarter, Gregg Kimball, and others—welcomed me and nourished me with their helpful comments.

INTRODUCTION

Gabriel and His Allies

Gabriel was born in 1776 at Thomas Prosser's Henrico County Brookfield plantation, north of Richmond and west of today's Interstate 95.¹ He reached manhood with Martin and Solomon, his brothers; with neighboring enslaved men and women; and with his owner's son, Thomas Henry Prosser. We do not know his family name or that of his brothers. Gabriel acquired skill as a blacksmith. By 1800, he was noted for his physical stature: 6 feet, 2 or 3 inches tall. He lacked two front teeth and carried scars on his head. In late 1799, it had become public knowledge—in a court prosecution—that he had not backed down in a confrontation with a white man, Absalom Johnson, who was in charge of a neighboring plantation. Rather, Gabriel had bitten off part of the man's ear.

Gabriel and his allies did enjoy some status within the enslaved community. They practiced various crafts. They were somewhat mobile, which enabled them to make nighttime and weekend visits to spouses or other family members. They could walk to Richmond and drink in some grog shops, where talk was relatively free. Gabriel was even literate, which was unusual but not illegal.² And there was one Baptist church in town where black people could worship if they wished. These men and women were culturally African American as well. They knew, or knew about, both black and white Richmonders. They knew their way around local areas. However, by definition, enslaved people suffered a major disadvantage—their bondage. Gabriel and his confederates tried to redress the grievance they had suffered from birth. Their grievance had not been answered in any substantial way as a result of the American Revolution. Gabriel, Martin, and Solomon, as well as many fellow conspirators, had no reason to believe that their bondage would change during their lifetime.

1. Specifically, about one-half mile south of the Parham Road interchange.

2. Before Gabriel's conspiracy, there was no Virginia law against enslaved people learning to read. Later, laws only prohibited teaching the enslaved to read, and enforcement of these laws was sporadic. Nevertheless, enslaved people's opportunity to read was often limited (see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* [Chapel Hill, 2008]).

News of emancipation measures being taken in the Northern states, and of the St. Domingue (Haiti) and other Caribbean revolts, reflected two models for attaining complete freedom. One was government action; the other, revolt. Government action was clearly unlikely in Virginia, where in 1800 nearly 350,000 men, women, and children faced lifetime bondage. The ratio of blacks to whites in Virginia was certainly not as dominant as in St. Domingue, yet Gabriel and his allies clearly believed their rebellion might succeed.³

What motivated the men who risked—and in many cases, lost—their lives? Modern scholars, particularly in the last forty years, have answered these questions vigorously. Gerald W. Mullin concentrated on religion and acculturation as prime motivators. Mullin studied newspaper ads in which slave owners claimed fugitives, primarily enslaved men. Many of the men, Mullin argued, were “born in Virginia (not Africa), highly assimilated, well traveled, and versatile in a variety of skilled tasks.” In other words, they knew the Virginia culture well, they were mobile, and they assumed they had rights. “Slaves late in the [eighteenth] century had a rich fraternal and religious life,” which enabled them to form strong relationships. The 1800 conspiracy grew from a collective point of view.⁴

Some twenty years later, the historian Douglas Egerton wrote *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, 1993). He accepted much of Mullin's argument, but added a political dimension. The enslaved conspirators sought to raise their status and political power. The would-be rebels shared an artisanal ideology as well as a highly suspicious attitude toward merchants. Having become accomplished craftsmen, slaves such as Gabriel the blacksmith regarded themselves as the equals of politically powerful merchants. And they knew they would only be recognized as equal if they revolted against those merchants. Egerton certainly understood that the more wealthy planters also

3. Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, 2010), is the most recent interpretation of the Haitian Revolution's impact on the U.S. Slave South. Both Douglas Egerton (in *Gabriel's Rebellion* [Chapel Hill, 1993]) and James Sidbury (in *Ploughshares into Swords* [Cambridge, 1997]) have also reflected upon that extraordinary international episode. A useful recent anthology is David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington, 2009).

4. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), esp. 140–41. Many newspaper notices concerning slave fugitives have been published on the Web and in books; see, e.g., *the Virginia Center for Digital History's Virginia Runaways*, at www2.uvawise.edu/runaways/; and Lathan Windley, comp., *Runaway Slave Advertisements in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 to 1787* (New York, 1995).

held down enslaved people. The conspirators had planned to kill their owners first and then to attack and hold Richmond.

As if to reply to Egerton, the historian James Sidbury devoted much of his *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge, 1997) to an alternative thesis concerning the 1800 conspirators. Sidbury sought to explain their cultural identity. While Egerton certainly acknowledged Christianity as a factor in the lives of late eighteenth-century enslaved Africans, Sidbury perceived an increasingly strong common racial and religious identity developed by Christians bound to slavery. Sidbury's most striking conclusion is that enslaved Virginians "from the Richmond area built a fraternal movement to overthrow slavery." He has aptly summarized the difference between his and Egerton's interpretations: for Sidbury, a religious worldview predominated; for Egerton, artisanal (skilled labor) was the engine of revolt.⁵

In *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy* (Charlottesville, 2012), Michael L. Nicholls not only takes issue with some of Douglas Egerton's use of evidence but also locates the origins of the conspiracy largely in neighborhoods both rural and urban. He also has highlighted personal trust as the most cohesive force in the conspiracy: the conspirators had to trust one another to succeed. They did so partly on the basis of previous associations, especially family connections. And they tested one another's trustworthiness. Nicholls has also uncovered evidence that neither Egerton nor Sidbury used.

However complex were the conspirators' motives, a plot was developed and put into motion, even if two storms—a ferocious late-summer rainstorm and an unexpected storm of betrayals—killed the conspiracy. Armed black men were to gather together carrying swords made from scythes and mount a three-pronged attack on Richmond. One group intended to seize arms located in a Capitol Square building. Hostage-taking was a second part of the plan, with Governor James Monroe as a target. A fire, to be set at Rocketts Landing, slightly downstream from the center of town, would have served to divert white defenders. Other hostages would be taken, more armed actions would give the enslaved rebels the upper hand, and Richmond's leaders would be forced to negotiate from weakness or surrender. Rumors spread widely that a massacre was part of the plan.

5. *Ploughshares into Swords*, 51–52; James Sidbury, "Thomas Jefferson in Gabriel's Virginia," in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, ed. James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, 2002), 215n7.

After the fact, some Virginia leaders admitted that a successful slave attack would have been disastrous. But the conspiracy drowned.

While the actions of Gabriel and his allies met with failure, it does not follow that their plan was futile. They could not have foretold the torrential rain that prevented them from gathering to assault Richmond on the night of August 30, 1800. It was that unanticipated natural disaster that forced the rebellion's leaders to plan to reconvene the following night. But a factor that is feared as much by military planners as it was by the enslaved revolutionaries came into play. If a battle plan is blocked, people gain time to rethink their plans and motives. Some men who had agreed to join the conspiracy decided to become informers. Made aware of the plot, Governor Monroe called out the state's militia units to prevent any subsequent insurrectionary action and to capture the suspects. This dramatic change in the rebels' fortunes led to their downfall, and in more than two dozen cases, to their execution by hanging between early September and mid-October. Other conspirators were eventually transported out of the Old Dominion—supposedly to what was then Spanish Louisiana—with heavy penalties hanging over their heads should they try to return. And legislators and other leaders contemplated what the conspiracy meant for Virginia's future.

The Richmond Context, 1800

It is essential to keep in mind where Gabriel's Conspiracy originated, how widespread it was, and where the crucial attack was supposed to begin.⁶ Thus, readers need to study the geography of Gabriel's environs. For example, the Prosser plantation was about six miles north of Richmond's center. Certain locations were essential to the rebels. They had recruited men from Richmond, Henrico, Chesterfield, and Petersburg, to be sure, but they had also tried to gather more men from as far away as Norfolk and Charlottesville.

Richmond was an engine for the area's economy, but not the only one. When the Virginia General Assembly moved to Richmond in early 1780, the new state capital's future appeared bright. It would surely thrive. After

6. Sidbury, in *Ploughshares into Swords*, Egerton, in *Gabriel's Rebellion*, and Nicholls, in *Whispers of Rebellion*, all reflect on black people's neighborhoods. For suggestive thoughts about neighborhoods and slave revolts, see Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007): 705–20; and Douglas R. Egerton, "Slaves to the Marketplace: Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Winter 2006): 617–39.

all, boats and small ships could go up and down the James River below Richmond, connecting with the Tidewater plantation economy. The town became a market center. But Henrico County, which surrounded the independent city of Richmond, contained the area's largest number of enslaved tithables—that is, people as property for whom slave owners had to pay taxes.⁷ Richmond's enslaved community still grew as fast as ever during the 1790s and the next decade as well—4.5 percent from 1790 to 1800, and 5 percent from 1800 to 1810. Only Norfolk matched these figures. Both the free and enslaved black population and the white population of Richmond were approximately equal to one another in 1800. And, when one combined Henrico's predominately agricultural economy (outside of Richmond) with Richmond's mercantile economy, there was a 5 to 4 ratio of enslaved and free Africans to European Americans.

Population data might suggest that Gabriel, born and living all his life in Henrico, and his allies, most of whom also came from rural Henrico, were country people. On the contrary, the three most recent major interpreters of Gabriel's Conspiracy have carefully and convincingly demonstrated that many of the conspirators were comfortable in both rural and urban settings. That being so, it is no wonder that authors Egerton, Nicholls, and Sidbury pay close attention to the rural-urban friendships and associations Gabriel and his allies enjoyed, and eventually relied upon, to form their rebellious conspiracy. Social development accompanied demographic growth.

The plotters sought to exploit economic and geographical circumstances. The conspirators from Henrico, Caroline, Chesterfield, and Petersburg planned to enter Richmond from several directions, then concentrate on starting a diversionary fire in the Rocketts area, using the diversion to seize arms at the penitentiary and at the Capitol; they then planned to complete their work by taking Governor James Monroe hostage near the Capitol. But the first wave of attackers had either to walk, or perhaps ride horses, to Richmond. Some white people later reported seeing enslaved people walking in the opposite direction than was usual for a Saturday night. Instead of making their way into the city, they were heading away. Unusual as this was, no one immediately reported the behav-

7. The other nearby counties surrounding Richmond were Charles City, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, New Kent, and Powhatan. Henrico's African-descended tithables—that is, its income-producing people—were fewer than 1,000 in 1755, yet had expanded to 6,961 by 1780. The enslaved Richmond city population rose from 428 in 1782, to 613 in 1784, 1,479 in 1790, 2,293 in 1800, and finally to 3,748 in 1810.

ior. Then the rains came. Gabriel and others decided they could not pass the flooded Brook Run, so they postponed the rising to the next night. Two conspirators, Pharoah and Tom, slaves of Mosby Sheppard and William Mosby, took advantage of the delay to relate the details of the plot to Sheppard. Patrols called out in response to Sheppard and Mosby's alarm searched for the insurrectionary band in the Prosser, Sheppard, and Mosby neighborhood but failed to find them in the raging storm. Although Sheppard and Mosby, as well as the other searchers, were from the Prosser plantation neighborhood and knew the area, they were no match for the weather.

Place was also essential to the government's response to the planned rebellion. Word went out to the same localities in which recruitment and planning had taken place. Henrico, Caroline, Chesterfield, and Hanover were the prime targets of searchers. Yet the dragnet had to be more extensive for white authorities to be convinced that the conspiracy had died. Enslaved men and women from Norfolk City and from Sussex County in southeast Virginia received special scrutiny. Watermen were potential supporters of a large-scale conspiracy because they knew so well the extensive Old Dominion waterways. The skipper Jacob was a widely traveled black waterman—whose master continuously hired him out. And Jacob recruited conspirators in Norfolk as well as in Gloucester County on the Middle Peninsula. Northwest of Richmond, Sam Byrd Sr. and Jr., both free men, recruited in Louisa County and Charlottesville (Albemarle County), while Watt, an elderly Prosser plantation man, searched for supporters in Goochland County.

Geographical information about the city of Richmond will also help readers familiarize themselves with the conspirators' targets and the government's administrative and judicial actions subsequent to the imprisonment of most of the wanted men. Some sites have been lost. For example, the penitentiary designed by Benjamin H. Latrobe had almost been completed in August 1800 and, after later remodeling and additions, was demolished in the late twentieth century. It was where Governor Monroe had directed that a powder magazine be created. And some of the rebellion suspects were confined there, including several who were transported out of the Old Dominion. Other sites are no longer used, such as the land where both the Henrico County Court and the City of Richmond courts and U.S. courts met at 22nd and Main. There, people accused of crimes against the United States spent time in the same jail as did accused pirates, counterfeiters, and the enslaved. The most well-known jail resident was James T. Callender, who had been convicted of sedition in the U.S. Circuit

Court, District of Virginia, in 1800. Callender sent Thomas Jefferson news (of a sort) about the rebellion, gathered from newspapers and from William Rose, the jail keeper.

Finally, the sites that may have haunted family members and friends of both enslaved convicts and targeted victims probably hosted weeds, grass, or even flowers later on. These were the several execution sites chosen by the judges of the various courts that tried the accused. The most well-known site is in downtown Richmond at 15th and Broad; it is the hanging ground where some of the convicted rebels were killed by strangulation—that is, by a short drop from a cart and the mortal asphyxiation that followed.⁸ A state historical marker (highway sign SA-66) was erected near 15th and Broad in late 2004. The insurance policies of the Mutual Assurance Society—images of which are linked to the Library of Virginia’s catalog—contain information about the dwellings of elite property owners in the Richmond area in 1800. And there are websites that feature Young’s Spring—or “the Spring”—where some of the planning took place.⁹

Trials, Verdicts, Sentences, Outcomes, and Justice

The notion that slave trials were nothing more than kangaroo courts impedes serious study of the way white authorities examined and punished those allegedly responsible for Gabriel’s rebellious conspiracy. True, slave trials did often result in ignominious execution by strangulation, leaving judges open to accusations of bloodthirsty vengeance, especially when those trials concerned alleged insurrectionary planning or action.¹⁰ Consider a contemporary report of one suspect’s statement at his Gabriel’s Rebellion trial:

I have nothing more to offer than what general Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavouring to obtain the liberty of my coun-

8. Three other sites are described in the text: Prosser’s Tavern, the Four Mile Crossroads, and the Gamble’s Hill area site.

9. A photo of the hanging ground and the text of the state markers are available at www.markerhistory.com/tag/gabriels-rebellion/. Thomas Henry Prosser’s home was insured by the Mutual Assurance Society in 1802; a drawing of the house is accessible through lva.virginia.gov/public/mutual.asp. Young’s Spring—which was in Spring Park—is in the area now known as Bryan Park (see Elvatrice Parker Belsches, *Richmond, Virginia* [Charleston, S.C., 2002], 115).

10. See Philip Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens, Ga., 1996), 63–96. Old Dominion slave courts condemned some 567 men and women to death between 1706 and 1784. Although it is not possible to know from the records the actual number of the condemned who were hanged in this earlier period, the later records show that 635 enslaved and convicted men and women were hanged in the period 1785–1865.

try men, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause: and I beg, as a favour, that I may immediately be led to execution. I know that you have pre-determined to shed my blood, why then all the mockery of a trial?¹¹

This often-quoted statement underscores how often the law was used against those who directly resisted slavery. Still, the hard historical fact is that slave laws were passed by colonial and state governments, and enforced by colonial, state, and U.S. governmental bodies and courts. Slavery was legal; slave trials were legal. It is undoubtedly true that some laws were unjust and that some courts perpetrated injustices. The slave quoted here insisted that he had been assumed guilty before he was tried, which would have made the trial a mockery. Slave insurrection trials were often held under tense, sometimes even terrifying conditions, which could lead to erroneous charges, convictions, and punishments. During the days after the 1800 plot was uncovered, there was undoubtedly great pressure to convict all the alleged rebels.

However arresting this anonymous rejection of a slave trial's legitimacy might be, it was not a legal defense for a slave. Again, slave law was law. It was based partly on the same criminal law that prosecutions of free people were, no matter who they might be. Completely lacking, however, was a "jury of one's peers." Empowering slaves as jurors would obviously have undermined the social and legal foundations of slavery. Was there a racist assumption that enslaved people did not merit the same legal protections as white people? Yes. But there was one possible ameliorating fact. To the extent that judges in slave societies sought to protect slave owners' interests in human property, there might have been some softening of racist judicial assumptions. Monetary loss—that is, the loss of a skilled laborer—could occasionally trump racism. And many of the justices in the courts of oyer and terminer tried to follow the law. Hence, there were frequent "not guilty" verdicts in the trials of enslaved people. But when

11. Quoted in Robert Sutcliff, *Travels in Some Parts of North America in the Years 1804, 1805, & 1806* (Philadelphia, 1812), 50. No one has been able to identify the speaker. Sutcliff mentions only a lawyer who witnessed the trials. The speaker could have been Gabriel, but one contemporary observer reported that Gabriel said very little at his trial. Douglas Egerton has identified "William and Sam Graham"—that is, one or the other—as "most likely" to have uttered the words quoted by Sutcliffe (see Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* [New York, 2009], 280). See also Robert A. Ferguson, *Reading the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 198–217, for more discussion on the statement that Sutcliffe recorded. For folkloric statements and lyrics that characterized Gabriel during the nineteenth century, see Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 256–76; and Stanley Harrold, *The Abolitionists and the South, 1831–1861* (Lexington, Ky., 1995), 56–57.

enslaved rebels conspired to attack slavery itself, they were rebelling not only against slave owners but also against the very government. It would have been very difficult for the justices to resist the external pressure to convict and condemn the alleged rebels. At the very least, government had the obligation to protect (white) people's lives.

Freedom and Slavery

Thomas Jefferson and many thousands of white people had rebelled for their independence in 1776, but Jefferson wrestled with the right of enslaved people to rebel for their freedom. Noting in 1802 that the recent insurgency by an unknown number of slaves in the South had resulted in part from the impetus of the St. Domingue (Haiti) uprising, President Jefferson had declared, “[Slave rebels] are not felons, or common malefactors, but persons guilty of what the safety of society, under actual circumstances, obliges us to treat as a crime, but which their feelings may represent in a far different shape.” Jefferson recognized the deadly paradox: how can a society extol freedom as infinitely desirable yet punish enslaved rebels for planning violent rebellion to gain their freedom? For some, the true believers in racist hierarchies supplied an easy solution to that problem: they concluded that Africans were not capable or deserving of freedom. For his part, Jefferson seemed to know that the racist answer was a weak one. So he resorted to the argument of people's safety. In 1800, there were probably not many people who would have agreed with Jefferson that the feelings of the enslaved insurrectionists might have led them to see their actions “in a far different shape.” So he communicated such notions only in private.¹² As to his own encomium that “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is its [*sic*] natural manure”; that referred to Shays's Rebellion in 1787, not to the 1800 slave rebellion.¹³

Insurrection trials extended an ongoing clash of values. Slave owners normally demanded that the courts protect their property rights—their right to possess personal property (primarily enslaved human beings), as well as their right to real property (mostly, their land). They insisted that slavery freed them to be free. They also knew that slavery buttressed

12. See Jefferson to Rufus King, July 13, 1802, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Series 1, *General Correspondence, 1651–1827*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division [hereafter cited as *TJP*], <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib011539>.

13. Jefferson to John Adams, Paris, November 13, 1787, in Jefferson, *Papers*, 12:355–56. Jefferson clearly limited the right to rebel to “the people,” but not to “enslaved people” (see Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787, in Jefferson, *Papers*, 11:95).

their racist domination of African-descended people. Social, economic, personal, and legal domination of enslaved people was designed to create a well-ordered society that benefited its citizens.¹⁴ On the other hand, enslaved people desired self-preservation (their bodies). Some people in bondage insisted by their actions that some personal property was theirs.¹⁵ The enslaved clashed with their owners and other white authorities over the “ownership” and protection of themselves and their families. Some bondspeople openly insisted that they had as much right to be free as any white person. But they knew they were hampered by law and custom. Escaping or rebelling was normally the only way for a person held to bondage to break free of slavery.

At times, the conflict between slave owners’ and slaves’ values erupted, insurrection being the most dramatic form of such discord in Virginia.¹⁶ The American Revolution interrupted the usual interaction of black and white Virginians. By then, the enslaved community was larger—approximately 33 percent of the Old Dominion population in 1740, and about 42 percent in 1775—and more Americanized than ever before. Some slave-community norms had also become well established. And freedom was increasingly one of those values. Two Brunswick County, Virginia, men had already been convicted of a misdemeanor in June 1752—that is, of “being privy to an Opinion entertained among Negroes of their having a Right to their Freedom and not making a Discovery thereof.” Other concerted actions during the American Revolution tested slave owners’ confidence in their domination. The growth of African-American Christian-

14. Among many authors who have examined this seeming self-contradiction, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), 3–6, 375–87; Orlando Patterson, “The Unholy Trinity: Freedom, Slavery, and the American Constitution,” *Social Research* 54 (Autumn 1987): 543–77; and David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America’s Founding Ideas* (New York, 2005), 61–67, 85–89, 274–89.

15. In other cases, owners followed in practice the Roman law doctrine that slaves could, with their owner’s permission, possess personal property (the *peculium*, which Thomas Jefferson and other slave owners accepted). Various U.S. state courts upheld the possession, as opposed to the ownership, of slave people’s property (see W. E. Moore, “Slave Law and the Social Structure,” *Journal of Negro History* 26 [April 1941]: 192–93; William Goodell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice* [New York, 1853], 89–104; and Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia*, 46–47, 58).

16. See Philip Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 64–65, 69, 84–89, 165–90, 255–79; and Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 182–83, 259–63. Charles Royster, in *Light-Horse Harry Lee and the Legacy of the American Revolution* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 126–27, explained that Governor Lee at least mentioned that a most telling motive for a conspiracy in 1792 was the “practice of severing husband, wife and children in sales.” “Severing” was the most appropriate term (see Henry Lee to Robert Goode, May 17, 1792, ExLB, 1791–94, 5–7).

ity also supported freedom, even as most white Christians still insisted on black subservience.¹⁷

But white authorities had controlled, and still controlled, the laws and courts they would use to suppress Gabriel's Conspiracy. They had confidence in the courts of oyer and terminer, which had been convened regularly throughout Virginia from the 1690s to the 1790s. A 1792 continuation and revision of this special trial procedure set the stage for the Gabriel trials. These included the long-established racial hierarchy that prevailed concerning witnesses; the fact that black testimony was unacceptable in the criminal trials of white people but that such testimony was necessary and allowable in oyer and terminer prosecutions of enslaved people; and that appeals were allowed only to the governor (in 1800, James Monroe), who could discuss each case with the State Council before responding to slave owners' petitions on behalf of a slave. The relevant statutes had nothing to say about coercion, torture, or intimidation. Nor, in the case of Gabriel's Rebellion, did the trial records. The absence of such evidence is only that—absent evidence.¹⁸ It is also clear that there was at times “positive” persuasion of some black witnesses: some men were pardoned after they testified against fellow conspirators.

The statute that every government officer consulted in 1800—there not having been a recent insurrection trial in the Richmond area—defines “insurrection” and decrees the penalty:

If any negro or other slaves at any time consult, advise, or conspire to rebel, or make insurrection, or shall plot to conspire the murder of any person of persons whatsoever, every such consulting, plotting, or conspiring, shall be adjudged and deemed felony, and the slave or slaves convicted thereof in manner herein after directed, shall suffer death, and be utterly excluded all benefit of clergy.

About two years before the conspiracy was developed and discovered, Virginia legislators had expanded the reach of the conspiracy and insurrection

17. See Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 173; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 80–148; and Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), 36–44, 243–83.

18. Richard Wayne, in *Death of an Overseer: Reopening a Murder Investigation from the Plantation South* (New York, 2001), and Winthrop Jordan, in *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge, 1993), both found evidence that enslaved suspects were whipped and subjected to other kinds of coercion while under interrogation.

statutes to free people who conspired with enslaved rebels. The penalty for such participation would now be execution.¹⁹

The power that the Henrico and other county courts held was quite clear when the verdicts came down. Twenty-six men were condemned to death and executed in September and October. Governor Monroe foresaw such results when he wrote to Thomas Jefferson on September 9: "The trial will commence on thursday, and it is the opinion of the magistrates who examined those committed, that the whole [the 30 men already in prison] very few excepted, will be condemned." Federalist Robert Troup informed Federalist Rufus King that "the gallows are in full operation" in Virginia. And they were. Nine other convicted conspirators were transported out of the Old Dominion (and the United States), barred from returning under pain of death.²⁰

Still, about one-third of the men tried in the 1800 conspiracy were found not guilty or were exempted from any punishment.²¹ The trials may have terrified some of the accused, given the hanging mood prevalent among white people. And those suspected of complicity would surely be watched closely later. And what would the wives and children of the

19. *Statutes at Large of Virginia*, ed. Samuel Shepherd (3 vols., Richmond, 1835–36), 1:125 (passed December 17, 1792). See the text therein. The common law supported this broad conception of capital conspiracy; *Regina v. Bass*, 11 Mod. 55, 88 Eng. Rep. 1881, 882 (K.B. 1705) contains evidence that the common law defined "conspiracy" as the agreement and planning to commit a criminal act. See also Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 326–27; and *U.S. v. Shabani*, 513 U.S. 10 (1994), 13–17. The same broad conception appeared in *U.S. v. Moussaoui* (see Government's Response in Opposition to Defendant's Motion to Strike Government's Notice of Intent to Seek a Sentence of Death, Criminal No. 01-455-A, pgs. 13–15). In the 1800 trials that followed discovery of Gabriel's conspiracy, the judges of the oyer and terminer courts charged each defendant with "conspiracy and insurrection." The 1792 law made a plot or conspiracy to rebel or "make insurrection" a capital crime. Gabriel and his followers only conspired, but at the hanging ground, this distinction would make no difference. It is not clear why the Henrico and other justices uniformly charged the 1800 defendants with insurrection as well as conspiracy. There was a conspiracy, but was there an insurrection?

20. See *Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles R. King, 6 vols. (New York, 1894–1900), 3:315 (Rufus King was well known as a political abolitionist); Arthur J. Alexander, "Federal Officeholders in New York State as Slaveholders," *Journal of Negro History* 28 (July 1943): 328–29, 334–36; Robert Ernst, *Rufus King: American Federalist* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 53–55, 109–11, 171, 222, 369–70, 374–75; Paul Finkelman, "The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Federalism," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, ed. Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville, 1998), 139; Joseph L. Arbena, "Politics or Principle? Rufus King and the Opposition to Slavery, 1785–1825," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 101 (1965): 56–77; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1990), 148, 159–60; and Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 114, 155–56, 159–60.

21. The 1800 numbers: of the 71 tried, 48 (two-thirds) were found guilty; of them, 26 were hanged, 13 were pardoned, 9 were transported (once the Virginia legislature created that punishment), and 23 were found not guilty. One suspect was reported to have committed suicide while being taken to Richmond.

executed and transported men have had to bear? The circumstances in Southampton County were even more dangerous for African Americans, both free and enslaved. Because after the Nat Turner Revolt of 1831, militia members and lynchers in Southampton and elsewhere killed both guilty and innocent people without trial, it is difficult to compare the Gabriel's Conspiracy trials with those of the Nat Turner Revolt. Still, in such a tense and furious environment as plagued Southampton County, at least half of the men tried were found not guilty.²²

Rarely in American history have 26 people convicted of capital crimes been executed within a few weeks. In 1822, Charleston, South Carolina, authorities sent 35 enslaved men to the gallows. The Sioux Uprising, or Dakota War, in 1862, ended with a larger number executed than in Charleston. Even after President Lincoln reversed the death sentences of 265 Dakota Sioux convicted of murder, 38 others were executed. There were other multiple executions, such as after the Stono Rebellion in 1739, and the New York Conspiracy of 1741.²³ Yet executions of slaves had been rare in the city of Richmond and in the nearby counties for any capital offense from 1780 through August 1800.

Given its extent, Governor Monroe and other officials were shocked that such a large conspiracy had developed in 1800. Although relieved that the conspiracy had been broken, they and many white citizens regarded themselves as lucky to have been spared. What of the opinion of enslaved people? We know little about enslaved Virginians' reaction to Gabriel's Conspiracy, except that some men and women, probably held to slavery, did create "Gabriel" folklore—a memory here and a song there.²⁴ In the 1770s, a dramatic presentation occurred in a former Tredegar Iron Works

22. The Nat Turner numbers are as follows: 91 tried, 23 found guilty and executed, 49 found not guilty, 1 pardoned, 3 discharged, and 18 transported. Perhaps the multiple lynchings of black men during and after the Turner Revolt help to account for the smaller number of capital hangings in Southampton than occurred after Gabriel's Conspiracy (see Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* [New York, 2003]; Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* [Boston, 2004]; and Henry Irving Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt: A Compilation of Source Material* [Amherst, Mass., 1971]). See also Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*; and Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill, 1996), esp. 262–75, 286–88.

23. See Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (New York, 1999), 229–31; Douglas Linder, *The Dakota Conflict Trials, 1862*, at the "Famous American Trials" website, www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/dakota/dakota.html; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 308–26; Daniel Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Boston, 1971), 466–73; and Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005), 246, 248–73.

24. Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 256–76.

building in Richmond. Dressed in black, an African American man, supposedly Gabriel, rose from behind a platform and movingly exhorted the cause of freedom.²⁵ At the northern end of the Richmond Slave Trail lies the African Burial Ground, where Gabriel was probably buried. Nearby is a state historical marker which relates the events of Gabriel's Conspiracy and his execution.²⁶

Finally, in this work I have endeavored to present the state's evidence for the conspiracy. In addition, a biographical appendix and tables are included to support our understanding of Gabriel's Conspiracy.

The Documents

Gabriel's Rebellion was the first major insurrectionary conspiracy against slavery in post-Revolutionary America.²⁷ The purpose of this documentary history is to set forth the known documents in their entirety in order to educate readers and to encourage and provoke new research and interpretations about this major plot against the peculiar institution. Douglas Egerton, James Sidbury, and Michael Nicholls have published challenging interpretations of Gabriel and his allies, as well as of those who suppressed the conspiracy and led the criminal prosecutions of the suspects. Other historians have focused on topics directly related to the plot. So it is obvious that historians have studied the documents contained in this collection. And as so often happens, those who read the documents in the future will contest the interpretations of previous historians. Indeed, future researchers may even uncover new documents.

As Douglas Egerton has pointed out, "Virtually every document pertaining to enslaved labor in the Americas is problematical in some way or another."²⁸ The written evidence about Gabriel's Rebellion is no exception. Although the testimony of enslaved men was recorded at some of the trials, and at others men dictated statements concerning the plot, it was white authorities—uneasy slave owners and responding civil and judicial authorities—who created the official record contained in this

25. The same building became part of the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, whose mission is to interpret the Civil War from Union, Confederate, and African American perspectives. See www.tredegar.org/.

26. The Richmond Slave Trail Commission oversees the trail, whose markers commemorate the victims of the slave trade and enslavement.

27. There is a planned electronic edition of the documents, which is to display details of military and financial matters.

28. Douglas Egerton, "Forgetting Denmark Vesey; Or, Oliver Stone Meets Richard Wade," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 59 (January 2002): 146.

volume. While folklore about Gabriel has been passed down in song, it is the largely official and written record that historians have used to narrate and analyze events.²⁹ Yes, the record is sometimes incomplete or even self-contradictory. For example, the answers to some questions remain unclear: Exactly whom did the enslaved conspirators plan to kill? And were any conspirators overlooked, especially those who might have been able to reveal additional aspects of the plot? Moreover, some of the documents are written in a monotone voice, as if a scientific experiment were being exercised in the courtroom. One often has to connect multiple documents in order to gain a sense of the drama. Because of such matters, this documentary volume will therefore surely increase and intensify arguments about the plotting that transpired in and near Richmond, Virginia, in 1800.

With the exception of the military and financial documents which are to appear on a planned comprehensive website (see note 27), full inclusion is the standard of this volume.³⁰ Perhaps new evidence will be found, although it is difficult to be optimistic that any major collection of sources will be uncovered. To be sure, an 1861 account in which one man remembered his August 1800 militia duty along the Brook Run (see pp. 239–40) is a welcome find, as well as an example of community memory. For the record, the following types of documents are all represented in this volume.

Newspapers. William Palmer collected stories about the revolt and knew the local area well. But his newspaper series on slavery in Virginia and on Gabriel's Revolt appeared in the 1890s, which ensured that some of his evidence was at least secondhand, and perhaps even thirdhand.³¹

In addition, early Virginia and other newspapers are evidence of a kind. Because of slow and the sometimes wildly erroneous circulation of information, newspaper sources cannot be taken at face value. I have included some extant Richmond newspapers, as well as several other accounts from local Virginia newspapers, in order to make available some journalistic reactions to Gabriel's Conspiracy. There is some conflicting evidence in these sources. I have also included newspaper evidence from other states, which reflects the complicated ways that virulent accusations

29. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 179–81; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 255–76.

30. See William P. Palmer et al., eds., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers, 1652–1869*, 11 vols. (Richmond, 1875–93), which is considerably less thorough than the present volume.

31. William P. Palmer, "Slavery in Virginia," *Richmond Times*, December 7, 21, and 28, 1890, January 11, 1891, and June 4, 1891.

by both Democratic-Republicans and Federalists were hurled at each other in the 1790s, and especially during the intense 1800 national election campaign. These politically motivated accusations certainly colored journalistic interpretations of Gabriel's Revolt. Early U.S. newspapers might claim to be impartial and objective, but their standards of accuracy and objectivity differed considerably from those of the twenty-first century. Of course, the Federalists insisted they were on the right side and that the Republicans were either Jacobins and seditious conspirators—which is to say, Democratic Republicans. On the other hand, Democratic Republicans accused the Federalists as being tyrants—that is, suppressors of individual and political rights. The pro-Jefferson Republicans mocked Federalists as monarchists, absolutists, and tyrants.³²

This fiery newspaper controversy remained hot partly because of one of the most striking events to occur in the western hemisphere—the successful slave rebellion in St. Domingue in the 1790s. That victorious assault against bondage served as the most potent lode of inflammatory rhetoric that Federalist newspaper writers could mine for arguments that the Democratic-Republicans were disloyal incendiaries who would stoop to help slaves rebel. The Democratic-Republicans rhetorically shouted back at the Federalists, accusing them of pro-British sentiments, tyrannical objectives, and of trying to ensure Adams's reelection to the presidency by fomenting a rebellion that would result in a pro-Federalist reaction. In spite of the pen-bearing antagonists' intention to write furiously, the situation in the Old Dominion was only complicated by this sort of off-the-cuff fulmination. The diverse journalistic examples available in the present collection demonstrate the newspapers' witches' brew of false inferences sprinkled amid few facts. To reach sound conclusions, however, one must

32. See Richard S. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns* (New York, 1997), 853–55, 857, 859; Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 37–42; Michael Durey, “With the Hammer of Truth”: James Thomson Callender and America's Early National Heroes (Charlottesville, 1990), III–42; James Morton Smith, *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Laws and American Civil Liberties* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1956), 277–433; Donald H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, N.Y., 1969), esp. 337–47, 352; Edward Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York, 2007), 190–212; Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism* (Boston, 2004), 153–58; Gordon S. Wood. “What America Started,” *New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2007, 32–35; Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (New York, 2006); Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); and Michael Nicholls, “‘Holy Insurrection’: Spinning the News of Gabriel's Conspiracy,” *Journal of Southern History* 78 (February 2012): 37–68.

carefully compare such newspaper evidence with the public record, private correspondence, and the trial testimony.

Court Documents. The Gabriel documents include numerous militia payrolls, as well as duplicate copies of the Henrico County trials. There are also many “information” documents, issued by prosecutors to initiate criminal court action. They mostly state the charge and name the accused. After an information document was entered, enslaved defendants were tried by courts of oyer and terminer, which held plenary power to hear (oyer) and deliver a verdict and a sentence (terminer). Ordinarily, there was a standard form for the trial records. Therefore, this volume will normally quote only the unique parts of each trial record—that is, the specific date of trial, the specifics of the prosecution, the justices who sat on the case, and the verdict. When there was occasional unique testimony or other unique statements at a trial, all such testimony is contained within this published section.

Military, Budgetary, and Other Governmental Finance Records. These records demonstrate the scope of the response by state and local governments to Gabriel’s Rebellion. One aspect of each condemnation of a rebel is the court valuation of the person in order to assess the compensation due by law to the executed convict’s owner. All of these court-designated values appear in this book. The Old Dominion’s oyer and terminer judges had been awarding compensation to owners of executed slaves for almost a century—specifically, since 1705. The intention of that compensation was to enable slave owners to regain the financial value of the executed person and to encourage owners not to cover up felonies in order to retain—or to sell away privately—a particularly valuable laborer. The same compensation was later (1801) granted to slave owners whose enslaved convicts were transported out of Virginia and the United States as a lesser punishment than execution.³³

Possible Missing Documents. Given all the work that has been done on Gabriel’s Rebellion, it seems unlikely that any major new body of evidence will be found. But if any substantiated new material appears, it will, we hope, be added to the planned website’s collection of documents.

33. See Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 20, 40, 52–53; and Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia*, 63–119.

Documentary Integrity. After some scandal and dismay concerning the book edited by Edward A. Pearson, *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill, 1999),³⁴ historians have been strongly reminded of the standards to which they are held concerning transcription, arrangement, and explanation of any slave court trial records which have not had widespread use until recent years.

The 1800 trial records in this volume originally appeared in the handwritten oyer and terminer court records of four Virginia counties—Henrico, Caroline, Dinwiddie, and Louisa—and of Richmond City. There are also slightly different handwritten transcripts filed in the executive papers and selected transcripts that Governor Monroe sent to the Virginia senate. Even excerpted transcripts were not widely available until some local newspapers published partial records. There were also state copies of each locality's oyer and terminer trial records.³⁵

The trial records are obviously not voluminous when compared to some later major trial records. Moreover, defendants in oyer and terminer courts were not allowed to testify on their own behalf. A court-appointed lawyer had that responsibility. Unfortunately, if those lawyers recorded their opinions, no such record has been found. But still another important difference between the trials of enslaved people and those of free people is that the slaves' verdicts were rarely appealed to a higher court. In the case of Gabriel and his confederates, some cases were reviewed by the Virginia Council, an executive body, but only shortly after the trials took place. The obvious problem with that review process is that the authorities were still gripped by anger and fear because the conspiracy had been only recently uncovered. In this respect, insurrection trials resemble some courts martial, except that military trial verdicts are normally not subject to civilian review.

Documents, though faithfully transcribed, have been somewhat regularized in format for the sake of readability. For example, the placement of dates and of the signatures in letters has been standardized. Text that was underscored in the original appears here in italics. In addition, please note that portions of some documents were abstracted or extracted in an attempt to make longer material accessible to the reader. Such material is

34. See Robert A. Gross, ed., "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy," pts. 1 and 2, *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 57 (October 2001): 913–76; 59 (January 2002): 135–202.

35. James T. Callender published several lengthy trial transcripts in the *Richmond Recorder*, but they appeared almost three years after the conspiracy was uncovered. These transcripts were in fact the same as the courts' transcripts.

prefaced by the heading “EXTRACT” or “ABSTRACT,” as appropriate; the ornament following that material indicates when the full text resumes.

Arrangement of Documents. This volume is arranged in a strictly chronological sequence. Any given document will refer to earlier or expected dates—for example, to trial dates ordered by authorities or to execution dates, both planned and actual—and to later, connected dates and events. Trial testimony necessarily referred to previous dates, as did correspondence and newspaper accounts. But such documents have been arranged according to the date or dates when the testimony was completed. The intention of this strict adherence to chronological order is to make as clear as possible the cause-and-effect relationship between events and documents that the record of Gabriel’s Conspiracy contains. Although this document collection is arranged chronologically, it certainly would have been acceptable to divide this volume into thematic categories. Readers are free to approach the documents from this perspective. The index should help readers find certain documents. There is also a chronology.

CHRONOLOGY

1776

Probable date of Gabriel's birth.

1783/1784

Ben, Frank, Gabriel, Martin, Peter, "Soloman," and Watt appear in the Henrico County Tax Records as the personal property of Thomas Prosser. Another forty-one male and female bondspersons were also listed as taxable to Prosser in both 1783 and 1784.

1799

October 7 Jupiter, the property of Thomas Henry Prosser, is convicted of hogstealing. The Henrico County Court rejects overseer Absalom Johnson's petition for protection against Solomon.

Gabriel is found guilty of maiming Absalom Johnson by biting off a large part of Johnson's ear.

November 4-5 Thomas Henry Prosser is bound to ensure Gabriel's "good behavior" for one year.

1800

When did the conspiracy begin? William Young's Gilbert asserted that, "about three or four years ago," a French man, Charles Quersey, advised him and others that he could lead enslaved rebels. Ben Woolfolk testified that he heard about the conspiracy from two men "last spring" (i.e., in the spring of 1800). James T. Callender claimed the plot began "several months" before September 13. The Henrico County justices estimated July 1 as the date the conspiracy began. Still another observer mentioned early August: John Grammar of Petersburg informed Augustin Davis of Richmond on August 9 that "whispers" of a Petersburg slave insurrection gave reason

to alert Richmond authorities to secure the capital city. Yet another witness estimated the meeting date of some of the plotters was a bit earlier than August 21. Two enslaved witnesses mentioned a conspiratorial gathering about August 21. Clearly, different people learned at least something about the conspiracy at different times.

- August 30 Mosby Sheppard, a Henrico County planter, informs Governor James Monroe that enslaved men are about to rebel near his plantation and at the Brook, about six miles north of Richmond. The governor initiates defense measures.
- September 2 Governor Monroe convenes the Virginia Council, calls out and arms the militia, and organizes other measures to suppress unlawful assemblies.
- September 4 Governor Monroe advises magistrates to provide security for witnesses and informers against the alleged conspirators.
- September 5 Henrico County Justices Selden and Storrs charge the county's jail keepers to capture and imprison six suspects. The search for more suspects continues into the beginning of December.
- September 6 Petersburg Recorder William Prentis informs Governor Monroe that a conspiracy is suspected in his town.
- September 8 The Virginia Council advises that a proclamation for Gabriel's capture be issued and that a reward of \$150 be offered. The reward is increased to \$300 on September 9. Henrico Justices Storrs and Selden describe Gabriel as "the main spring and chief mover" of the plot.
- September 9 General Joseph Jones of Petersburg, a Revolutionary War veteran, advises Governor Monroe that any suspect "ought immediately to be hanged, quartered, and hung up in trees on every road as a terror for the rest."
Young's Gilbert, an enslaved informer, is interviewed by John Foster and identifies seven men as conspirators.

- September 11 The first trials take place in Henrico County. Thomas Henry Prosser's Solomon is the first to be tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by hanging. Solomon makes a full confession, but to no avail.
Solomon, Will, John, Isaac, Mike, and Ned ("Natt") are tried.
- September 12 Solomon, Will, John, Isaac, Mike, and Ned ("Natt") are hanged by the neck.
Billy, Martin, Charles, Frank, and Martin are tried.
Governor Monroe is informed that Gabriel has been seen in Hanover County "enquiring the route to Jamestown."
George, Frank, and Sawney are tried.
- September 13 James T. Callender sends Thomas Jefferson news about Gabriel's conspiracy.
- September 15 Daniel, Peter, Jupiter, Sam, Daniel, and Isham are tried.
Billy, Martin, Charles, and Frank are executed.
The Virginia Council authorizes a proclamation that offers a reward of \$300 for the capture of Jack Bowler.
- September 15 Governor Monroe declares that "the insurrection appears to be so completely broken" that the previous military presence can safely be reduced.
Governor Monroe writes privately to Thomas Jefferson, "Where to arrest the hand of the executioner, is a question of great importance."
- September 16 Ned, Isaac, Harry, Ned, Joe, Laddis, Billy Chicken, and Ben Woolfolk are tried.
- September 17 Stephen is tried.
- September 18 Sawney, Peter, Jupiter, Sam, and Isham are hanged.
The Virginia Council pardons Ben, alias Ben Woolfolk, "for reasons appearing to them." Ben is willing to testify against several defendants even though he has been convicted of conspiracy and insurrection.
Thirteen prominent citizens protest the "frequent executions" that have occurred within sight of people's

homes and that have been “extremely distressing to the view of our families, especially the female members.” Later executions are moved elsewhere.

- September 19 George Smith is tried.
Isaac and Laddis are executed.
- September 20 Thomas Jefferson replies to James Monroe’s private concern (September 15) about the number of executions. Jefferson advises that “absolute necessity” is the best standard for capital punishment. Jefferson also suggests “exportation,” an idea that became a reality in 1801.
- September 22 Gilbert, Joe, George, and Tom are tried.
- September 24 Gabriel had escaped to Norfolk, but Mayor Thomas Newton sends him back to Richmond, along with a letter to Governor Monroe.
- September 25 Brutus and King are tried.
- September 27 Sam Byrd, Michael, and William are tried.
Governor Monroe reports to the Virginia Council that Gabriel “was brought to my house yesterday about 4 o’Clock in the afternoon and a great cloud of blacks as well as whites, gathered around him.”
- September 28 Three Virginia Council members interview Gabriel at the penitentiary. They report that he “did not seem disposed, at present, to make any confession worth notice.”
- September 29 Sam Graham, James, Moses, and Abraham are tried.
- September 30 Jacob, Dick, James, and Solomon are tried.
- October 1 Peter, Billy, another Billy, Lewis, and Ben are tried.
- October 3 Sam Byrd and Michael are executed.
Governor Monroe refers to “the defeat of the late meditated insurrection of the slaves,” which “has in great measure subdued their spirit.” The governor still emphasizes continued patrolling.
- October 5 Governor Monroe reports to Norfolk Mayor Thomas Newton that Gabriel “seemed to have made up his mind

- to die, and to have resolved to say but little on the subject of the conspiracy.”
- October 6 Gabriel and Dick are tried.
- October 10 Jack Bowler comes out of hiding and delivers himself to Henrico Justice Gervass Storrs. He meets with Governor Monroe and is later confined in the penitentiary. Peter Smith, a free African American, had negotiated Jack Bowler’s surrender.
George Smith, Gilbert, Tom, William, Sam Graham, and Gabriel are executed.
- October 13 Ralph is tried.
- October 20 Peter is tried.
- October 22 John, Ben, Scipio, and George are tried.
- October 24 Peter is executed.
- October 29 Billy, Humphrey, Jack Gabriel, and Jack Bowler are tried.
- October 30 John Fells and Thornton are tried.
- November 4 Absalom and Emanuel are tried.
- December 1 Watt is tried.
- December 5 Governor Monroe delivers his detailed summary of Gabriel’s conspiracy to the General Assembly. The governor offers to send a copy to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson responds that he would thank Monroe for “any information you can give me on the subject of the conspiracy.”
- December 23 William Wilson of Gloucester County petitions for compensation for Jacob, his slave, who allegedly stabbed himself to death after being suspected of supporting Gabriel’s conspiracy.
- December 27 Governor Monroe tells the mayor of Richmond that too many African Americans are staying in Richmond after daylight. “The Negroes from the country have no business in town, but to attend to market.” He adds, “We ought not to consider ourselves exempt from danger.”

- December 29 The Richmond Common Council agrees with Governor Monroe's suggestion that there be a permanent watch to protect the city "against fire and insurrection of the free Negroes and slaves." The watch was created in early 1801.
1801
- January 14 The Virginia Assembly empowers Governor Monroe to buy and emancipate Pharoah and Tom, who had informed Mosby Sheppard of Gabriel's conspiracy. This transaction was not fully executed until December 1801.
- January 15 The Virginia Assembly passes "An Act to empower the governor to transport slaves condemned, when it shall be expedient." Thereupon, Governor Monroe authorizes the transportation of Jack Bowler and seven other previously condemned men to be sold out of Virginia and the United States. Although private citizens sold these men in Spanish Louisiana, they suffered losses doing so. The Virginia legislature refused to compensate them.
- January 28 King, Lewis, Ben, Scipio, Jack Gabriel, Jack Bowler, John Fells, Thornton, and Watt are transported.
- July 17 By indenture, the free men Pharoah and Tom are each granted a lifetime annuity of \$60 per year.
- September 13 Governor Monroe cautions that there is "much reason to apprehend the Negroes have not relinquished the project in which they were embarked last year."
- October 5 Thomas Henry Prosser emancipates Ben. His reason for doing so was not recorded.