

# Gabriel's Conspiracy and the Election of 1800

By DOUGLAS R. EGERTON

THE SPRING OF 1800 FOUND RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, EMBROILED IN political controversy; the April elections for the General Assembly were crucial for both Federalists and Republicans in the upcoming presidential contest. The accompanying unrest, discord, and rumors of disunion inspired a black man named Gabriel, owned by Thomas Henry Prosser, to conceive of what was perhaps the most extensive slave rebellion in southern history. Gabriel's conspiracy has been either ignored or misunderstood by historians; most contemporaries believed that it probably could have succeeded. Had that been so, it might have changed not only the course of American race relations but also the course of American political history. This article attempts to identify Gabriel and the other insurgent leaders and to explain how their unique status informed both the goals of their rebellion and their method of recruitment. In turn, this explanation of their identity and goals will help answer why the conspiracy matured when it did and what the profound political and ideological ramifications of its failure were.<sup>1</sup>

Why North American slaves were less overtly rebellious than their Latin American brethren has been extensively discussed in recent years. What remains to be answered is why these few North American rebellions occurred. This puzzle becomes less complex when each rebellion is grounded in place, class, and time. When these pieces are fit together, the problem of why is clarified, and the goals of the conspirators take form and shape. Removed from its proper context, Gabriel's conspiracy appears illogical; his goals, muddled.

<sup>1</sup> Although modern scholars often give Gabriel the surname of his owner, Thomas Henry Prosser, no extant contemporary document does so, and I have avoided doing so here. I wish to thank Richard R. Duncan, Alan Gally, Steven Hahn, Ronald M. Johnson, Marcus Rediker, and Philip J. Schwarz for their comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1988 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Reno, Nevada.

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An understanding of time and place, however, reveals a coherent and—given the information available to him—logical plan.<sup>2</sup>

The conspiracy cannot be divorced from the world of Richmond in the years following the American Revolution. The leading conspirators were slaves, to be sure, but they were slaves who lived and labored in an urban culture that was unusual if not nearly unique in the South. Richmond at the turn of the century had just under six thousand residents. Half of the population was black, and about one-fifth of the blacks were free. And as inhabitants of Virginia, a state with a free black population that was growing rapidly because of manumission and economic change, the border South conspirators dreamed realistic dreams of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the web the conspirators were spinning stood Prosser's Gabriel. Then in his twenty-fourth year, Gabriel was a natural leader, a highly skilled blacksmith who could both "read and write." At six feet odd, Gabriel towered over most men, and he was not afraid to use his great strength; in the fall of 1799 he had been convicted of "biting off a considerable part of [the] left Ear" of a white neighbor. As a potential revolutionary, Gabriel had much to lose, for he had recently married.<sup>4</sup> But his emerging plan was based upon careful calculation, and there is absolutely no truth to the popular myth that the short-haired slave was an irrational, messianic figure who wore his locks long in imitation of Samson. As far as the extant evidence indicates, freedom was his only religion.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See for example Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 36; and *Return of the Whole Number of Persons Within the Several Districts of the United States . . .* (Washington, 1802), 69–70.

<sup>4</sup> *Norfolk Herald*, September 16, 1800 (first quotation); trial of Gabriel, October 7, 1799, Henrico County Court, Order Book (Virginia State Library, Richmond) (second quotation); Burton's Daniel indicated that Gabriel's wife Nanny knew about the conspiracy. See his testimony at the trial of Jones's John, September 11, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (Virginia State Library). There is, however, no evidence to support the thesis that the plot was "led by Nancy [sic] Prosser and her husband, Gabriel." See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Description of Gabriel by Thomas Henry Prosser, in Richmond *Virginia Argus*, September 23, 1800. The persistent myth that Gabriel was a messianic figure who emulated Samson by wearing his hair long appears to have been created by Joseph C. Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800–1865* (New York, 1938; rpt. ed., New York, 1973), 49, as he is the first to mention it. No citation is given to support his assertion. It is possible that Carroll mistook a description of Jack Ditcher, an unskilled laborer who wore his hair long, for one of Gabriel. Ditcher, like Gabriel, expressed no religious sentiments. The story that Gabriel's brother Martin was a preacher is also unfounded. Significantly, four scholars writing prior to Carroll make no mention of Gabriel's religion. See Robert R. Howison, *A History of Virginia . . .* (2 vols.; Philadelphia, 1846–1848), II, 390; Joshua Coffin, *An Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections . . .* (New York, 1860), 24–28; Thomas W. Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws: Episodes in American History* (Boston, 1889), 190; and Harvey Wish, "American Slave Insurrections Before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (July 1937), 311. Ever since Carroll wrote *Slave Insurrections*, however, a discussion of the influ-

Gabriel did not live in Richmond itself but in a small cabin on Brookfield, the Prosser tobacco plantation six miles outside the city. Gabriel and his brothers, Solomon and Martin, had probably been raised on the plantation (seven-year-old Gabriel appears in the 1783 tax records of Thomas Prosser, Sr.), which had a stable slave population of just over fifty laborers. Perhaps their father was an artisan, for both Gabriel and Solomon were trained as blacksmiths and rarely, if ever, worked in the fields, which placed Gabriel among the slave elite.<sup>6</sup>

As a skilled artisan, Gabriel had advantages over the field laborers. Even the largest and most efficient Virginia plantations could not keep their bond artisans fully occupied around the year, and consequently many owners occasionally hired their craftsmen out to neighboring farmers or town dwellers. Even with all the potential work to be done at Brookfield, Gabriel spent more than a few days each month smithing in Richmond. Occasionally he was even given the right to hire his own time. This gave men like Gabriel the opportunity to decide where and for whom they would work. Though he was still a slave in the eyes of the law, he enjoyed a rough form of freedom. Indeed, Gabriel's ties to his owner were so tenuous that several historians have identified him as a free man.<sup>7</sup>

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ence of Gabriel's religion on the insurrection has appeared in virtually every reference to the conspiracy. See for example William J. Kimball, "The Gabriel Insurrection of 1800," *Negro History Bulletin*, XXXIV (1971), 153–56, and the same author's sketch in Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York, 1982), 506; Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans: From Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom* (Westport, Conn., and London, 1975), 453; Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619–1962* (Chicago, 1962), 111; Nicholas Halasz, *The Ratling Chains: Slave Unrest and Revolt in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1966), 87; Barbara Clark Smith, *After the Revolution: The Smithsonian History of Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985), 129, although the catalogue is less explicit on the point than the exhibit itself; George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 112; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 393; John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed.; New York and Oxford, 1979), 221, who inexplicably cites only Higginson; and, to a lesser degree, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 593, and his *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 44–46. One author who does not depict Gabriel as a religious zealot is Gerald [Michael] Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), yet neither does he explicitly denounce the myth. Although the arguments presented in this essay differ from Mullin's, my debt to his work should be obvious.

<sup>6</sup> In 1783 Thomas Prosser, Sr., owned fifty-five slaves including children and was the fourth largest slaveholder in Henrico County (the 1783 tax list was unique in that it counted slave children). The tax list dated August 16, 1800, shows that Thomas Henry Prosser owned forty-eight slaves over the age of twelve and that only two Henrico County residents paid more in taxes. See Henrico County, Personal Property Tax, 1783 and 1800 (Virginia State Library). For a map of the buildings on Brookfield, minus the slave cabins, which were not insured, see map of August 3, 1806, number 119, volume 40, Mutual Assurance Society Policies (Virginia State Library).

<sup>7</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 392. Four works that identify Gabriel as a free black are

The documentary record does not reveal just what sort of arrangement Gabriel worked out with his owner, but the typical method in the upper South allowed the skilled bondman to contract out his labor, then give his master a share of the wages. Provided Gabriel was able to pay the agreed-upon sum at regular intervals, he was free to spend whatever he earned above that amount. The arrangement held out obvious benefits for both slave and master, but lurking within it were dangers to the peculiar institution. Hiring out introduced a cash nexus into a relationship that was not supposed to have one, thus weakening the paternalism of the plantation.<sup>8</sup>

On many occasions plantation artisans hired themselves out to white artisans and tradesmen in Richmond to fill unexpected, short-term labor shortages. Blacksmiths like Gabriel were the most common black artisans, but Virginia slave hirelings included carpenters, coopers, shoemakers, tanners, and weavers. In small shops across the city, black and white mechanics labored side by side and in the process developed strong bonds of labor solidarity that often cut across racial lines.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, Richmond-area artisans—slave or free, black or white—dealt directly with urban merchants. Artisans did not produce directly for a retail market but labored almost exclusively on specific orders from clients or merchants—“bespoke goods.” The mechanics were paid by the piece according to a fair price established by the various trades. In exchange, merchants provided craftsmen with credit and materials. The relationship was reciprocal, but it was far from equal; merchants dominated the flow of marketable goods as well as raw materials. Although they could not dictate the price of finished goods, they could pressure the artisans to lower their prices by shutting off the stream of raw materials or by threatening to take their business elsewhere. In a region with a weak tradition of craft organization, such pressure often worked.<sup>10</sup>

For slave artisans like Gabriel, the power of the merchants could be

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John C. Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), 126; Federal Writers' Project, *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion* (New York, 1940), 78; Gary B. Nash and Julie R. Jeffrey, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (2 vols.; New York, 1986), I, 291; Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974), 342.

<sup>8</sup> Clement Eaton, “Slave-Hiring in the Upper South: A Step Toward Freedom,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVI (March 1960), 672; and Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond B. Pinchbeck, *The Virginia Negro Artisan and Tradesman* (Richmond, 1926), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 4 (quotation); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984), 28.

even more devastating. Unscrupulous businessmen often underpaid or even openly cheated bond hirelings, as blacks could not take them to court or testify against them. In a system in which the failure to pay one's master a fixed sum could cost a slave the privilege of hiring out, one dishonest businessman could doom a bondman to a life restricted to the plantation. It is thus not surprising that artisans like Gabriel came to see "merchants," and not their owners, as their primary enemy.<sup>11</sup>

Given Gabriel's tenuous grasp on prosperity and quasi-freedom, it was hardly unusual that his goals took on a uniquely urban flavor. The values of the city were far removed from those of the countryside. Surrounded by an atmosphere of business enterprise—and driven by a need to stay solvent—the black artisans were hardly impervious to the claims of money and property. They were influenced by the heady and transforming ideology of artisan republicanism, the powerful political belief that small producers were superior to those, like the merchants, who made money off the sweat of those who worked with their hands. Gabriel was a radical, but he was an eighteenth-century radical with an eighteenth-century program. His goals were rooted in secular rationalism, not in Old Testament millennialism; his plans called not just for his freedom but for an equally inestimable treasure: the right to his just earnings.<sup>12</sup>

For all that, Gabriel was still black and enslaved, and thus he stood no higher than at the top of a distinctly compressed black class structure. Many white artisans frowned upon the working class and its tradition of crowd activity, but black artisans were less socially removed from unskilled black laborers. Skilled and unskilled alike, Richmond blacks shared a common cultural domain. As a result, it was natural for Gabriel, as he informed his brother, to rely on what was fundamentally a method of popular protest to achieve political ends worthy of any disciple of Thomas Paine: to pull down the "merchants" and "possess ourselves of their property."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tommy L. Bogger, "The Slave and Free Black Community in Norfolk, 1775–1865" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1976), 167; Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days* . . . (Richmond, 1856), 92; and testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel, October 6, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (quotation).

<sup>12</sup> Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790–1860* (New York, 1961), 270. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 2, argues persuasively that post-revolutionary slave revolts "must be understood primarily as part of the most radical wing of the struggle for a democracy that had not yet lost its bourgeois moorings."

<sup>13</sup> Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976), 47, 52–53; Charles G. Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1763–1812* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), 38; testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel (quotations); and confession of Prosser's Solomon, September 15, 1800, Letterbook, Executive Communications (Virginia State Library) (second quotation). The only detailed account of the plot, William J. Ernst, "Gabriel's Revolt: Black Freedom, White Fear" (M.A. thesis,

There could be no mistaking what this form of popular protest required: insurrection. But it was a conclusion a man such as Gabriel would reach, a smart, aggressive slave with so little prejudice against violence or regard for his own safety that he would bite a white neighbor over a stolen hog. His emerging plan, as he explained it to his brother Solomon and to Ben, another of Prosser's slaves, was simple, if not yet perfected in its military aspects. The insurgents, including the urban slaves, would meet on Prosser's land and march on Richmond. Fighting in three groups, they would attack the capitol, the magazine, and the penitentiary. The slaves would then fortify the city as best they could and await word that other cities had been taken or that the slaves from those cities were heading for Richmond. At that point, it was expected that the embattled whites would "agree to their freedom" and allow the freed slaves to take their place in society. And Gabriel "would dine and drink with the merchants of the city on the day when it was agreed to."<sup>14</sup>

In the spring of 1800, during his frequent trips into town, Gabriel began to spread his as-yet-imprecise plan and to recruit followers. He acted cautiously; he first approached other slave hirelings, especially those who, unlike himself, lived away from their masters, an arrangement that further weakened white control and supervision. Not surprisingly, his method of recruitment, even his language, was informed by his special status as a black artisan. Would they "join a free mason society?" Gabriel and other early leaders asked, "a society to fight the White people for their freedom[.]"<sup>15</sup>

Word of the conspiracy began to move rapidly through the back alleys, hidden taverns, warehouses, and docks of the port town. The

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University of Virginia, 1968), 30–31, states that Gabriel's goals were "muddled." Ernst fails, however, to distinguish among the levels of conspirators. The testimony of Solomon and Prosser's Ben, both close to Gabriel, is given equal weight to that of Ben Woolfolk, a minor figure and an agricultural worker who was not in a position to understand Gabriel's economic demands. Moreover, because he does not ground Gabriel—and his goals—in place, class, and time, Ernst finds the rebel's emphasis on property "particularly curious."

<sup>14</sup> Confession of Prosser's Solomon; and testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel. As with most historiography, scholars tend to view this event by the standards of their own time. The historians of the 1960s saw Gabriel as a radical separatist bent on creating a "Negro State," a theory expressly contradicted by Gabriel's "dine and drink with the merchants" comment. See for example Marion D. deB. Kilson, "Towards Freedom: An Analysis of Slave Revolts in the United States," *Phylon*, XXV (Summer 1964), 176; Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 111–12; C. Eric Lincoln, "The American Protest Movement for Negro Rights," in John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1966), who sees Gabriel as "anticipating Elijah Muhammed by 150 years" (p. 461).

<sup>15</sup> Testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Sam Byrd, Jr., September 27, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; William Prentiss to James Monroe, n.d., *ibid.*; Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York, 1964), 48–54, 66; testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of George Smith, September 19, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (quotation).

mechanics Gabriel contacted were not sworn to secrecy, but they were careful not to tell slaves who had close ties to their owners or who spent most of their time in the countryside. At first their numbers were small, but freedom of movement and ease of communication soon permitted them to recruit others. One of the conspirators, William Young's Gilbert, routinely wrote "himself a Pass" so he could travel freely about the Richmond area.<sup>16</sup>

As recruits joined, word of the conspiracy began to spread. Black artisans used their freedom of movement to travel far outside the city. George Smith "hire[d] his time of his mistress" and journeyed to neighboring towns, and Sam Byrd, Jr., hired himself out "for the greater part of the summer" so that he might be free to "engage a number of men in the adjacent counties and in Petersburg," twenty-five miles to the south. It is significant that as the conspiracy grew, it remained the secret of like-minded black elites in Virginia towns.<sup>17</sup>

By mid-summer the conspiracy was well known to many black artisans in Petersburg. Sam Byrd, Jr., one of the most active—and certainly the most mobile—recruiters, was able to use his respected uncles, Reuben and Jesse Byrd, "two free men of colour," to contact other urban blacks. Reuben, a moderately prosperous mason and carpenter, agreed to serve as the coordinator of the Petersburg men. Word also was carried north to Sam Byrd, Sr., a "free mulatto of Hanover = Town [who] enlisted men there."<sup>18</sup>

Having left the conspiracy in the capable hands of his father and two uncles, Byrd traveled "as far as Charlottesville to inlist men," a town sixty-five miles northwest of Richmond. The resourceful young man also recruited a black mail carrier to be the regular courier between Richmond and Charlottesville; Byrd had found the blacks of that town "very willing to join" in the yet undefined revolt, but it was necessary to find a method of passing increasingly detailed information among the conspirators of the several urban areas. The mail service would meet this need.<sup>19</sup>

Communications among the Virginia towns were not intended to be

<sup>16</sup> William Bernard to James Monroe, September 20, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; and testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Young's Gilbert, September 22, 1800, *ibid.* (quotation). One of the slaves, Lewis's Sawney, had been hired out for so long that the court was confused as to his true owner. See certification of William Young, September 26, 1800, Auditor's Item 153, Box 2, Slaves Condemned (Virginia State Library).

<sup>17</sup> Testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of George Smith (first quotation); and testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Sam Byrd, Jr. (second and third quotations).

<sup>18</sup> William Prentis to James Monroe, September 24, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first quotation); confession of Young's Gilbert, September 23, 1800, *ibid.* (second quotation); James Monroe to William Prentis, October 11, 1800, Letterbook, Executive Communications. Reuben Byrd must also have been a mulatto, for he was occasionally listed as white. See the Petersburg City Personal Property Tax, 1795–1803 (Virginia State Library).

<sup>19</sup> Confession of Young's Gilbert.

so precise that revolts in several places could begin at exactly the same time. Instead, Gabriel hoped that under the leadership of the Byrds and John Scott, a Petersburg hireling, a "union of plan" among the towns could be devised so that the other conspirators would know to rise after he and his Richmond followers had "commenced the insurrection."<sup>20</sup>

With many blacks from Richmond and Petersburg involved in the conspiracy, the word began to flow down the James River to Suffolk and Norfolk. Black boatmen along the James had long been the carriers of information and runaway slaves as well as goods for merchants; now several were involved as couriers. One of them, William Wilson's Jacob, was a ship's captain for hire who regularly "passed between [Petersburg] and Norfolk." As with the Petersburg conspirators, the men of the lower James were to meet on a yet to be appointed date outside Norfolk and wait for word of the Richmond uprising. By the end of July word of the revolt had spread to at least six Virginia towns; it was, as Governor James Monroe later observed, a secret known "in many and some distant parts of the State."<sup>21</sup>

But Richmond remained the heart of the conspiracy. By early August a recruiter reported to Solomon that "all the boys in town" were "nearly ready to do the business," the common slang term used by the conspirators. Gabriel had spent most of the summer in town recruiting unskilled urban blacks such as the "warehouse boys," and both Byrd and Matt Scott, a free black, had approached at least one hundred Richmond slaves. Unwisely, Scott, who was literate, began, like other rebel leaders, to keep a list of the names of those he had recruited, probably at Gabriel's request.<sup>22</sup>

From the perspective of the leaders, their recruitment technique was flawless. Using their relative freedom, they contacted only those

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel (second quotation); [Richmond mayor] James McClurg to James Monroe, n.d., Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first quotation); and unsigned letter to editor, September 13, 1800, printed in *Fredericksburg Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800.

<sup>21</sup> Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 10, 1800; *Norfolk Herald*, October 2, 1800; Bogger, "Slave and Free Black Community," 168-69; William Prentis to James Monroe, n.d. (first quotation); trial of "John a Boatman," October 22, 1800, Caroline County Court, Order Book (Virginia State Library); pay warrant to Joel Thomas, March 3, 1801, Military Papers, Gabriel's Insurrection (Virginia State Library); and James Monroe to William Prentis, October 11, 1800 (second quotation). One Virginian believed that blacks in the remote western hamlet of Blacksburg knew of the plot. But since Blacksburg had no black artisan community and was distant from the waterways along which the recruiters traveled, it is unlikely that slaves there were involved. See William Radford to James Preston, September 14, 1800, Preston Family Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington).

<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Wilkinson's Daniel, September 15, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first two quotations); confession of Young's Gilbert; and testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Parson's Nat, September 11, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (third quotation).



whose talents and skills had made them self-sufficient and nearly free in their unique urban world. The early conspirators were the most likely to demand total freedom and were in the best position to benefit from that freedom should it come. But in order for their plot to include enough blacks to be successful, the rebels had to reach beyond the urban elite to the slaves on nearby farms and plantations. Having few cultural or economic ties to the "out landish" plantation blacks (as conspirator George Smith called them), many of whom were Africans or their children, the insurgents failed to persuade the rural slaves to join their plan. Gabriel believed that he had at least the tacit acceptance of "nearly all of the negroes in town," but when asked "how he come on in the country," he simply shook his head sadly. Until the last moment Gabriel's conspiracy was completely urban, the only one of its kind in southern history.<sup>23</sup>

An understanding of precisely who Gabriel and his followers were explains their emphasis on "property" and a fair share of the wealth of society and why Gabriel saw the "merchants," and not the rural planters, as his enemies. But in order to explain why Gabriel believed that achieving these goals might be possible the question of time must be taken into account. Only when Gabriel's plan is placed against the turbulent political background of 1800 does the logic of his conspiracy emerge.

From start to finish, the shadow of politics hung over the affair. Spending many of his days in town, Gabriel could hardly have been unaware that the nation was in the midst of a bitter and divisive presidential election. More to the point, as a literate man he surely knew, if only from the vitriolic Richmond press, that the city was a Federalist stronghold. Even after the spring elections, in which the Republicans were victorious almost everywhere else in Virginia, the thriving commercial towns of Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk—the hubs of the conspiracy—remained stubbornly Federalist. Visible signs of political rivalry were everywhere for the slaves to witness; Repub-

<sup>23</sup> Testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of George Smith (first quotation); testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Wilkinson's Jupiter, September 15, 1800, *Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers* (second and third quotations); and testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel. Although the Denmark Vesey conspiracy was in its origins urban, it received some support from the plantation blacks, due to the efforts of Gullah Jack Pritchard, who had no counterpart in the Gabriel conspiracy. See John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey's Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, Ohio, 1983), 135–38. Richard C. Wade in *Slavery in the Cities* states that urban areas inhibited revolts and that "no actual significant uprising took place in any Southern city. The Gabriel mutiny in 1803 [sic] . . . started on the Virginia countryside . . ." (p. 226). His thesis that urban slaves had greater freedom and were thus even less willing than plantation slaves to undertake suicidal rebellions, however, holds true only so long as there are no mitigating factors that lead urban slaves to believe that their actions might not be suicidal. As will be argued, the political factor led Gabriel to believe that the revolt might be successful.

licans wore the French tricolor, while Federalists donned black cockades.<sup>24</sup>

In the cities, the most vociferous Republicans were the artisans, whose egalitarian interpretation of the American and French revolutions was bound to rub off on the slaves who worked beside them. Members of the Democratic-Republican societies of Richmond and Norfolk spoke a language that the slaves understood, a dialect far more radical than that spoken by the Republican planters. For their part, the already hated merchants—Federalists almost to a man—employed heavy-handed electioneering tactics that all but incited the slaves to revolt. Playing to white fears, the Federalist press spread the rumor that the Republicans would liberate the slaves if elected. Even their figures of speech, meant to terrify white conservatives, only made the meaning of the election all the more clear to urban bondmen. “Shall we then embark,” queried the Federalist Richmond *Virginia Gazette*, “with [Thomas Jefferson], on the tempestuous sea of liberty?”<sup>25</sup>

If the two parties united on any issue, it was on the fear that the election was likely to result in civil war and disunion. Certainly the overheated partisan atmosphere of Richmond could grow no hotter. During the summer the eyes of the city were focused upon the spectacular trial of Republican polemicist James Thomson Callender, who was convicted and jailed under the hated Sedition Act for publishing “with intent to influence the coming [presidential] election.” Rumors were rife that if Jefferson were victorious the Federalists would not relinquish power. The Richmond *Virginia Argus* charged that Virginia Republicans were stockpiling guns; another Federalist journal predicted an “ultimate appeal to arms by the two great parties.” William B. Giles was even overheard saying in the Swan Tavern that he hoped “to see a separation of this state, from the General-Union.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> James H. Broussard, *The Southern Federalists, 1800–1816* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 5; Charles Copland Diary, April 1800, Charles Copland Papers (Virginia State Library); and James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, April 23, 1800, Thomas Jefferson Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). As Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé have written in only a slightly different context: “At a time when political discussion was at its maximum, even the village labourers were drawn into it. . . . Quite certainly very few labourers actually read [newspapers]. But equally certainly those who did—village artisans, and their like, and the local Radicals—passed the news along by word of mouth, and by example.” See *Captain Swing* (New York, 1968), 88–89.

<sup>25</sup> Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 70; Donald H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, N. Y., 1969), 346; and Richmond *Virginia Gazette*, July 18, 1800. Eugene P. Link, in *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790–1800* (New York, 1942), 13–16, identified seven societies in the Chesapeake and suspects there were more that were unreported by the mainstream press.

<sup>26</sup> Norfolk *Herald*, May 31, 1800 (first quotation); Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, May

Amidst these rhetorical rumblings of civil war Gabriel must have come to believe that if the slaves could ever revolt successfully, that time had arrived. From their urban perspective, it appeared that the artisans were preparing to take up arms against the Federalists, whose own words painted them as the enemies of liberty. For the slave hirelings, who had their own grievances against the merchants, the battle seemed to be theirs as well. "We have as much right to fight for our liberty as any men," insisted Jack Ditcher, a leading insurgent.<sup>27</sup>

Gabriel, scanning the surface of events, was right. By taking advantage of the political turmoil, he evidently believed, the urban blacks, using their slightly superior numbers, could force the Federalist merchants to yield. Already surrounded by a hostile sea of Republicans who were rumored to be arming themselves, the tiny conservative island of Richmond, unarmed and defenseless, would be unable to do anything save surrender.<sup>28</sup> It was not just that the conspiracy developed during a time of division among whites, as one historian has recently suggested, it was that artisan Gabriel, sharing the small producer ideology of many urban Republicans, hoped to join and exploit that division. His faith was that white mechanics would see in his own struggle for liberty and economic rights grounds for accepting his support. Gabriel's error was not one of logic but of information. His limited urban view led him to believe the struggle was between Republican artisans and Federalist merchants; Republican planters seemed to have played no part in his calculations, for he *never* identified them, or even whites in general, as his enemies. He simply failed to recognize that the Jeffersonian cry for liberty and equality was meant to apply to whites only.<sup>29</sup>

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9, 1800 (second quotation); and Richmond *Virginia Gazette*, January 25, 1799 (third quotation); Adrienne Koch, *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration* (New York, 1950), 194, writes that the rumors of Republicans stockpiling guns were just that, although Dumas Malone observes: "Very likely there was belligerent talk by hotheads." See his *Jefferson and His Time* (6 vols.; Boston, 1948-1981), III, 416 and note 17.

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of Prosser's Sam at trial of Jack Ditcher, October 29, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (quotation). It is clear that the origins of the plan coincide with the spring elections. Just one day before notifying Jefferson of the Republican victories, Monroe informed Jefferson of local "fears of a negro insurrection." See Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), 220 and note 38.

<sup>28</sup> James Callender to Thomas Jefferson, September 13, 1800, Jefferson Papers, stated that Richmond could have mustered only "four or five hundred men, of whom not more than thirty had Muskets."

<sup>29</sup> Genovese's argument that Gabriel's conspiracy "matured in the wake of divisions or apparent divisions in the ruling classes" would seem more applicable for the Vesey conspiracy of 1822, by which time the relative racial flexibility of 1800 had ended. Vesey, unlike Gabriel, wished to use the split among whites to flee the country; he could not envision joining either side or remaining in the American South. Gabriel clearly believed that having forced his enemies to yield, they would allow him to remain safely in Richmond. See Roll, *Jordan, Roll*, 593.

Gabriel nonetheless understood that his white artisan brethren might not support his cause unless forced to do so by sheer numbers of the insurgents. For that, he needed to try again to reach the less politicized rural slaves. It was a dangerous gamble. On most farms the tie between master and slave was far closer than in the cities or on the larger plantations, and Gabriel feared that one of the “outlandish” slaves would reveal the plot to his owner. But the need for men finally outweighed caution. On August 10, following the funeral of a child on the plantation of William Young, “Gabriel gave an invitation to some of the Negroes to drink grog down at the Spring.” There he announced he had a plan to fight not just for black freedom but also “to fight for his Country.”<sup>30</sup>

Gabriel was too pragmatic to believe that his fellows would wager their lives on a dream, and so he revealed his complete plan in detail. Thomas Henry Prosser, who had very likely been Gabriel’s childhood playmate, would be killed first.<sup>31</sup> The insurgents would then meet at the Brook Bridge, between Prosser’s plantation and Richmond. One hundred men would stand at the bridge. Another hundred would go with Gabriel, who was to carry a flag reading “death or Liberty.” Wielding the weapons he and Solomon had forged—swords “made of scythes cut in two”—they would storm the capitol, where they hoped Robert Cowley, a free black who served as doorkeeper, would provide them with guns. The third wing of fifty men would set a diversionary fire at Rockett’s, a tobacco inspection station in the warehouse district where some of the conspirators labored. Governor Monroe would be taken hostage but not harmed. Enough whites would be killed to force the town’s leaders—who, the conspirators thought, would receive no aid from the predominantly Republican countryside—to grant the rebels’ demands for freedom and the right to all of their earnings. The friends of liberty, “Quakers, Methodists, and French people,” would be spared, as would “poor white women who had no slaves,” whom the conspirators considered members of

<sup>30</sup> William Young to Samuel Pleasants, September 24, 1800, in *Richmond Virginia Argus*, October 3, 1800; testimony of Price’s John at trial of Sam Graham, September 29, 1800, *Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers*; and testimony of Price’s John at trial of Young’s Gilbert, September 22, 1800, *ibid.* (quotation). It is unclear how many country blacks were at this meeting, although it is evident that urban slaves were there.

<sup>31</sup> Testimony of Prosser’s Ben at trial of Wilkinson’s Jupiter. Gabriel had grown up with Prosser. The Henrico County Personal Property Tax for 1783 lists Martin, Gabriel, and Solomon as slaves of Thomas Prosser, Sr. Gabriel, born in 1776, was then seven years old, exactly the same age as Thomas Henry Prosser, who was born on November 5, 1776. For Prosser’s age see Charles Copland, petition, December 5, 1798, depositions Af-119, Af-121, *Richmond City Legislative Petitions, 1798–1803* (Virginia State Library). For a discussion of the stormy personal history of Prosser and Gabriel—and why Prosser was to be one of the first to die—see Philip J. Schwarz, “Gabriel’s Challenge: Slaves and Crime in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XC (July 1982), 285–86.

their own class.<sup>32</sup>

Having outlined his plan, Gabriel shouted that all who wished to join him should “stand up—and those who would not . . . set down.” One doubter asked Sam Byrd, Jr., who stood at the front, how many men he had enlisted. Like Matt Scott, Byrd had been keeping a list of conspirators, but, instead of producing it, he insisted he had a firm commitment from “five hundred” men. Doubtless Byrd was exaggerating to calm the fears of the insurgents, but there is no reason to doubt that Byrd, who could read and write, had been keeping a list of names. And as an important lieutenant, he knew all of the top men in the plot.<sup>33</sup>

As one by one the slaves rose to their feet, Gabriel's men worked their way through the crowd “and enlisted a considerable number who signed a paper [with their names or] their marks.” Then Jack Ditcher, a laborer who had been involved in the conspiracy for at least as long as Byrd had been, challenged Gabriel's leadership. Ditcher, too, was a natural leader, and, if Gabriel was an imposing figure, Jack was even more so. Four years Gabriel's senior, he stood six feet four or five inches, and his long hair was tied back in a queue. To decide who was to lead the uprising, those present decided to hold their own election. Jack, by trade a ditcher for hire, had far less prestige in the eyes of the slave community than did artisan Gabriel. Preparing to undertake a possibly suicidal venture, the slaves surely wanted Gabriel's brains over Ditcher's brawn, and “upon the votes being taken, Gabriel had by far the greater number.”<sup>34</sup>

Ditcher's challenge had introduced disharmony into the ranks of the rebels. To quell divisions within the movement that might lead the cautious to back away, Gabriel raised the doctrine of political equal-

<sup>32</sup> Confession of Ben Woolfolk, September 17, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; undated notation in James Monroe's hand, *ibid.*; confession of Young's Gilbert; unsigned letter, September 20, 1800, in *Norfolk Herald*, October 18, 1800 (second quotation); and testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Gabriel, October 6, 1800, Letterbook, Executive Communications (first, third, and fourth quotations). The decision not to kill poor white women was based upon class, not sexual, considerations and should not be seen as supporting the traditional racist fantasy of black men wishing to “divide the women among them.” For examples of the latter see Howison, *History of Virginia*, II, 391; John P. Little, *History of Richmond* (Richmond, 1933), 101; and George Morgan, *The Life of James Monroe* (rpt. ed.; New York, 1969), 228.

<sup>33</sup> Testimony of Price's John at trial of Williamson's Laddis, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first quotation); and testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Sam Byrd, Jr. (second quotation).

<sup>34</sup> *Norfolk Herald*, September 27, 1800; John Foster to James Monroe, September 9, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first quotation); William Bowler to James Monroe, September 17, 1800, *ibid.*; and testimony of Price's John at trial of Jack Ditcher, October 29, 1800 (second quotation). Although Ditcher was referred to as “Jack Bowler alias Jack Ditcher” by white contemporaries and as “Jack Bowler” by modern scholars, giving him the surname of his owner, Prosser's Ben and other slaves called him by the name that described his occupation, which presumably was his own preference.

ity. He “expected the poor white people would also join him,” for they had no more political power at present than did the slaves. Such a hope was not totally unrealistic, for Richmond-area white and black laborers often worked as closely together as skilled whites and blacks did. Virginia yeomen and planters were bound together by racial solidarity, but in the grog shops, back alleys, and blacksmith shops of the cities, where laborers of both races met, a rough form of equality was the norm. The Norfolk *Herald* reported that two white women were living with “some negroes,” presumably insurgents. Gabriel understood that his revolt was less an event than it was a process. When the fighting began, poor whites and rural slaves would be forced to choose sides. Typical of those expected to throw in against the merchants was Lucas, an unskilled white laborer who promised George Smith that he would join once the uprising was underway. There was good reason, as one horrified Federalist later wrote, to believe that Gabriel’s cadre would be joined by “the most redoubtable democrats in the state.”<sup>35</sup>

The rebel leader then made a pronouncement that left the gathering stunned and silent. “Two [white] Frenchmen had actually joined,” Gabriel told the throng. Jack Ditcher and the other leaders knew who they were, although as Gabriel was already being too incautious he did not endanger the Frenchmen’s lives by mentioning their names. Unfortunately, there is no indication as to how the Frenchmen came into contact with the rebels. Perhaps they met in a back alley tavern. More likely they met through white artisans who were members of a local Democratic-Republican society. If that was the case, such a political bond would have strengthened Gabriel’s view of the Federalist merchants as his enemies.<sup>36</sup>

If Gabriel and his men are viewed as unsophisticated religious zealots, as popular myth holds, it is easy to believe that claims of aid from two white Frenchmen, one of them knowledgeable in soldiering, was nothing but a desperate dream. But if Gabriel is understood to be a

<sup>35</sup> Testimony of Prosser’s Ben at trial of Prosser’s Gabriel (first quotation); undated notation in James Monroe’s hand; Norfolk *Herald*, October 2, 1800 (second quotation); and unsigned letter to editor, September 13, 1800, in Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800 (third quotation). For information on the interracial subculture of early national urban areas see Foner, *Tom Paine*, 48–51; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 85; and Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 260–61.

<sup>36</sup> Testimony of Prosser’s Ben at trial of Prosser’s Gabriel; and unsigned letter to editor, September 13, 1800, in Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800. Ernst, “Gabriel’s Revolt,” 37, states: “The fact that no whites, French or otherwise, were ever connected with the affair seems to shed a great deal of doubt upon the question.” Among those who agree with Ernst are Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (New York, 1971), 187; and Richard R. Beeman, *The Old Dominion and the New Nation, 1788–1801* (Lexington, 1972), 228. James Hugo Johnston accepted the slaves’ testimony at face value and supported their claims of white involvement. See Johnston, “The Participation of White Men in Virginia Negro Insurrections,” *Journal of Negro History*, XVI (April 1931), 160–61.

literate artisan whose breadth of vision was truly international and whose pragmatic decisions were based upon information drawn from the urban press, the claim is not so easily dismissed. Too many of the leaders, including those closest to Gabriel, like his brother Solomon and Sam Byrd, Jr., knew the names of the two men involved. Jack Ditcher, who had just moments before called on the slaves to follow his lead, would hardly have supported Gabriel's claim if he believed it to be a lie.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, among the leaders the careful distinction was always drawn between the two Frenchmen and the French nation, from which quarter Gabriel expected no aid. Even the Petersburg conspirators, far removed from the central planning in Richmond, understood that French aid was limited to "two white men." Only young Ben Woolfolk, a captured conspirator who became the state's principal witness, believed that the French navy "was landed at South Key." Yet Woolfolk was but a novice in the conspiracy. As a minor recruiter he was neither a member of the slave elite nor privy to the information of those who were.<sup>38</sup>

There is some evidence as to who the two men were. Gabriel told several of the leading conspirators that "a man from Caroline" County who had fought on the American side during the Revolution was to meet him at the Brook Bridge on the night of the assault and help to organize the men. Several slaves informed William Young's Gilbert that the man in question was Charles Quersey, who had lived in Caroline with Francis Corbin two years earlier. Quersey himself previously had told Gilbert, who at the time was hired out in Caroline, that "he would help them & shew them how to fight," and several conspirators now observed that Quersey and another white man were "very active" in "this late Business" in Norfolk.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, the mysterious Quersey, never having become a property owner, remains a shadowy figure in the public records. But Francis Corbin, with whom the slaves insisted he had lived, is not. The Cambridge-educated Corbin, then forty-one years old, was already turning against the Adams administration for its attacks "on the State sovereignties" when he finally broke with the Federalist

<sup>37</sup> Testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Sam Byrd, Jr.; testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Solomon, September 11, 1800, *Negro Insurrection*, Executive Papers; and Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 19, 1800.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Jones to James Monroe, September 9, 1800, *Negro Insurrection*, Executive Papers (first quotation); and confession of Ben Woolfolk (second quotation). Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 152; and Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 101, state that the conspirators confused the aid of two Frenchmen with the aid of the French navy; thus the two historians implicitly deny white involvement.

<sup>39</sup> Confession of Prosser's Solomon (first quotation); and confession of Young's Gilbert (second quotation). Quersey was the name given in oral testimony. Perhaps the spelling was Quercy, taken from the French town of the same name.

party in a fit of rage after being denied an officer's rank during the Quasi-War with France. As a convert to Republicanism, Corbin was just the type of man to take Quersey in, at least so long as the Frenchman hid his involvement with Gabriel from Corbin. County records indicate that at the time Quersey was said to have been living with Corbin, the Virginian did indeed rent a room to an unidentified adult white male.<sup>40</sup>

The second Frenchman, Alexander Beddenhurst, remains equally shadowy, yet here as well can be seen the outlines of a man far too substantial to be the figment of so many slaves' imaginations. Quersey was most likely Gabriel's contact with Beddenhurst, for although several slaves identified him as being with Quersey in Norfolk during the early part of the summer, there is more evidence that the second Frenchman was in Philadelphia by August. Beddenhurst's role was to "furnish [the rebels with guns and] all things needful." But Beddenhurst was never far from the center of intrigue, and a "correspondence was carried on [between] Philadelphia [and the] towns of Petersburg, Norfolk, &c." John Scott, the slave hireling who aided Reuben Byrd in organizing the Petersburg men, had a Philadelphia address for Beddenhurst: "the corner house of Coats' alley." Coats' Alley appears as a line, with no name given, on a contemporary city map. Therefore Scott could not have designated the street by randomly picking a name from a Philadelphia map; he must have gotten the address elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

Coats' Alley was a short, narrow street deep in the artisan section of Philadelphia and only two blocks from the wards traditionally inhabited by blacks. Its residents included a hatter, a joiner, numerous masons and smiths, and a "Sea Captain." The alley also boasted a large population of French nationals. And the corner house, the residence of Beddenhurst, which was never identified by name in any

<sup>40</sup> *Genealogies of Virginia Families: From the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (5 vols.; Baltimore, 1981), II, 346–49 (quotation); George Washington to Francis Corbin, July 24, 1798, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of George Washington* (39 vols.; Washington, 1931–1944), XXXVI, 362; and Caroline County Personal Property and Land Book, 1797 (Virginia State Library).

<sup>41</sup> *New York Spectator*, October 1, 1800 (first quotation); Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 19, 1800 (second quotation); confession of Young's Gilbert; unsigned letter to editor, September 13, 1800, in *Fredericksburg Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800 (third quotation); and Philadelphia Map, 1802 (Genealogical Research Aids Room, National Archives, Washington). The unnamed Coats' Alley touched Front Street between Vine and Market streets down near the waterfront. The street was first identified by name in *Gopsill's Philadelphia City and Business Directory for 1868–1869* (Philadelphia, 1868). Beddenhurst may have arrived during the American Revolution as part of the German-speaking fourth regiment in Count Rochambeau's corps. If this was the case, he was probably not French but might be described so by slaves who understood that he had fought with the French. On makeup of the regiment see Arnold Whitridge, *Rochambeau* (New York and London, 1965), 78–79. My thanks to William Stinchcombe for suggesting this possibility to me.



Virginia document, was "The French Boarding-House," owned and operated by John Boulanger.<sup>42</sup>

The slave rebels decided at the August 10 meeting that Saturday, August 30, would be the night of the assault. Acting in concert with the Richmond group, nearly 150 slaves, "mulattoes," and "some [lower class] whites" from Suffolk and Norfolk gathered at Whitlock's mill outside of Norfolk and waited for word from Richmond. But just as all was in readiness, nature took a hand in the affair. The skies opened and a torrential rain poured down on the Richmond area, washing away bridges and cutting communications between Brookfield and the city. Slaves were seen "going [away] from the town," whereas it was normal to see rural slaves entering Richmond on Saturday night, but they were unable to reach the Brook Bridge. Even if Quersey was as good as his word, he could have made no progress coming from Caroline. In desperation, Gabriel and his wife Nanny passed the word as best they could for his followers "to meet at the tobacco house of Mr. Prosser the ensuing night."<sup>43</sup>

What Gabriel did not know was that the plot had already been revealed. Two slaves named Pharaoh and Tom, belonging to Prosser's neighbor Mosby Sheppard, had informed their owner that Gabriel was to lead an uprising that very night. Pharaoh, long a slave on the Sheppard farm, perhaps saw the information as the safest route to his own freedom. Sheppard spread the alarm to his neighbors and then galloped to town to inform Monroe. Almost simultaneously a Petersburg slave informed his owner, Benjamin Harrison, "that the slaves, free negroes & Mulattoes did intend to rise" and that "two white men," whom he named, "were concerned."<sup>44</sup>

The Virginia authorities were in a state of absolute terror. Rich-

<sup>42</sup> Gary B. Nash, "Forging Freedom: The Emancipation Experience in the Northern Seaport Cities, 1775-1820," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1983), 40; and Philadelphia City Directory, 1795, pp. 27, 35 (first quotation), 74 (second quotation) (City Archives, Philadelphia City Hall Annex). I am grateful to Billy G. Smith and Tom Gentry for their aid on this point.

<sup>43</sup> Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 10, 1800 (first quotation); James Monroe to General Assembly, December 5, 1800, Letterbook, Executive Communications (second quotation); James Callender to Thomas Jefferson, September 13, 1800, Jefferson Papers; Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, November 3, 1800; testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Owens's Michael, September 11, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; and testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel (third quotation).

<sup>44</sup> Mosby Sheppard to James Monroe, August 30, 1800, in *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1801), 26; testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Frank, September 12, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; Joseph Jones to James Monroe, September 9, 1800 (quotation); and Henrico County Personal Property Tax, 1782, 1799 (Virginia State Library). Pharaoh and Tom were in fact emancipated by the state for revealing their secret; as an act of fealty they adopted the surname Sheppard. See Household, 1794-1812, p. 39, Account Book, Box 668, Mosby Sheppard Papers (Henrico County Human Services Office).

mond resembled a city besieged. Militia companies were posted at the penitentiary and the capitol, and patrols swept the outskirts of the city and arrested any slave suspected of taking part in the conspiracy. Governor Monroe established a special board of inquiry composed of two magistrates, Miles Selden and Gervas Storrs, and the Henrico County court of oyer and terminer—a Virginia tribunal reserved for slave crime—was convened “without delay.” James Rind was assigned by the commonwealth to represent those taken into custody.<sup>45</sup>

At first the mounted units scoured only the area just outside of town near Prosser’s home. Then came the break the magistrates needed. Ben Woolfolk, who had been seized outside of Richmond, determined to save his own life by turning informer and witness. He told Selden and Storrs that he “would make some important discoveries” if he was promised pardon for his crimes. But the details of the plot, he admitted, were made known to the slaves “according to their rank,” and he, “being only in his novitiate . . . knew very little of the extent of [the] conspiracy.” He did, however, implicate Gabriel as the leader, and Woolfolk provided the names of a number of Richmond slaves that he had seen on Byrd’s list. For the first time it was clear that town blacks were involved; on September 19 “a number of them were surprised and taken into custody.”<sup>46</sup>

The Henrico Court, however, also received other information of a very different and unwelcome kind. The magistrates and justices, themselves old revolutionaries, found much of the testimony disquieting. Too many of the slaves, reported observer John Randolph, displayed a proud “sense of their [natural] rights, [and] a contempt of danger.”<sup>47</sup> One insurgent, speaking at his trial, made the political and revolutionary nature of the conspiracy all too evident. “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,” he said defiantly. “I have adventured my life in endeavouring to obtain the liberty of my

<sup>45</sup> William Mosby to James Monroe, November 10, 1800, in *Journal of the Senate*, 26; Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800; and unsigned letter to editor, September 20, 1800, in *Norfolk Herald*, October 18, 1800 (quotation). On the 1692 creation of the courts of oyer and terminer see Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Law of Virginia, 1705–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Unsigned letter to editor, September 20, 1800, in *Norfolk Herald*, October 18, 1800 (first, second, and fourth quotations); and Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, November 3, 1800 (third quotation).

<sup>47</sup> John Randolph to Joseph H. Nicholson, September 26, 1800, Vol. I, Joseph H. Nicholson Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). For a similar assessment see [George Tucker], *Letter to a Member of the General Assembly of Virginia, on the Subject of the Late Conspiracy of the Slaves with a Proposal for Their Colonization* (2d ed.; Richmond, 1801). Prior to the American Revolution, the author insisted, the slaves “fought [for] freedom merely as a good, now they also claim it as a right” (pp. 6–7).

countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause."<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, white authorities in other Virginia towns conducted their own trials and investigations. It became increasingly clear to all how widespread the conspiracy was. Petersburg slaves and free blacks, including the Byrds, were swept up, and Suffolk leaders examined both blacks and poor whites, although the latter "equivocate[d] and depart[ed] from the truth" when asked about their knowledge of the conspiracy. John Scott too was captured in Petersburg as he tried to board the Norfolk stagecoach. Found "in his pocket" was Beddenhurst's name and Philadelphia address.<sup>49</sup>

Scott's evidence, with its enormous implications, was a threat to the Republican ascendancy. Woolfolk had already stated his belief that the French navy was to sail to the rebels' aid, a claim the governor had dismissed. Now he was confronted with hard evidence of French involvement. Selden and Storrs, the examining magistrates on the special board of inquiry, took the slaves' depositions before the brief, perfunctory appearance in the court of oyer and terminer (where Selden sat as well). From their judicial posts the magistrates could contain the most damaging information. The two magistrates were good and true Republicans, and Storrs and Selden's brother Joseph were members of the six-man party committee that named the state electoral ticket. Monroe knew that the implications for the Republican party of French involvement in the plot would be minimized by these faithful party members. Unhappily, however, a Richmond slaveholder, displeased with the plot's having been hushed up due to a fear of alarm, was a spectator at the trials. As a proslavery ideologue, he was determined "that the origin of this great evil should be known." And he had heard of the Beddenhurst letter.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Robert Sutcliff, *Travels in Some Parts of North America, in the Years 1804, 1805, & 1806* (Philadelphia, 1812), 50 (quotation). Some scholars believe that Sutcliff was describing the trial of slaves executed in an 1804 conspiracy, a plot for which there is no evidence in the Virginia State Library. Evidently the term "lately" used here by Sutcliff means "in recent years." Moreover, internal evidence points to the trial he was discussing being in 1800. Sutcliff clearly alludes to slaves tried in Richmond but hanged in "a field" north of the city. Several conspirators, including George Smith and Prosser's Tom, were tried in Richmond but hanged outside of town near Prosser's tavern. During the Easter 1802 slave conspiracy no slaves were hanged either in or north of Richmond. See Douglas R. Egerton, "After Gabriel: The Easter Conspiracy of 1802," paper presented at the 1988 meeting of the Southern Historical Association in Norfolk, Virginia. This quotation was given to Sutcliff by a lawyer present at the slave trials in Richmond, and while it is secondhand, it corresponds in tone both to the nature of Gabriel's demands and to the views of Randolph and Tucker.

<sup>49</sup> William Prentiss to James Monroe, September 6, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 10, 1800 (first quotation); and unsigned letter to editor, September 13, 1800, in Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800 (second quotation).

<sup>50</sup> Confession of Ben Woolfolk; Richmond *Virginia Argus*, September 12, 1800; Henrico County Court, Order Book, September-December 1800; Horace E. Hayden, *Virginia Genealogies* . . . (Baltimore, 1966), 738; and unsigned letter, September 13, 1800, in Frede-

Evidence pointing to the involvement of two Frenchmen was growing in proportion to the number of leaders captured. Gabriel was still at large, but his brother Solomon had been taken, as had Sam Byrd, Jr. It had been important for these men to keep lists of the names of those they had recruited. Trial testimony indicated that Solomon, Byrd, Gabriel, John Scott, and Matt Scott all kept lists, as did Jacob, the black skipper who served as courier between the towns. There is no evidence that Ditcher, who probably could not read, kept a list, although he knew the names of the two Frenchmen. One white court observer told the Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald* that correspondence from Philadelphia, Norfolk, and Petersburg had been captured.<sup>51</sup>

All of these documents were rushed not to the Henrico County Court but to the governor, from whose office most of them disappeared. For those who wanted access to the information contained in the documents, Monroe's behavior was annoying. Mayor James McClurg of Richmond, a staunch Federalist, complained of being kept uninformed, and he badgered Monroe to aid the Petersburg authorities by sending them "the Information" he had received. William Prentis, a former mayor of Petersburg, heard that Monroe had "a list of a number" of conspirators and wrote to him in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a copy.<sup>52</sup>

On the surface, it was madness for the conspiracy leaders not to have destroyed their lists before being taken. But Gabriel remained free, and as late as September 20 some slaves hoped that the revolt would still take place, at which time records of the names and locations of the rebels would be necessary. One insurgent wrote to Jacob's contact in Gloucester and warned him to "keep still yet." Gabriel would come soon "and then you may [k]no[w] more about the bissiness." Such hopes kept the black captain from destroying his lists, which were eventually captured with him in Norfolk and forwarded to Monroe. "I presume," William Prentis hotly observed, "an enquiry into them would avail nothing, otherwise you would have sent them here."<sup>53</sup>

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ricksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800 (quotation). Although this anonymous source was a Federalist, his real interest was not in partisan politics but in preserving slavery. He thought "it a matter of great moment, that the origin of this evil should be known," and he had been able "by much industry, to collect [information] from the most authentic sources."

<sup>51</sup> Testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Solomon; testimony of Ben Woolfolk at trial of Sam Byrd, Jr; and Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 19, 1800.

<sup>52</sup> [Richmond mayor] James McClurg to James Monroe, n.d. (first quotation); and William Prentis to James Monroe, September 6, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (second quotation).

<sup>53</sup> A. W. to B. H., September 20, 1800, September-December 1800, Executive Papers (first quotation); and William Prentis to James Monroe, n.d. (second quotation). The letter from A. W. to B. H. is the only extant letter written by a conspirator. Although the writer

Despite efforts by Monroe and the two magistrates to suppress evidence, information concerning the two Frenchmen began to leak out. William Young's Gilbert actually named Quersey on September 23, and the pesky Prentis accused the two magistrates of interrupting the confession of a condemned slave. About the same time John Mayo, a white man from Richmond who was not involved in the legal proceedings, took it upon himself to ask several slaves just before they were hanged about the rumor of white involvement. Warned not to "die with a lie in his mouth," Judith Owens's Michael admitted that "there was a white man more concerned [than] them." When asked for a name Michael "collected himself" and went to his death silently.<sup>54</sup>

Late in the month Gabriel was captured in Norfolk, where he had been taken on a boat by Richardson Taylor, a white skipper. Billy, a slave of Miles King who had known Gabriel in Richmond, observed him standing on the docks and turned him in for the reward. The unrepentant Gabriel told his captors that he had "learnt more" about the Norfolk end of the conspiracy "than he was acquainted with before," although he would say no more at that time. A white man from Fredericksburg, however, reported that Gabriel had "letters in his possession from white people."<sup>55</sup>

As Gabriel was being brought back to Richmond in chains, the governor was planning for the complete isolation of the prisoner. Like all of the conspirators, Gabriel was to be placed in solitary confinement, and Monroe gave strict orders that the guard should hold "no conversation with him on any subject or permit any other person to do so." The penitentiary keeper was also instructed to dismiss the "extra guard" and to allow no whites to speak to him "without order from the Governor."<sup>56</sup>

The governor was unable to keep Gabriel from speaking to his captors on his way to Richmond from Norfolk. While the black artisan admitted that "he was to have had the chief command," he insisted that there were four other persons as deeply "concerned in the busi-

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A. W. probably did not know where Gabriel was hiding, A. W. was literate and could read in the newspapers that Gabriel had not been arrested. Since all of the other leaders save Ditcher had been captured, Gabriel doubtless was the "brother X" referred to in the letter who was still at large.

<sup>54</sup> William Prentis to James Monroe, September 24, 1800; confession of Young's Gilbert; and John Mayo to Samuel Pleasants, September 24, 1800, in Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 3, 1800 (quotation).

<sup>55</sup> John Moss to James Monroe, September 28, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers; Richmond *Virginia Argus*, September 30, 1800 (first two quotations); and Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, October 3, 1800 (third quotation).

<sup>56</sup> James Monroe to council, September 28, 1800, Negro Insurrection, Executive Papers (first quotation); [Councilman] A. Blair to Keeper of Penitentiary, September 28, 1800, in H. W. Flournoy, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts* (11 vols.; New York, 1968; reprint of 1875-1893 edition), IX, 156 (second quotation).

ness" as he was. Gabriel said he could "mention several in Norfolk—but being conscious of meeting with the fate of those before him he should make no confession." Of the slaves, only Jack Ditcher and Sam Byrd, Jr., were as deeply involved. The other two—those in Norfolk—had to be Quersey and Beddenhurst.<sup>57</sup>

The last leader of the conspiracy who remained at large was Jack Ditcher, who, according to Prosser's Ben, knew the names of the two Frenchmen. Ditcher finally surrendered to Gervas Storrs, and if he confessed, testified against other slaves, or named the Frenchmen—none of which is likely, given Ditcher's stoic character—there is now no evidence of it.<sup>58</sup>

Given the political leanings of the Virginia townfolk, it was not surprising that terrified Federalists did their best to turn the conspiracy into a partisan issue. What was surprising was that the subsequent debate remained largely ideological. Conservatives from Fredericksburg and Norfolk insisted, quite correctly, that the Republican cry of "Liberty and Equality has been infused into the minds of the negroes." It was the "friends of the blacks . . . in Pennsylvania and Baltimore," one Federalist bleated at Monroe, "who are exciting our negroes to cut our throats."<sup>59</sup>

The self-evident hypocrisy of the Virginia Republicans also attracted the full fire of the embattled New England Federalists, who hoped the threat of revolt would bring the southerners to their senses. "If any thing will correct & bring to repentance old hardened sinners in Jacobinism," prayed the *Boston Gazette*, "it must be an *insurrection of their slaves*." More creative Federalists even charged that the revolt had been planned "by the noted Callender in prison" with the aid of "an United Irish pretended Methodist preacher."<sup>60</sup>

To this the busy Callender returned fire. Writing from his cell, Callender insisted that only one man in the nation was evil enough to conceive of "such a project," and that man was "Alexander Hamilton." Yet the truly dangerous charges, at least to James Monroe, were not theoretical but were the persistent rumors of French involvement. The conspiracy was "quite a domestic one," Monroe assured John Drayton, the lieutenant governor of a terrified South Carolina. "If

<sup>57</sup> Richmond *Virginia Argus*, September 30, 1800 (first quotation); and Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, October 3, 1800 (second quotation).

<sup>58</sup> Norfolk *Herald*, October 18, 1800; testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Prosser's Gabriel; and Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, October 14, 1800.

<sup>59</sup> Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 19, 1800 (first quotation); and A Private Citizen to James Monroe, December 10, 1800, in Norfolk *Herald*, December 18, 1800 (second and third quotations).

<sup>60</sup> Boston *Gazette*, October 9, 1800 (first quotation), October 23, 1800; and Philadelphia *Gazette*, September 25, 1800, in Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 3, 1800 (second quotation).

white men were engaged in it, it is a fact of which we have no proof.”<sup>61</sup>

In fact, Monroe had plenty of proof. Late in September some of the facts about Quersey and Beddenhurst were finally printed, but for Federalist electoral hopes it was too little too late. Picking up the Virginia rumors, a Boston newspaper, *Russell's Gazette*, reported that “two Frenchmen” were involved in the conspiracy and that “a correspondence was kept up between those villains and some others in Philadelphia, Norfolk, [and] Petersburg.” Even this small leak gave pause to Virginia Republicans. “Our federalists have endeavored to make an electioneering engine of it,” complained John Randolph.<sup>62</sup>

In a very real sense, however, Monroe was right: there was no longer any proof. All that remained was the nearly unanimous testimony of the conspirators that two Frenchmen were involved. Any corroborating and specific testimony or hard evidence—such as the lists kept by the leaders or the correspondence captured with Scott, Gabriel, and the black captain—all of which was sent directly to Monroe, was never turned over to the court, and was not included in the pertinent records he relinquished upon leaving office. Yet men from three cities—Richmond mayor James McClurg, William Prentiss of Petersburg, and the anonymous Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald* source—insisted that such documents had been seized and were in the possession of the governor. The Fredericksburg informant, who had been allowed to hear testimony before the political dangers of the conspiracy became clear, gave the newspaper the most corroborative evidence of all, which remained unmentioned in the extant trial testimony: a Philadelphia street address not on contemporary maps. Neither John Scott nor the anonymous informant ever mentioned that the corner house in Coats' Alley in Philadelphia was named “The French Boarding-House”—a coincidence of truly Dickensian proportion. Already perceived to be soft on France, Monroe's party was even then facing charges that Jefferson—who himself was kept quite in the dark about “the excitements”—would call upon France to “invade the country” to aid in a planned civil war. Evidence that two Frenchmen, even acting strictly on their own, were involved in another kind of civil war would have devastated the Republicans in their southern

<sup>61</sup> James T. Callender to Samuel Pleasants, October 1, 1800, in Richmond *Virginia Argus*, October 3, 1800 (first quotation); James Monroe to [S. C. Lt. Gov.] John Drayton, October 21, 1800, in Stanislaus M. Hamilton, ed., *Writings of James Monroe* (7 vols.; New York, 1898–1903), III, 217 (second quotation).

<sup>62</sup> Unsigned letter, September 13, 1800, in Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, September 23, 1800; Boston *Russell's Gazette*, September 29, 1800 (first quotation); and John Randolph to Joseph Nicholson, September 26, 1800, Vol. I, Nicholson Papers (second quotation). Beeman, *Old Dominion*, 228 and note 22, believes that “neither party attempted to make political capital of” the alleged French involvement.

political base.<sup>63</sup>

Gabriel had hoped to use this situation to the advantage of not just himself and his followers, but also, as he said, “for his Country.” His conception of the “revolution of 1800” went far beyond anything that even white artisans dreamed; indeed, his vision of political change was to the Republican leadership the world turned upside down. If Gabriel had intended to treat hostage Monroe with leniency, such magnanimity was not returned, especially from Republicans who were startled to discover that their slaves believed they had a common enemy in the merchants. And so in the end Joseph Selden congratulated himself on the victory of his party over “the Adamsites & British subjects,” while Gabriel and Solomon and Martin and twenty-four of their followers went to their deaths.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, November 8, 1800, Series I, James Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress) (first quotation); and Charles O. Lerche, Jr., “Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study of the Political Smear,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., V (January 1948), 480 (second quotation). Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 44n78, argues that the “alleged implication of two Frenchmen in the Gabriel Plot [was used] to embarrass the Republicans in the political campaign of 1800.” The fact, however, that the Federalists would have used this information had it been more widely known hardly makes it false in itself.

<sup>64</sup> Testimony of Price’s John at trial of Young’s Gilbert; and Joseph Selden to Wilson C. Nicholas, January 1, 1801, William B. Randolph Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress) (second quotation). Unfortunately, the trial records for several Virginia counties are incomplete, and so it will probably never be known precisely how many blacks were tried for complicity in the plot. Regardless of where they were tried, however, if they were executed a record was retained in Richmond, so it is possible to ascertain with some certainty the number hanged. Yet estimates of blacks executed range from a low of three in Julia C. Pollard, *Richmond’s Story* (Richmond, 1954), 75–76, to a high of forty-five in Halasz, *Rattling Chains*, 96. By cross-matching the death certificates and payments to owners in the file Auditor’s Item 153, Box 2, Condemned Slaves 1800, with the material in Condemned Slaves 1800–1801, Executed, Gabriel’s Insurrection; Condemned Slaves 1801, Transported; and Pardons, September–December 1800, Executive Papers (all in the Virginia State Library), the number who died appears to be twenty-seven. This figure includes William Wilson’s Jacob, the black skipper, who hanged himself while in custody. See *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1801), 42. The figure would surely have been higher had it not been for the advice of Jefferson, who cautioned Monroe that “there has been hanging enough.” Jack Ditcher was among the nine slaves sold to the lower South after Monroe received Jefferson’s letter. See Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, September 20, 1800, Jefferson Papers, and List of Slaves Reprieved for Transportation, March 8, 1806, Executive Papers, for the fate of Ditcher. My thanks to Philip J. Schwarz for the latter citation.