

---

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: HOW THE PRESS CREATED FEAR TO JUSTIFY  
ANTI-BLACK LEGISLATION (1739-1898)

by

TAMMY BLUE

An Honors Thesis  
submitted to the English Department at the University of Alabama at Birmingham  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
departmental undergraduate honors program in English

Birmingham, Alabama  
Approved by Thesis Committee: April 24, 2018

We, the undersigned members of the Thesis Committee of Tammy Blue, approve and accept the following document as her thesis for completion of the departmental honors program in English.

---

Dr. Jesse Dunbar, Assistant Professor	Faculty Mentor	Date
---------------------------------------	----------------	------

---

Dr. Gale Temple, Associate Professor	Faculty Reader	Date
--------------------------------------	----------------	------

---

Adam Vines, Assistant Professor	Director of English Honors	Date
---------------------------------	----------------------------	------

## Acknowledgements

**Dr. Jessie Dunbar**, my advisor & mentor – Thank you for believing in me and my passion for this project.

**Dr. Gale Temple / Professor Adam Vines** – Thank you for being such an amazing and supportive Honors Committee.

**Teresa Davis**, my lifeline – Without you this thesis would have never been written. Thanks for “the talk” and for all your guidance, encouragement and laughs.

**Jessica Robbins**, my everything friend – I would not survive without you.

**Christal Baty Shew / Ashley Phillips**, my “ears” and dear friends – I seriously love you both, thank you for everything.

Special Thanks to – **Dr. Colin J. Davis, Dr. Chris Minnix and Dr. DeReef Jamison**

**University Writing Center** - It is an honor to work with such talented, caring, and open-minded people. And thank you, **Dr. Jaci Wells**, for being beyond amazing in every way.

**Family & Friends** – Thanks for all your support during the ups and downs of this crazy academic world.

**Shelly Blue**, my sister - For teaching me to never be afraid to turn the page of life.

*For my beloved Murphy*

## List of Figures

*Image 1 - The News and Observer, circa 1898, Cartoonist Norman Jennett penned caricatures of blacks.....25*

*Image 2 - The News and Observer, circa 1898, Destruction of The Daily Record of Wilmington (N.C. Office of Archives & History.....27*

## I. Introduction

*“The newspaper press of the United States is, for good or evil, the most powerful influence that acts on the public mind.”<sup>1</sup>*

The nineteenth century press framed slave resistance in such a way as to create a racialized panic, with a call for action that was bolstered by theories of white mortality. Whether consciously or not, elitist editors and white slave owners exacerbated or diminished the threat of slave revolt as a means to maintain power. While the broader implications of these revolts have been the subject of many historical discussions, they have not done so, as historian Brian Gabriel has rightly observed “with newspapers or discourse as primary objects of study...over time this unique media discourse of racial fear...perpetuated an idea of blacks as...deserving of enslavement, and left for future generations an unfortunate racist legacy” (Gabrial 339). And while there has been considerable research on the subject of press’s influence – a connection between periodical literature and its impact on fear of slave literacy and insurrections has yet to be made. It is for that reason, I will specifically argue how the press in the 1700-1800s created a whirlwind of fear in order to justify anti-black legislation.

In order to establish the instrumental way in which the press is utilized in the connection between fear and anti-black legislation, this thesis will examine both the largely accepted historical accounts of three revolts and the media’s role in each. To begin, I provide a brief historical context of the press during this time period and show how white fears of black violence gained prominence in newspapers, which in turn created a “discourse of racial panic” (Gabrial 338).

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Everett, (qtd. in Gabriel 58).

Utilizing Williams and Dickenson's study, *Fear of Crime...The Relationship between Crime Reporting and Fear of Crime* (FOC), I will provide further evidence that fear is often provoked by news reportage, then apply Dickenson's theory to three revolts: The Stono Rebellion of 1739, Nat Turner's Revolt in 1831, and The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898. I will also underscore the connections between the fear created by the press and the impact that periodical literature had on anti-black legislation.

The next section will demonstrate how the press's dramatic underplaying of the Stono Rebellion was meant to allay any worries that slaves could overcome whites, despite any speculation about the attack. Whether the minimalist approach in newspaper reportage of the event was circumstantial or intentional, the desired effect to create fear was achieved. Mark Smith's *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, presents a collection of documents related to the event, including eye-witness accounts – which were the primary source material for southern slave-holding whites when newspaper coverage was sparse. This examination will show how fear could be created through the lack of information from the press, leaving much to speculation and rumor. And when it was discovered that the rebellion leader was a literate slave, fear was created by a (potentially deliberate) absence of facts, was the motivation behind the justification of The Negro Act of 1740, an anti-black literacy law.

Next I turn my attention to the Nat Turner Revolt, which I argue that, unlike The Stono Rebellion, the press intensified the incident – having described Turner and his men in the most extreme, violent and horrific terms, reminiscent of the hauntingly familiar Haitian Revolt (Gabrial 44). Reportage on Nat Turner deliberately attempted to evoke those old fears, as well as continued to insist that black literacy was a threat to white

social order. A closer look at this reportage, including a close analysis of the *Raleigh Register*, draws direct links between the portrayal of blacks as monsters to be feared, and shows how quickly that fear manifested into stricter enforcement of the existing fugitive slave laws, as well as playing a significant role in expediting the necessity of an American Civil War.

Finally, I provide a critical explanation of the press's involvement in the Wilmington Race Riot. I will explore ways in which white elitists seized an opportunity to spotlight a black editorial from *The Daily Record* into justification for calling whites to action against the local black businessmen and politicians. The press used its influence to chip away at the apparent harmoniously integrated community in the post Antebellum South, until whites could justify shattering the line violently. This resulted in the development of the Ku Klux Klan, and set the stage for Jim Crow laws which stifled black mobility and prosperity.

While I am deeply invested in demonstrating the press's ability to create and manipulate fear and the racist legislation that is justified as a result - the more significant argument of this thesis is to show how the press's fearmongering has, and continues to influence white opinions of blacks to present day.

## II. Press

It is important to keep in mind that the logistics of newspaper distribution were limited at best. Weeks, and sometimes months, would go by before an edition would arrive to smaller areas or cities, sometimes delivered by ship or horseback. In *The Press and Slavery in America*, Gabriel states that rumor and speculation ran rampant in the pages, citing sources was rare, and editors often printed stories to serve their political sensibilities and allegiances (18). To add to the already biased perspective of newspapers, most of the information shared with the public originated as correspondence from affected areas; these reports were simply copied and redistributed when they finally arrived, without fact checking. This type of repetition, which often portrayed slaves negatively, helped cement the country's negative feelings towards blacks and helped to fortify justifications for human rights violations against African-Americans. An article in *Boston Evening Transcript*, captured the very spirit of what whites feared the most – slave revolt: “Nothing can exceed the savage atrocity of the negroes, in the execution of their purposes” (Gabrial 338).

With this pre-disposition about blacks firmly in place, the real motivation behind the method of press reportage of insurrections becomes evident; these events required swift and severe action, and it was the duty of the press to issue the call. Although content appeared often weeks after the revolts had already occurred, it still carried inflections of panic that encouraged readers that something still needed to be done. Indeed white audiences encountering such information, may have believed an authoritative response was required (Gabrial 336). One example from the *New York*

*Herald* implies an inherent danger in permitting black people enough autonomy to plan an insurrection, let alone carry it out:

The whole history of negro insurrection proves that there is no race of men so brutal and bloody-minded as the negro...The negro, once roused to bloodshed, and in possession of arms, is as uncontrollable and irrational as a wild beast. (qtd. in Gabriel 361)

In addition to the revisionist strategizing that portrays black bondsmen and women revolting against violence of slavery as more “brutal” than slavers, overseers, and slaveholders, this excerpt plants fear in the minds of white readers. It was the same fear that would drive citizen’s support of policy-makers and law enforcement who assured them that they would diminish threats by any means necessary. The press would continually do this – implicate blacks for white fears, but then pay no regard to the horrors of slavery that were at the core of this fear of retaliation. This was the way in which the “dominant white class” used the press to capitalize their agenda – creating fear.

### III. Fear

*“Is it not strange how often the [threat] of a ‘negro uprising’ or a ‘Negro riot’ is conjured up by heated imaginations and published throughout the Union as an imminent danger to the white race?” (Fredrickson 286)*

The article, *Fear of Crime: Read All About It*, by Williams and Dickenson studies the relationship between newspaper reporting of crime and fear of crime (FOC). *Fear of Crime* defines fear as: “an emotional reaction characterized by a sense of danger and anxiety...produced by the threat of physical harm...elicited by perceived cues in the environment that relate to some aspect of crime” (34). As previously mentioned, the press presented slave uprisings and blacks as a major threat to white safety. And since the reportage would also explain that authorities would need to step in to keep everyone safe, by the very definition, it created fear among whites. Interestingly, the study also suggests that “Fear of crime is very much a matter of vulnerability...not of *being* vulnerable but of *feeling* vulnerable” (35). For this time period, it played into the press’s plot perfectly – to be ambiguous in order to make the impression that whites were in danger, but yet authoritative action would keep them safe, essentially solving a problem that didn’t even exist.

Periodicals constantly constructed fear in this manner but “[those] fears were exaggerated far beyond the proportions of the danger and were in part a response to more complicated anxieties” (Jordan 114). And due to periodicals strongly suggesting that whites should fear blacks – they did. Whites truly believed that Negro insurrection threatened “their lives, liberties, properties, and every other human blessing” (Jordan 114). Gabriel writes, “In each news account the black rebel is always an immediate threat to the white-controlled slave system and is transformed into an objectified thing that must

be stopped and destroyed” (17). The press reportage often aimed to make whites afraid that the intention of blacks was to annihilate the entire white race, when in reality they only wanted their freedom.

The Williams and Dickinson study goes on to say, that while there are many sources of fear of crime, (victim, environment, and physical vulnerability), most people have not been a victim or witness themselves. This strongly supports the notion that perception of crime is largely due to indirect sources, specifically newspapers and media (36). Applying this logic to the rebellions explored in this paper, fear was created in cases when there was actually very little or no threat of whites becoming a victim to slave violence.

Dennis Rome takes this idea a step further in his book, *Black Demons*, when he argues that under such a “theoretical view,” people will essentially create the reality and world they believe exists, based on the knowledge they receive; for example – what they read in newspapers becomes part of an arsenal of indisputable facts rather than a perspective on complex, multi-faceted issues. The most problematic and frightening aspect of these limited worldviews is that “People then act in accordance with their constructed view of reality” (Rome 3). Based on the press’s instigation into individual interpretation of the Stono and Nat Turner Rebellions, and the Wilmington Race Riot, the reality that was constructed – was to be very, very afraid of slaves and blacks.

The subject of race and media has generated more scholarly and journalistic writing, and more public outrage and concern, than most (Entman and Rojecki xi). However, Williams and Dickinson urge scholars to fulfill the “need for further research to pin down more precisely what it is about newspaper reports that is influential and to

measure the impact that those features have upon the reader” (51). Through my examination of slave rebellions, my intervention into Williams’ and Dickenson’s discourse on race and the press is to suggest that the impact of racist reporting created fear and panic, which in turn had a monumental impact on African-American lives.

This project emphasizes a progression of increased media intervention into the public opinion and state policy that varies directly with a devolution of white collective reactions to slave insurrections. More specifically, the Stono Rebellion of 1739 demonstrates a minimalistic press approach that results in creating a fear of slave literacy among whites with damaging legislative decisions. Whereas the reportage of Nat Turner’s Revolt will be exaggerated and leave lingering feelings of fear of blacks among whites. And finally, the thesis will present the way the press’s unique involvement in the Wilmington Race Riot successfully calls to action a violent white mob, hell bent on the destruction of black equality.

## IV. Stono Rebellion (1739)

*“Constant vigilance [is] the price of continued Mastery”<sup>2</sup>*

On September 9, 1739, just twenty miles southwest from Charleston, South Carolina, twenty armed slaves fought their way to freedom along the Stono River in what was one of the earliest organized acts against slavery in the Americas (Black Past). In just hours, planters on horseback caught up with the group which then had grown to 60-100 slaves (Form3). Twenty whites, and forty slaves were killed before the uprising was stopped, making the attack unprecedented in “rocking the colony to its core” (Rasmussen 125). This section of the thesis examines both the press’s unwitting role in the timing of the insurrection, and the great efforts that were taken to downplay and erase the incident from recorded history. It will also explain how in the absence of reportage, eye-witness accounts became the way information was spread, which resulted in the uprising bringing about legislation with important implications for black literacy (Rasmussen 125).

The press’s initial ignorance of their role in the planning of the rebellion was the main reason for historical erasures of the revolt. While the details for what would arguably become the most well-planned insurrection in history were already underway, it has been argued by some historians that it all came into place when a literate slave “snatched glances” at a newspaper and received valuable information (Smith 528). The leader of the Stono Rebellion was Cato Perkins;<sup>3</sup> an Angolan priest and educated slave, originally from the Kongo Empire in Central Africa (Fold3). In *Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion*, Mark Smith reveals that despite their

---

<sup>2</sup> Governor Alexander Spotswood at the Virginia Assembly. (Jordan 111).

<sup>3</sup> Historians have used several names to refer to the leader of the rebellion: Cato Perkins, Jemmy, and Jeremy. The Stono Rebellion itself was also referred to as: Cato’s Conspiracy or Cato’s Rebellion (Fold3).

disagreements on the motivation<sup>4</sup> behind the timing of the revolt “virtually all historians agree on [the] literacy of Cato” (528). “Cato [who] was [taught] how to read and write by his rich master” (Smith 519) fomented attacks on slave literacy. In addition to reading the local paper to determine the most timely moment to initiate the attack, Cato also wrote passes for bondsmen to escape to freedom without any interference, because [he] was a “Negro who spoke excellent English” (Smith 528).

On August 18, 1739, (twenty-two days before the rebellion), the *Gazette* published a notice about the Security Act; a law which required all white men to carry firearms to church on Sunday or submit to a stiff fine, beginning on September 29 (Smith 519). While there were several other factors motivating the slaves’ desire to act quickly, it is hard to ignore the connection between this notice in the press and the action of Cato and his followers. Experts have speculated that “a literate slave involved in the rebellion read of the Act on, or shortly after, August 18” (Smith 519). Thanks to the press’s notice, and their arrogant underestimation of slave literacy, Cato and the other slaves may have realized that if they did not act to seek their freedom before September 29, they might not get another chance.

At first glance, the downplayed response of the press in relation to Stono seems uncharacteristic of what we have come to expect of reportage of slave rebellions. I reiterate however, this was due in large part to appear to have control, despite their lack of knowledge of intelligent slaves’ ability to use the press to their advantage. Historian Brian Gabriel explains, “Maintaining perceptions that the master class controlled the

---

<sup>4</sup> Several factors may have convinced the slaves that a rebellion might successfully lead to freedom. A yellow fever epidemic had weakened the power of slaveholders, there was talk of a war between Britain and Spain, and accounts of slaves who had obtained their freedom by escaping to Spanish-controlled Florida gave the Carolinian slaves hope. (Fold3).

slaves was vital, and controlling the Southern press during a slave crisis, by advocating its silence, helped lessen the threat's power, impressing upon both literate blacks and whites that the situation was under control" (342). Keeping in mind this was one of the first and most formidable uprisings in history, lack of press coverage meant almost no documentation. It would be up to historians such as Peter H. Wood, to analyze any recorded information on the revolt. "Only one eyewitness account is extant, supplemented by several secondhand reports" (Smith 75). And while this evidence has been corroborated, most of these accounts portray the harsh punishment dealt out to the insurgents by white slave-owners. General James Oglethorpe reported that "one slave was shot in the face by his 'Master,' and when the 'villains' attempted to go home, the [white masters] cut off their heads and set them up at every Mile Post they came to" (Smith 8). I contend the press neglected to print any of these facts in order to ensure the slaves would garner no sympathy. And while the press's silence portrayed the situation as being under control, the elite master class could successfully shift focus onto the real issue – slave literacy.

### **An Act for Better Ordering**

Any fear of slave insurrection after Stono quickly shifted to slave literacy as the cause, which was evident in legislation's next move. "Even as South Carolina officials punished the rebels, they thought about how best to prevent a repeat of the Stono revolt. They settled on a legislative, legal solution" (Smith, 20). The Stono Revolt would prompt a small, but important statute which prohibited slaves learning to read and write – it was called, The 1740 South Carolina Negro Act. It was an amendment to existing slave codes,

under the “Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves”

(Smith, 20). It states:

XLV. And whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

This provision, as well as twenty-six others, were precisely indexed to the events and contours of the revolt, which suggests the intensity of white South Carolina’s fear of slave literacy following Stono (Smith 20). Interestingly though, this law directly targeted those to blame for slave literacy in the first place – white slave-owners. The common practices of teaching slave children to read and write and of using slaves as scribes was eventually deemed a crime, subject to heavy fines on slave-owners. If slaves could not read, there was no way for them to learn about whites’ social, religious, or legislative plans, therefore the threat of retaliation was significantly reduced. This introduced the idea that if you were white, and helping a slave, then you were part of the problem, thereby eliminating an important lifeline for slaves.

The 1740 South Carolina Negro Act cast slave literacy as a potential threat to the slave-holding economy (Rasmussen 201). It is critical to note that excluding enslaved and free blacks from the written sphere became a crucial element in the creation of racial difference in the United States. Restricting literacy along racial lines, would dramatically limit expression in the colonies among blacks (Rasmussen 203). “The myth and contestation of black illiteracy shaped not only the lived experience of slavery and racialized difference but also black literary production throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Rasmussen 203).

## V. Nat Turner Rebellion (1831)

*“The singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense...I would never be of any service to any one as a slave.” Nat Turner<sup>5</sup>*

On August 21, 1831, Nat Turner and four of his fellow slaves rose in revolt in Southampton County, Virginia. By August 23, the rebels numbered approximately seventy; before they were dispersed they had killed at least fifty-seven white men, women, and children. (Schafer 361). Upon his capture and conviction, Turner was hung until dead, but many believed he may have also been skinned after his execution. As recounted by John W. Cromwell in a 1920 article in the *Journal of Negro History*, “Turner was skinned to supply such souvenirs as purses, his flesh made into grease, and his bones divided as trophies to be handed down [to white families] as heirlooms” (Klein 9). Turner’s rebellion, follows other uprisings after Stono, notably those of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vessey. In opposition however, newspaper coverage generated in the wake of Nat Turner stands apart from earlier events for its “volume and immediacy” (Gabrial 353).

It is extremely important to note the fact that, “the Turner Insurrection occurred in a relatively isolated section of Virginia; the editors of [three] newspapers<sup>6</sup> were [solely] responsible for reporting the [initial details] of the most serious slave insurrection in the ante-bellum South” (Elliott 3). Based on the practices of the press discussed in an earlier section, this was also the information that was exchanged<sup>7</sup> everywhere else in the

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, (Gray 8).

<sup>6</sup> *Raleigh Register*, *the Star*, and *North Carolina State Gazette* (Elliott 3).

<sup>7</sup> The process of exchanging papers was editors would copy front page headline articles from affected cities and re-distributing them in another town.

country. Due in large part to delays associated with this type of format, non-local newspapers were quick to react as news of the rampage spread, even though they had not confirmed “authentic” accounts or details. (Gabrial 348). For example, in addition to several premature false reports of Turner’s capture, there were also rumors of other insurrectionary attempts (Elliott 15). This in turn created uneasiness and made whites more fearful for their immediate safety, which editors used to stir up panic.

One such update from the *Richmond Enquirer*<sup>8</sup> linked daily updates to fears from the past, comparing Turner and his followers to a “parcel of blood-thirsty wolves...like a former incursion of the Indians upon the white settlements” (Gabrial 354). In addition, the use of amplified rhetoric such as “soul harrowing,” “murderous fiends,” and “blood thirsty infatuation” did much to spread “the black terror” (Elliot 17). Not to mention the fact that this portrayal served those who thought the extreme manner in which Turner was hunted and eliminated was defensible.

The disproportionate reaction of whites to reportage on this rebellion in comparison to those in the past, is most likely attributed to the consensus that “Turner’s intelligence and education [were] a major cause of the revolt” (Klein 1). Nat Turner was confirmed to be a preacher and literate, which as the editor of the *Advertiser* felt, “was a dangerous combination” (Schafer 371). Being that Turner was a man of God only amplified this insult to whites.

It is logical to conclude that press reportage on Nat Turner’s Rebellion attributed even more to the existing fear of insurrections and slave literacy. To offer support to this theory, the following is an analysis of a report from one of the three primary news

---

<sup>8</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, August 30, 1831

sources covering Turner's rebellion: the *Raleigh Register*.

### **Analysis of Reportage**

Published in the September 1 edition of the *Raleigh Register*, just ten days after the Nat Turner insurrection, was an article entitled "Insurrection and Murder!" - undoubtedly intended to create panic. The headline provided no information about the timeline of the event in question or whether or not it was ongoing or resolved.

The author begins to fill in the details of the occurrence, utilizing descriptors for the events, such as "soul harrowing," in an effort to bolster the "black terror" effect - or the unsubstantiated fear of black Americans by whites. The details provided in the article by the periodical's own admission may not be factual, rather, they "endeavored to cull such facts as we believe to be substantiated. These we will succinctly present to our readers, without however vouching for their precise accuracy" (*Raleigh Register*).

More bewildering was the fact that white readers, already stirring from their vivid imaginations of what happened, might have been comforted by an admission that they are still waiting for "something official" to appear. As the story is spun in such a way to inspire a particular reaction, one might conclude that the editors could get away with calling anything official and the public would truly not know the difference.

In the following lengthy but important quote, the author makes correlations between Nat Turner, preaching, and by extension literacy. After reading this reportage it is logical to conclude that it attributed even more to the existing fear of slave insurrections and slave literacy.

**1831, *Raleigh Register*** - "On Sunday, the 21st ultimo, there was a *negro* preaching in the neighborhood of the Cross Keys, in Southampton county, about

ten miles from the Court House, at which a black preacher (a slave) named *Nat Turner*, officiated. What the character of his discourse was, is not stated, but is a fair subject of inference from the fact that the conspiracy broke out the same evening in that neighborhood, and was headed by the preacher himself, in conjunction with a free man of color, called *Will Artist*. His harangue most probably was the immediate cause of the disturbance, for it seems from all the accounts that: the number of insurgents was few and that there existed nothing like a concerted plan, except in the narrow circle where it began. Perhaps by animating and encouraging the timid with hopes of success, removing the scruples of the religious by grossly prostituting the sacred oracles and inflaming and confirming the resolute, by all the savage fascinations of blood and booty, this mis-called preacher so worked upon the feelings of his auditors that they immediately resolved upon their bloody course. Be this however, as it may, it is certain that on the evening about fifty negroes, headed by the two persons before names, rose in open rebellion and commenced an indiscriminate slaughter of the whites, sparing in their blood thirsty infatuation, neither age, sex, or condition.”

The words, “negro, Nat Turner, preacher himself, and immediate” are italicized.<sup>9</sup> They draw specific attention to the blatant attempt to be sure that even the reader who doesn’t (or cannot) read the entire article, will at the least pick out these associations. Of course the editor wants the reader to know the black man’s name and that he was a slave – but even more so, that he was a trusted preacher. This resonates more for whites in the south specifically because of Turner’s status as a literate slave, who has been permitted to have influence over other slaves on the plantation, has earned the trust of the plantation owner. Therefore this harsh narrative may imply the crimes committed against Turner were justified because he betrayed the trust of white people. If Turner and his followers were painted as the evil ones and removed (or prevented to exist), then there would no longer be cause for any concern. The author goes on to say, “there existed no concerted plan,” possibly to downplay the intelligence of blacks, and their ability to organize anything

---

<sup>9</sup> The name, Will Artist also appeared in italics in print. Although he was a free man of color and part of the rebellion, it is clear the editor wants to place the cause of the insurrection on one man – Nat Turner.

much larger. The writer in fact refers to Turner's followers as "timid" and having had their "religious scruples removed" by desires for "blood and booty." It seems a convenient tale for a newspaper to spin, especially to whites who want to continue justifying their oppression of black motivations which they deem to be corrupt or anti-religious. To elaborate, the press could have also downplayed the severity of the rebellion for fear that their readers, many of whom benefitted from slavery (either as slaveholders or overseers), and might come to believe that the economic rewards of slavery were not worth the risk of being murdered during a rebellion. So, they attempted to minimize the damage done by the rebellion. After all, if left with the impression that all slaves are plotting, rather than being taken advantage of by duplicitous slaves like Turner, plantation owners might never rest easy. To present the actual fact that blacks were only interested in acquiring their physical and psychological freedom, would have painted whites to look like controlling monsters. Therefore, that inconvenient truth is not printed. The periodical claims there were 50 participants on the rebellion side – when in reality that fact also varied depending on the publication.

The paper goes on to confirm that 60 whites were "butchered" and proceeds to list the names of the deceased.<sup>10</sup> This was no doubt done to personalize the event for white readers. This editorial choice may have even been made with the hopes that any direct association with any of those killed would further fan the flames of white retribution in order to further solidify their control over blacks/slaves.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Raleigh Register* (1831) - "During that night and the following day, they succeeded in killing more than sixty whites. We have been favored by a gentleman, from the vicinity of the scene of action, with the following list of the individuals butchered, which however does not comprise all, several having fallen whose names could not be procured."

As a reminder to slaves and blacks to remember their place and the cost for rebellion, the article mentions the quick capture and killing of the insurgents, and reports how their heads are removed and “placed on stakes in the public road.”<sup>11</sup> This is not unlike the impulsion for publishing the gruesome details regarding the disposal of Turner’s remains post-mortem. Shockingly again, the periodical admits that various reports “differ in their details,” to be rest-assured the event is over. It is rather counterproductive that the author writes about the “great excitement” that has been generated over this disturbances will hopefully “subside” when the very purpose of reportage was to generate enough fear to create change (Raleigh Register). The report boasts the “promptness” of the response, and flexes their own “power” as having the ability to report on it.

Another interesting facet of the fearmongering that is produced in this article is that rebellious slaves are not the only enemy to the white slaveholders. There is an escalating fear of progressive whites joining the abolitionist cause as well.<sup>12</sup> White sympathizers are the “infernal villain” and unworthy of any type of redemption and will

---

<sup>11</sup> *Raleigh Register* (1831) - “By Wednesday night, the whole band of insurgents, with the exception perhaps of two or three, were either killed or captured. The two leaders were shot and their heads placed upon stakes in the public road. Though many of the accounts differ in their details, they all concur in one point, viz: that the affair is at the end. & that no suspicion is entertained of its having been a general thing. We trust, therefore, that the great excitement into which the country has been thrown, will quickly subside, whilst the prompt manner in which this outrage has been met and the example made, will deter others from making similar attempts. It is very gratifying to us to have it in our power to state, as we can do upon.”

<sup>12</sup> *Raleigh Register* (1831) - “It is said that one white man, at least, was found amongst the dead conspirators, disguised and blackened as a negro.... If this be true, the fate which overtook him was almost of too mitigated a character. We can think of no crime in the whole range of human enormity so heinous as this. Circumstances may be adduced, by bare possibility, in extenuation of a simple murder, or even of him who should place fire brand in the midst of a populous town — but for the infernal villain who would join our slaves in such an unhallowed and diabolical crusade, there can be no such thing as extenuation.”

suffer the same (or worse) fate than the slaves themselves. This harsh sentiment is echoed in other publications during this time warning that, “Civilized man ought to remember well his standing, and never let himself sink down to a level with a savage; our laws are summary enough and let them govern” (Gabrial 357). The message was clear: the only real choice for whites in the debate over slavery and equality was to be anti-black.

The press was so successful in elevating racial panic with reportage such as this with the *Raleigh Register*, that despite the fierce response of Virginia militia, many whites were on edge expecting another violent attack. George Washington’s niece, Mrs. Lewis wrote from her Alexandria home, “We know not when, or where, the flame will burst forth, but we know that death in the most horrid form threatens us” (Erickson). Another Virginia man had a letter published in the *Cincinnati Journal* that read, “I have not slept without worrying for three months. Our nights are sometimes spent listening to noises” (Erickson). It was only a matter of time before fear took control, and drove efforts for more restrictive legislation against blacks. And the immediate and lasting impact on African-American lives would be vast, and substantial.

### **Aftermath & Impact**

In response to Turner’s insurrection, the white community responded in a “riot of revenge” (Erickson). The editor of *The Richmond Whig* described “the slaughter of many blacks without trials and under circumstances of great barbarity” (Erickson). Most of the dead were condemned only by mere suspicion. The report continued, “[Black] men were tortured to death, burned, maimed and subjected to nameless atrocities” (Erickson). An

unknown number of blacks, both enslaved and free, had their heads cut off and impaled on posts along what is today call Blackhead Signpost Road<sup>13</sup> (Erickson).

The savage and bloody reprisals urged Virginia militia Brig. Gen. Richard Eppes, to issue this stern proclamation to whites: “Any who attempt the repetition of such acts shall be punished, if necessary, by the rigors of the articles of war” (Erikson). The threat stopped the indiscriminate killing, and successfully shifted the focus of punishment to be delivered by the law. In Southampton's court - 50 blacks both enslaved and free, were tried. Seventeen were convicted and hanged, 12 were transported and 21 dismissed or acquitted (Erickson).

In the aftermath following Nat Turner’s capture and execution, and the court’s delivery of “justice,” there was a divided view on what the next steps should entail in regards to slaves and free blacks. Many white Virginia citizens, still overcome with fear of further uprisings, sent over 40 petitions and 2,000 signatures to the Virginia legislature urging it to “deal with the menace of slavery.” These petitions often argued for the necessity of more stringent laws in favor of limiting the rights and mobility of slaves, while others wanted the “forced expulsion” of both slaves and free blacks alike (Erickson). Public sentiment from every part of the commonwealth impressed the necessity of “getting rid of the free people of color” (Gabrial 359). This speaks to the fact that regardless of status, whites’ fear of blacks marked them all as the same threat. This particular plea to rid Virginia of free blacks, was answered after the citizens of Northampton county sent a petition to the General Assembly demanding that the free African Americans in their county be removed. In March of 1832, their request was

---

<sup>13</sup> Named “N----- Signpost Road” during the time of this revenge riot in 1831 (Erikson).

granted and a bill was passed removing a number of free black people from the state and transporting them to Liberia.<sup>14</sup>

Another impact on slaves following Turner's revolt, was the elimination of white abolitionists in Virginia and other areas of the south. To bring it to an end, slave states entered an exceptionally repressive period with fines, imprisonment or death levied against anyone caught with abolitionist materials - including newspapers - or trying to give them to slaves (Gabrial 341). Any attempt to educate or inform *any* black person was a huge betrayal to the white race and threatened white supremacy. Laws were enacted to send a clear message:

**Alabama Laws, 1832, No. 55** - Should any person distribute, circulate, or publish, or cause to be distributed, circulated, or published, any seditious papers, pamphlets, or writing, tending to produce conspiracy, or insurrection, or rebellion, among the slaves or colored population, such person, upon conviction thereof, shall suffer death.<sup>15</sup>

The calls for emancipation of slaves from whites were genuinely rooted in morality and to eliminate violence, but ultimately fell on deaf ears. At a meeting held in Charles City County, the General Assembly voted narrowly not to pass [emancipation], and also rejected a measure for a gradual approach that would have followed the North's lead. Thus marked the end of the blossoming abolitionist movement in the south (Klein) and removing the very limited support system that blacks had among white sympathizers.

Conversely, in the wake of the rebellion, states passed a series of harsh and repressive laws that hardened the existing slave codes<sup>16</sup> (Erickson). This included, but was not limited to laws against: teaching Blacks to read or write, preaching, reading,

---

<sup>14</sup> CHAP. XXIII. — An act concerning the county of Northampton. *The Nat Turner Project*, (Roth).

<sup>15</sup> *The Nat Turner Project*, (Roth).

<sup>16</sup> "Laws Passed." *The Nat Turner Project*, (Roth).

assembling, making money by selling or trading, carrying a weapon, or any “seditious speeches, by free negroes or mulattoes.”<sup>17</sup> The justification for the anti-literacy measure particularly, pointed to Turner’s intelligence and education as a major cause of the revolt (Klein).

For some, Nat Turner was a symbol of all that was wrong with the slave system and of the potential for black retaliation and liberation. For others, Nat Turner embodied the dark savagery of African Americans and slaveholders’ often repressed fears that that savagery would lead to their destruction. (Roth)

In the years that followed, the press would continue to play a role, using Nat Turner as the symbol for fears of individuals on different sides of the slavery issue (Roth). These tensions continued to build over the next 30 years, helping to “set the United States on its course toward the Civil War” (as qtd. in Klein).

---

<sup>17</sup> CHAP. XXI, *The Nat Turner Project*, (Roth).

## VI. Wilmington Race Riot (1898)

*“It was race against race, the whites against the negroes; and it was a one-sided affair. ‘Kill the n-----s!’ rang out now and then through the dusk... ‘Kill the damn n-----s!’” (Chesnutt 298)*

On Nov. 10, 1898, one-hundred to three-hundred armed white men marched through the black sections of Wilmington, North Carolina murdering all who dared to challenge them. As violence filled the streets, others snatched control of the government. While installing themselves back into power, almost three-hundred people were killed and at least twenty-one successful blacks and their white allies were banished. Although it is one of the most significant chapters in state history, it is a story many have never heard. (Tyson 2).

The unique role the press plays leading up to and following the Wilmington Race Riot is anything but accidental. Every action leading up to the riot was carefully orchestrated by the region’s leading figures and institutions in a campaign that spread white supremacy across North Carolina and the South (Tyson 2). In the article, *The Ghosts of 1898: Wilmington’s Race Riot and the Rise of White Supremacy*, Timothy Tyson explains the carefully orchestrated campaign that ended up altering the state’s history and “created a legacy that haunts us still” (2).

On the surface, Wilmington was a city that had successfully managed a peaceful, albeit separate, existence between whites and blacks despite the failure of Reconstruction. With African-Americans holding positions in Congress, being members of the police force, and owning thriving businesses, integration appeared to be working. However, when whites lost control of the state politics during the election of 1896, none of that mattered. The 1896 election added to the post-Civil War resentment when Republicans

(known at the time for being the party against slavery), gained sweeping control of the White House and both sides of Congress. Historians have even referred to it as the “re-aligning election” (Edwards). In *The Psychology of the Wilmington Riot*, Arnold Goldstein argues that riots need a “trigger” or a “precipitating event” (356) in order to begin; this loss of power in 1896, coupled with over a hundred years of unchecked fear of blacks provided the perfect storm. The white Democrats promised to avenge their defeat at the hands of white Populists and African-American Republicans in the next election of 1898 (Learn NC). And once again, the press became the propaganda tool by which revenge seeking whites would justify the stealing of an election and rising up in a violent attack against African-Americans.

Dr. Jeffrey Crow, deputy secretary of the N.C. Office of Archives and History, confirmed via a Press Release: “Research demonstrates unequivocally that the Wilmington Race riot was not a spontaneous event, but was directed by white businessman and Democratic leaders to regain control of Wilmington” (1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission). In fact the events in Wilmington were not just a single day of a “sparked” violent riot, it was a four-pronged plan as outlined by journalist J. Peder Zane: 1) Steal the election, 2) Riot, 3) Stage a coup, and 4) Banish the opposition.<sup>18</sup>

At the center of their press strategy was editor and publisher Josephus Daniels of *The News and Observer*. He led the newspaper propaganda effort that would incite white

---

<sup>18</sup> 1) Steal the election – Under the banner of white supremacy, the Democratic Party used threats, intimidation, anti-black propaganda and stuffed ballot boxes to win the statewide elections on Nov. 8, 1898. 2) Riot – On Nov. 10, armed whites attacked blacks and their property. 3) Stage a coup – As the riot unfolded, white leaders forced the mayor (at gunpoint), police chief and other local leaders to resign from their offices, placing themselves in charge. 4) Banish the opposition – After seizing power, whites removed opposition by banishing their most able and determined opponents, black and white. (Tyson 3).

citizens into a furor, leading to justification of electoral fraud and mass murder (Tyson 1).

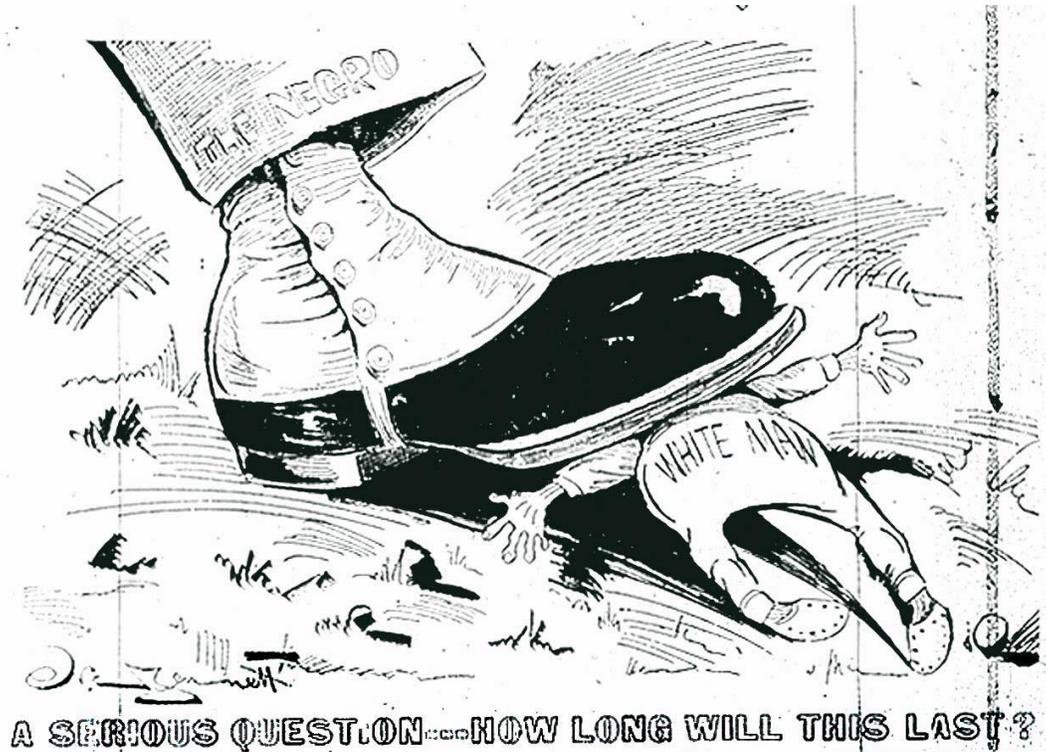


Image 1 - Cartoonist Norman Jennett penned caricatures of blacks. (The News and Observer)

In addition to anti-black political literature, this editor sexualized images of black men as having uncontrollable lust for white women. Newspaper stories warned of “black beasts” who threatened the flower of Southern womanhood (Tyson 1). The proverbial, “last straw,” which historians unanimously agree was the culmination of the master plan, would appear to be the justification of whites having no choice but to rise up in protection of their white female citizens. When in reality it was simply the distraction needed to physically and violently take over the local government.

The effort of Wilmington Democrats to persuade white men to commit violence was made even easier in August 1898 when Alexander Manly, the black editor of *The Daily Record*, answered a speech calling to [lynch] “a thousand Negroes a week”

(BlackHistory). In the eyes of some whites, Manly's editorial was the equivalent of "literary rape" and it was a miracle that he wasn't killed immediately:

Poor white men are careless in the manner of protecting their women...they should guard their women more closely...You leave your goods outdoors and then complain when they are taken away. Our experience among poor white people in the country teaches us that women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than the white men with colored women. Tell your men that it is no worse for a black man to be with a white woman than for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman. Don't think ever that your women will remain pure while you are debauching ours. You sow the seed – the harvest will come in due time. (BlackHistory).

Of course Manly was only referring to the double-sided nature of ignoring sexual violence against black women by white men. He was by no means advocating rape or violence against any woman, instead calling out the blacks' refusal to accept the hypocrisy. Willfully ignoring the context behind Manly's incendiary remarks, local whites seized the opportunity to deliberately misrepresent the tenor of the editorial in order to support their lies about predatory blacks (Tyson 1).

In response to the election and its aftermath, Wilmington's Alfred Waddell - the former Confederate soldier who famously proclaimed, "We will never surrender to a ragged raffle of Negroes, even if we have to choke the Cape Fear River with carcasses" (Tyson 1). The day after the election he published the *White Declaration of Independence*<sup>19</sup> that called for the disfranchisement of black voters (Tyson 1). The day after that Waddell led a crowd of whites totaling almost 2,000 to Love and Charity Hall, where Manly's *The Daily Record* was published and set the building ablaze (Tyson 1).

---

<sup>19</sup> A document stating that whites would no longer accept being ruled by the inferior race of Negroes. It was published on Nov. 9, 1898, the day before the riot, in an effort to get more participation and rise among whites. *White Man's Declaration of Independence*, (1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission).



**Image 2** - Destruction of The Daily Record of Wilmington, said to be the only black-owned daily newspaper in the United States at the time (1898), by white supremacists. (N.C. Office of Archives & History)

Manly had no choice but to flee the city, which was exactly the message Democrats wanted to send – that business and political interests of local blacks would be eliminated by any means necessary. These violent acts were born from fears of losing control of their state and national politics as well as racial superiority – which is a fear I argue, attributed to the press’s involvement.

Without repercussion, the entire plan was a major success. Waddell became mayor, he and his followers regained control of the city, and any black person who had been in a position of power was removed or murdered. Wilmington “white men asserted their mastery by denying the African-American male’s political independence and destroying the voice that publicized equal access to white and black women” (Lowery 351). The echo of Wilmington would resonate for years, leading to the beginning of some of the most oppressive anti-black legislation laws in American history.

## After the Riot

When the new legislature met for the first time in 1899, they went to work immediately to limit rights of African-Americans. By using the fear whites had of blacks regaining positions of power in the political sphere, it was easy to pass the 1898-1915 “grandfather clause”<sup>20</sup> which targeted African-American voters – many of whom were first generation voters – by requiring that one’s grandfather had to have voted in previous elections in order that the right be extended to them. The leaders of the white supremacy campaign were also largely responsible for the birth of the Jim Crow laws.<sup>21</sup> In addition, due to minimal (outside) press coverage of the riot, a one-sided legacy about that fateful day would be steeped in fiction.

When asked to offer a firsthand account of events, newly appointed Mayor, Waddell, “whitewashed the bloodshed and disorder” (Lowery 415) to make it more palatable to civilized audiences. Waddell also insisted he prevented lynching violence and denied responsibility for burning down Manly’s office, claiming it was “purely

---

<sup>20</sup> **The Grandfather Clause** was a statute enacted by many American southern states in the wake of Reconstruction (1865-1877) that allowed potential white voters to circumvent literacy tests, poll taxes, and other tactics designed to disenfranchise southern blacks. Following the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), which extended citizenship to blacks, the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) was ratified, providing a mandate that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged...on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” But after a brief period of relatively open voting, southern states and, especially, Democratic legislators began enacting poll taxes, literacy and property tests, and understanding clauses, which they claimed would exclude the poor and uneducated, in a thinly veiled attempt to eliminate the black vote. Many Southern states, however, had to rely on the cunning of voter registrars to ensure that poor and uneducated whites were not disfranchised by these tests. (BlackPast).

<sup>21</sup> **Jim Crow laws** revived principles of the 1865 and 1866 Black Codes, which had previously restricted the civil rights and civil liberties of African Americans. Generally, the remaining Jim Crow laws were overruled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but years of action and court challenges have been needed to unravel the many means of institutional discrimination. (Reconstruction and Repression, 1865-1900).

accidental” (Lowery 415). His explanation provided the structure and substance of the collective memory of events [of Wilmington] for nearly a century (Lowery 415).

With no published press accounts and Waddell’s lies resonating in the South, it would be four years before the black side of the story was told. In 1901 literary master, Charles Chesnutt, published his gritty and harrowing novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* which was based on the real-life events of the Wilmington Race Riot. While the book remained a favorite of the literary elite, it didn’t gain a huge contemporary following. Sadly Chesnutt “failed to capture the imagination of readers, and Waddell’s narrative continued to inform the masses” (Lowery 423). More than a century later, and it has become clear that the events of Wilmington in 1898 injected a “vicious racial ideology” into American political culture (Lowery 415) that would have a long reach – long enough to have an impact on present day racial politics in the United States.

## VII. Conclusion

*“When men sow the wind it is rational to expect that they will reap the whirlwind.”  
Frederick Douglas*

The causal relationship between race-based media bias and legislation that overwhelmingly targets people of color is more pressing in the current political moment than one might have envisioned it would be one hundred-fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Many white Americans still fear black violence against them and hold racist ideas about blacks in society (Gabrial 336) and some historians and scholars say that the American race problem is simply insoluble.

Contemporary assessments of this phenomenon – that is, the media’s consistently negative portrayal of black Americans – highlight what is lacking in historical discourses of the centrality of the media’s influence on the worldviews of its audiences. While an important scholarly venture, the primary area of focus should not be on the psychological impact of racist portrayals, but on the impact of media portrayals on the daily lives of the people who are on the receiving end of this violence.

It is my intention that examining these patterns of reportage and the irrational fear they create will shed a light on the ways we as a society justify passing legislation which oppresses whole communities of people. More importantly, I hope to highlight the fact that we as a nation continue to function with centuries old fears which were “deeply embedded in the antebellum psyche” (Gabrial 361). We must have the courage to be willing to question the origin of our fear; is the threat real or has it been manufactured to advance another agenda? Until we stop privileging the intentions of the assailants over the devastating impact of racism on victims of its violence, I fear that we will remain caught in the whirlwind.

## Works Cited

- 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission. *WILMINGTON RACE RIOT DRAFT REPORT OFFERS REVELATIONS*. Press Release. Raleigh: North Carolina, 2005. Web.
- Black History. *The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898*. n.d. Web. 1 April 2018.
- Black Past.Org. *Wilmington Race Riot of 1898*. n.d. Web. 14 October 2017.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *The Marrow of Tradition*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1993. Print.
- Edwards, Rebecca. "1896 Election Results." 2000. *Vassar College*. Web. 10 November 2017.
- Elliott, Robert N. "The Nat Turner Insurrection as Reported in the North Carolina Press." *The North Carolina Historical Review* (1961): 1-18. Web.
- Entman, Robert M. and Andrew Rojecki. *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Print.
- Erickson, Mark St. John. "Remembering the horror of Nat Turner's rebellion." 21 August 2017. *Daily Press*. 23 February 2018.
- Fold3. 10 July 2007. Web. 30 March 2018. <<https://www.fold3.com/page/1437-slave-rebellion>>.
- Fredrickson, George M. *The Black Image in the White Mind*. Middletown: Harper Row, 1971. Print.
- Gabrial, Brian. "From Haiti to Nat Turner: Racial Panic Discourse during." *American Journalism Historians Association* (2013): 336-364. Document.
- . *The Press and Slavery in America 1791-1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2016. Book.

- Gray, Thomas R. "The Confessions of Nat Turner." 1999. *Documenting in American South*. Web. 30 March 2018.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. Kingsport: University of North Carolina Press, 1968. Print.
- Klein, Christopher. *10 Things You May Not Know About Nat Turner's Rebellion*. 24 May 2016. Web. 15 October 2017.
- Learn NC. "North Carolina in the New South." 2009. *Learn NC*. Web. 2017.
- Lowery, J. Vincent. *Remembering 1898: Literary Responses and Public Memory of the Wilmington Race Riot*. 31 May 2006. Web.
- Raleigh Register*. 1 September 1831.
- Rasmussen, Birgit Brander. "Attended with Great Inconveniences: Slave Literacy and the 1740 South Carolina Negro Act." *Modern Language Association* (2010): 201-203. Document.
- Reconstruction and Repression, 1865-1900*. n.d. Web.
- <<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/reconstructionandrepression.htm>>.
- Richmond Enquirer*. 30 August 1831.
- Rome, Dennis. *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Roth, Sarah N. *The Nat Turner Project*. 2016. Web. 23 September 2017.
- <<http://www.natturnerproject.org/newspaper-articles>>.
- Schafer, Judith Kelleher. "The Immediate Impact of Nat Turner's Insurrection on New Orleans." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* (1980): 361-76. Document.

Smith, Mark M. "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion." *Southern Historical Association* (2001): 513-534. Document.

—. *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005. Print.

Tyson, Timothy B. "The Ghosts of 1898: Wilmington's Race Riot and the Rise of White Supremacy." *The News and Observer* 17 November 2006: 1A-16. Web.

Williams, Paul and Julie Dickinson. "Fear of Crime: Read All About It? The Relationship between Newspaper Crime Reporting and Fear of Crime." *The British Journal of Criminology* (1993): 35-56. Document.