Episode 336: Vanessa Holden, "Surviving the Southampton Rebellion"

Announcer: 00:00:00 You're listening to an Airwave Media Podcast.

Liz Covart: 00:00:04 *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Hello, and welcome to Episode 336 of *Ben Franklin's World*. The podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

What did it take to stage a successful slave uprising? What qualities your accomplishments made a slave rebellion successful? When you look at the history of early America in the early United States, we see enslaved people occasionally rise up to abolish slavery and fight for their freedom. The biggest and most successful slave uprising began in August 1791 on the Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue. And that uprising ended with the emergence of an independent and slave-free Haiti. Now in the United States, we see a few violent slave uprisings that took place over the course of the early Republic. A particularly brutal rebellion took place in January 1811 in Louisiana.

Another violent rebellion took place in 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia. Now neither of these rebellions led to the abolishment of slavery, but they did lead to the death of many enslaved people and their enslavers. With details from her award-winning book, *Surviving Southampton, African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community*, Vanessa Holden, an associate professor of history and African and Africanist studies at the University of Kentucky leads us through the events and circumstances of the 1831 Southampton rebellion. A rebellion that we tend to know today as Nat Turner's rebellion.

00:01:53 Now, during our investigation of this rebellion, Vanessa reveals when and where the Southampton Rebellion took place, the early history of Southampton, Virginia, and why it experienced a slave rebellion and why we should look at the Southampton Rebellion as a community wide event.

But first, thank you. Thank you for taking the time to tell others about *Ben Franklin's World*. I really appreciate your enthusiasm and support for this podcast. And I know you're telling people because

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this show keeps finding new listeners. So thank you for taking the time to tell your friends, family, and acquaintances about *Ben Franklin's World*. Together, we're bringing early American history to more people. So thank you for being a part of that. Okay.

Are you ready to visit Southampton, Virginia? Let's go meet our guest historian.

Liz Covart: 00:02:54 Our guest is an associate professor of history and of African American and Africana studies at the University of Kentucky. She's the director of the Central Kentucky Slavery Initiative and the author of the award-winning book, *Surviving Southampton. African American women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community*, which won the 2022 James H. Broussard Best First Book Prize from the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World,* Vanessa Holden.

Vanessa Holden: 00:03:22 Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here. I'm a fan of the podcast and yeah, I was super excited to see the invite, so happy to chat today.

Liz Covart: 00:03:31 It's always a lot of fun to have fans as guests. Now to get our chat going, we know that slavery and resistance to slavery are two things that go hand in hand. And today we're going to investigate the Southampton Rebellion. So Vanessa, would you give us a bird's eye view of this rebellion and tell us when and where it took place.

Vanessa Holden: 00:03:51 Historians have long called this particular slavery rebellion, Nat Turner's rebellion. And that is the name by which a lot of the audience probably knows this historical event. It took place in Southampton County, Virginia, which is right on the border with North Carolina, just outside, it's in this little zone between the Tidewater and the Piedmont in Virginia. It's a pretty swampy place relatively near The Great Dismal Swamp. In there in the southern half of the county below the Nottoway River. What started out as a group, clearly a handful of enslaved men led by an enslaved man named Nat Turner decided the late evening of August 21st, 1831, that early in the morning on August 22nd, they would begin the rebellion that they had been planning probably since that winter. And they'd had a few false starts over the course of 1831 and decided that this was the right time to strike.

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00:04:49 And the basic plan that they had all agreed on was that they would move from farm to farm, to plantation to plantation, in their neighborhood and murder every white man, woman, and child that they came across and they kept to that original pact. They really did endeavor to murder any white person that they came in contact with. They began at Nat Turner's enslaver's farm and murdered his family, including an infant, and then moved on from there. Another key part of their strategy was to gain additional insurgents as they went. So to recruit additional enslaved people as they moved from place to place. It took until midday on August 23rd for local militia to put down the rebellion, but that just launched what would turn into a fall and a harvest season full of trials of suspected rebels. Nat Turner himself would remain at large until the end of October 1831 and was executed in November 1831.

Vanessa Holden: 00:06:00 But much as white officials really wanted his execution to be the decided end of the rebellion, one thing that I talk about in my own work is that the labor of surviving this particular rebellion for African Americans and the community is a type of work that never ended that there's no sort of expiration date on surviving this rebellion. And so African Americans had to reshape resistive strategies that they'd been using for generations in the county before this rebellion happened, really on a dime in the changing landscape, post rebellion.

Liz Covart: 00:06:41 Killing every white person, a participant may have come across really seems like an extreme form of resistance. You know, often when we talk about slavery and resistance, we talk about slowing down the pace of work, making time and space for family and culture and possibly nighttime excursions to see friends or running away. How and why did this rebellion and its resistance become so violent? What was the context that made the Southampton rebellion so violent?

Vanessa Holden: 00:07:10 So in the US context, it might seem extreme. And certainly the rebellion at the time and thereafter was regarded as pretty extraordinary because it actually happened before anyone gave up the plot, which had happened with previous rebellions, including in Virginia in the year that Nat Turner was born, Gabriel's Rebellion in Richmond was a rebellion that never happened because it was given away before it could happen. So it's extraordinary in that they

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succeeded, they killed nearly 60 white men, women, and children in the county before they could be stopped, and before they could be thwarted. I think something that's particular to this rebellion really is the temporal context for the rebellion. It happened in 1831. That's a time in which most US history students are learning about Jacksonian America. They're learning about various interpretations and reinterpretations of what the revolutionary generation had accomplished. And it's an era in which men like Andrew Jackson are rising to the top.

These guys who are all in on settler colonialism, all in on expanding slavery and forcibly migrating enslaved people further west and deeper south. It's an era in which Indigenous people and policies towards Indigenous people take a sharp, sharp turn towards removal. And certain kinds of white men are gaining more access to political power. Enslaved people in Virginia are at the top end of this burgeoning internal trade and enslaved people. Their children are at risk for sale from the Commonwealth of Virginia, and it's not a trade that doesn't touch the south side of Virginia below the James River. So one of the reasons that I talk about it in the book, I talk about it in my chapter about Black children. I talk about it when I recount really the basic outline of the rebellion is that killing women and children demonstrates that enslaved people were very clear that all white people were benefiting from slavery and participating in it.

Vanessa Holden: 00:09:32 White women who were, thanks to the laws of the time, not able to hold property as married women were benefiting from slavery or surveilling Black people, were very much involved in the violence of American chattel slavery and white children were raised to become enslavers and were absolutely participants in the violence of slavery and individuals who participated in the rebellion knew full well that these children were going to grow up to inherit them and to inherit their own children.

In fact, Nat Turner was not technically owned by Joseph Travis, though he lived on his hormone plantation. He was owned by a little boy, Putnam Moore, who would inherit him as a part of his inheritance when he reached an age of maturity that allowed him to inherit property from his deceased father. So these were just theoretical connections to the ways whites were building generational wealth. Enslaved people were very much aware of this. Very much aware of how vulnerable their own children, particularly

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when they became teenagers would be to the internal trade. So the violence of slavery touched every age group of enslaved person and was perpetrated by every age group and every gender of white Virginian. So really the violence was par for the course, especially in the household makeup of many Virginia farms in the area. What is remarkable about the rebellion is that they succeeded in perpetrating it, that they didn't get thwarted. And so I do think that's really important to remember.

Liz Covart: 00:11:19 You raised a really interesting point when you said that the Southampton Rebellion may seem extreme and violent within the context of the United States. And I knew as soon as you said that you were right, because if we place the Southampton Rebellion in the context of rebellions enslaved people orchestrated in the Caribbean, like in places like Jamaica or Haiti, the Southampton Rebellion was comparatively mild and relatively late in taking place.

Vanessa Holden: 00:11:43 I mean, there are other violent revolts in the United States. Colonial history, the revolt in the early 19th century in New Orleans. The memory of which was pretty widely suppressed as a strategic move on the part of white enslavers. And some of that suppression and historic memory suppression happens with this rebellion too. The historian Patrick Breen is really clear in his arguments that the white power structure really did try to shape the narrative and memory of this rebellion as small insignificant, the result of only one disturbed man's, they wouldn't have used this term, but mentally ill musings, and they meant that in the most pejorative way possible, that they wanted it to seem as small as possible with this few participants as possible, as isolated as possible. But that was a strategic loop on their part to thwart copycat or thwart rebellion spreading that wasn't necessarily the truth of what was happening in Southampton County's Black community.

Liz Covart: 00:12:51 Another aspect of our memory about the Southampton Rebellion is that we know it is Nat Turner's Rebellion. You mentioned that at the start of our conversation and you make the case in your book, *Surviving Southampton*, that we really shouldn't think of this rebellion as Nat Turner's Rebellion. Could you tell us why you think that's the case and what's wrong with using Nat Turner's name to describe the rebellion and why do you think we should start referring to this rebellion as the Southampton Rebellion?

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Vanessa Holden: 00:13:18 I think that it's really important to think about the ways that this rebellion was historicized almost as soon as it happened. So very quickly folks knew that it was an event of historical significance. And on the one hand, Nat Turner, the historical person in the cultural history of the United States, morphs into an archetypal rebellious slave, really divorced from the actual historical person and becomes the always lurking hyper-violent stereotype of Black men that pervaded the antebellum and then era of emancipation, post-Civil War. So there's that, of course, that's named for him. He's the ultimate rebellious slave. Also, the ways that the white press was covering this really did want to pin it on one central leader. You know, this wasn't every enslaved person, you shouldn't be worried about your own enslaved property. This was just one person's evil influence that did this.

00:14:28 On the other hand, Nat Turner becomes a folk hero in the Black community. Again, often divorced from the actual historical person, but becomes an archetypal freedom fighter. So the ultimate rebellious slave in another way. I don't think that I'm for downplaying Nat Turner's role. And I certainly don't argue that he's not important somehow. He is in the book and his own narrative of the rebellion is in the book. Something that I think is important to recognize is that really until the early 20th century, many, many people called this rebellion, the Southampton insurrection, they called it the Southampton rebellion, the trouble in Southampton. The place was really important to how they identified what had happened. And secondly, among descendant communities in that county, they use the terms interchangeably. Some people still call it Nat Turner's rebellion. Some people call it the Rebellion like it happened last August, and some people call it the Southampton Insurrection.

In fact, one of Nat Turner's descendants has erected his own plaque in homage, his ancestor and names it the Southampton Insurrection, place is incredibly important. When I look at Nat Turner's own jailhouse confessions, he starts his own narrative of the rebellion, not with his plot, not even with his own personal conversion experience, to evangelical Christianity.

Vanessa Holden: He starts his story in his own community and in his childhood and emphasizes the role that his parents and grandmother played in

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imbuing him with a sense of what Daina Barry would call soul value and significantly his grandmother who gave him a sense of his own worth, his own value and his own intelligence. And that wasn't something to be hidden or ashamed of, but something to celebrate and something that they celebrated. So he begins his own story of these actions, deeply rooted in community, deeply traced back to a female elder in his kinship network.

00:16:45 Then I take that up in my own work, emphasizing women like his grandmother. So if they're raising enslaved boys and enslaved girls to believe in their own value and specialness and the God-given intelligence and worth, then that's really worth emphasizing in how we name this rebellion. That said, it's not up to me. What descendant communities called this event if they prefer Nat Turner's Rebellion, that's fine. I found no evidence that he wasn't the person who planned it. He definitely had a leadership role, unseating Nat Turner isn't really the point. The point is to focus on a broader community that was needed to support these efforts.

Liz Covart: 00:17:32 You mentioned that the press was really crucial in shaping the Southampton Rebellion around Nat Turner. They wanted people to see that he was the sole individual who led this slave revolt and that using their own language had some sort of mental health issues. And historians have the benefit right when it comes to viewing the past in that we get to see a lot more information than someone who's an actual witness to the event can see even within their own lifetime. So what would it have meant in the 1830s, if the press had been able to see the historical record that we can see now that shows just how many people participated in the Southampton Rebellion that it was this community wide event. How would this evidence-based narrative that a lot of different people participated in the Southampton Rebellion have impacted the everyday lives of Americans living in 1831?

Vanessa Holden: 00:18:24 The official historical record, whether it's sort of legislative session records from Richmond and Virginia state house or local court records, or even beyond trial records post-rebellion, but all the other things that are happening in Southampton's courthouse post-rebellion, it's important to know the press is using reports as they come in. And initially, white Southampton residents had no idea what was happening or what had happened. And they were trying to piece together what had happened. And they were also trying to isolate it and stop it as fast as possible as trials unraveled post

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rebellion. It becomes sort of clear. I agree with Patrick Breen on this, that officials in Southampton County are really less interested in the actual narrative of what happened and more interested in punishing the smallest amount of people possible. And being able to declare though this is over.

Vanessa Holden: 00:19:31 So it's important to note that at the time the legal culture was a culture that valued keeping the piece above all else. And at the time keeping the piece meant preserving social hierarchy, pretty explicitly. Nobody really pulled punches about that. So it wasn't really about giving suspected rebels due process or something like that. It was about making sure the right sort of white men were in charge that anybody who had executed human property got recompense, got reimbursed for the loss of property. And that the county could say that they had moved on. So press accounts further and further away from the actual event, also try to downplay what happened. And they tow the same line that oh, this turns out it was super isolated reports that it was hundreds of enslaved people are exaggerated. You don't need to worry that there are Maroons and the great most swamp that are going to come get you, the message was everybody calm down. This isn't as big a deal as you think it is.

And the only thing that really kind of got in the way of that particular narrative was the fact that Nat Turner was missing. He remained at large from August 23rd till the end of October 1831. And there was speculation in the press about where he could be. And so this contributes to his archetypal status because there was this certain sense that he was just sort of lurking around any and every enslavers' plantation waiting to inspire revolt and rebellion. In reality, he actually was hiding out in a series of dugout caves, very near where he had been enslaved and pretty close to where his wife was held as a slave. So again, in reality, it was the Black community in Southampton that we're seeing to him and making sure he stayed alive.

00:21:40 And I think the press had a vested interest in not touting the success of this rebellion because where these accounts are being published, New Orleans, Richmond, there are literate Black communities that could also read this. In fact, there's one account in a New Orleans paper that sort of says something to the effect of, well, this rebellion wasn't really that big. And also we really should be careful how much we even talk about this, because you never

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really know who's reading this. It's like, well, yeah, I bet New Orleans was concerned about who was reading these accounts.

Liz Covart: 00:22:12 Thus far, our conversation has allowed us to get a sense that the Southampton Rebellion was bigger than Nat Turner. We keep saying it was a community wide event and I'd like for us to dig into the history of Southampton as a community so that we can see its famed rebellion from the ground up. Vanessa, what do we know about Southampton's early American past? Could you tell us about the establishment of Southampton and what this community was like during the 17th and 18th centuries?

Vanessa Holden: 00:22:40 So the English start to incur on Indigenous lands and what becomes Southampton County relatively early on in the history of Virginia, it borders some of the earliest counties or parishes in the area that the English colonized along the James River. Certainly by the mid to late 18th century, white colonists have established church parishes there and have established a courthouse there. It breaks off from Isle of White County to become its own county by the late 18th century. And it is originally inhabited by Indigenous people who are not Algonquin speakers. They're Iroquois speakers, but they're surrounded by Algonquin speakers. They historically are called, the Nottoway, but today descendant communities of this group of people prefer different terms. So some prefer to be called Nottoway and identify as Nottoway and others identify as Cheroenhaka Nottoway. And both groups have their own websites and their own tribal historians.

00:23:47 There's some evidence that they made the savvy political move to use the power that English colonists could lend them to play off enemies in the area. The Indigenous inhabitants are still there, even as the English are establishing Episcopal parishes and the area really is in colonial Virginia, pretty out of the way, it's in an area of the Commonwealth that people call the south sides on the south bank of the James River. But there are other counties in between Southampton and the James, the Nottoway River is their main waterway that connects them to other places. Early on, white colonists tried to bring tobacco into the area and it did okay, but it didn't do as well as it did other places. So local Indigenous inhabitants and English colonists. This is not to suggest that it was some sort of idyllic relationship between the two groups, but they

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did over time negotiate a number of treaties through which English and later Americans took native lands.

00:25:00 Really the county is an "every county" you'd say. This is part of why it was so shocking to many, many Americans and southerners in particular because they had a cluster of very wealthy people. And then for the most part, they're middling folks, small to mid-sized farms, small to mid-size plantations. Most people had relatively small slave holdings, certainly by cotton south standards. Most of the people involved who were murdered during the rebellion, they owned less than 30 enslaved people. And as I talk about in the book, the people who did own around 30 in slave people sometimes about half, about half of their holding were children. So we're talking about half that number are adolescents or adults. That said, these individuals really are literally banking on slavery. They are clear that they will use enslaved people like financial products to bolster their future.

Vanessa Holden: 00:26:00 And by the 1830s, Southampton's farmers and plantation owners had discovered and were already cultivating cotton. It's one of the few places in Virginia where you can grow cotton. And even though the variety that survived there was pretty... I mean, cotton's already in arduous crop to deal with, but enslaved people talk about Southampton cotton at the time being particularly small and scrawny and having a sap around the cotton bowls and around the branches. So something to remember is today cotton is cotton, agribusiness has made sure that there's a standardized short staple upland cotton that's grown everywhere. But in the 19th century, it was what cotton survives the pests that are in your local area, what cotton survives the weather and the soil profile. They didn't have these standardized fertilizer regimens and these sort of things.

00:27:04 So they're growing cotton, some in small patches to make their own clothing and some in much larger patches. So the county really is this place in which middling white farmers see that they maybe could really be on the come up, that they could really make something out of slavery. That's not to say that they didn't contribute to planter migration. In fact, Southampton County is not only the birthplace and home of Nat Turner, it's also the

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birthplace of Dred Scott. And it's the birthplace of John Brown, not the abolitionist, but the slave narrator who wrote a narrative about his time as an enslaved person in Georgia. So those other two famous enslaved men are mostly known for having lived through planter migration. So it is an "every county" in some ways, which is part of what made it so terrifying.

Liz Covart: 00:28:05 Southampton does sound like an up and coming place if you're a white person. I mean, you mentioned that it's a place that grows cotton. It's a place that has a few really wealthy people and a place with lots of enslaved people. You know, you mentioned that most of Southampton's white farmers tended to be middling types of farmers who could own as many as 30 enslaved people, which seems like a lot of enslaved people. You know, when you talk about poor white farmers, people who own no slaves, or you might have somebody who own one or two, these people are owning 30 enslaved people. And that means that Southampton also had to have had a sizeable population of enslaved men, women, and children. So Vanessa by 1831, what was the population of Southampton like? Was it a Black majority population?

Vanessa Holden: 00:28:53 It is filtering towards a Black majority, but right on that line. One demographic group that is largely attacked and blamed for the rebellion, even though there isn't a lot of evidence that an enslaved person and enslaved people led and instigated the rebellion, are free people of color. Southampton County at the time had the third largest population of free people of color in Virginia. And free people of color do not by and large live in a separate enclave of some kind, many, many, many of them are embedded in white households among enslaved people doing the same kind of labor.

Vanessa Holden: 00:29:43 Their material conditions were pretty similar to enslaved people. They're a very tiny number of Black landowners. Some of whom also have free Black tenants, but overwhelmingly free Black people live among enslaved people and have typically year-long labor contracts with white landowners.

The only exception to that and caveat I can give is that at the time in Virginia, the term free person of color applied both to people of Indigenous descent and people of African descent, of course, those groups are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they're the same Afro-Indigenous people. The closest thing to an enclave is what was called at the time "Indian Land". So a very much reduced

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reservation for not away descendants. And there are some free Black people who live there. They themselves may have been Afro-Indigenous. They themselves may have married Indigenous people, and that's not super clear in the records, but demographically, this county has a significant Black population and the free Black population was roughly 20% of the Black population. So they were also really visible.

Liz Covart: 00:31:02 Could you tell us more about the experiences of the Black people who lived in Southampton County, where we do see sizable communities of free Black and enslaved inhabitants intermingling together? What was it like to live in Southampton County in 1831 as a Black person?

Vanessa Holden: 00:31:18 Some of the free Black people in the county were born free. Some became free. There are a couple of major land owners in the county in the late 18th, early 19th century, who a part of a trend among the Revolutionary generation, free enslaved people in their wills, or find ways to free them before they die. So there are groups of folks who all have the same last name and that they're all related in one way or another to these Revolutionary-era manumissions. Certainly, other folks purchased their own freedom. There are other routes to freedom that are really closing off and closing in by the 1830s. One thing that is sort of interesting to me about the county that affects free women of color's lives is that many of them, almost all of them are listed as having a job or work of some sort and for free women of color they're overwhelmingly listed as spinsters. One of the things that these free women did was spin.

They're not using the term spinster in the pejorative way that folks may be more familiar with as an older unmarried woman. They literally mean that they spin and what they would've been spinning at the time was cotton. And there were also weeding cottages that dotted Southampton County and enslaved women wove cloth and produced clothing. Sometimes they produce a rough cloth that people called slave cloth because enslavers were trying to clothe the enslaved population on their land. So these women were mobile.

Vanessa Holden: 00:33:10 They may have moved around to different weaving cottages and it places them in a type of skilled labor that we often aren't thinking of when we think about free women, they're very limited work options for free women of color that amounted to domestic work or laundry work. And in a slave society like Virginia, even those

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jobs were few and far between, but that there was this other kind of work that got free women out of the fields, got them in significant ways out of white households and into these other laboring spaces.

00:33:47 It's a type of labor that exists all over Southern counties that look like Southampton County. But it's one that I think is we're thinking about that. There are these particularly mobile women all over the county who are free. Now at the time, Virginia law required that free people of color register with a given county and established residents in that county, their restrictions on them working in any other location at that time to curb their mobility. And there's a fee associated with registration, folks who don't register, folks who end up in debt because they can't pay these fees, risk re-enslavement, they risk indenture to pay for their debts. And because of these records, we can think through, well, what life might have been like? The records include really thick physical descriptions of people because folks wanted to be able to prove that they really were free and there are no photographs at the time.

Liz Covart: 00:34:48 Mobile women, jobs and employment that seemed to be bringing free people of color, at least some money. And Southampton was also a community that was on the verge of Black people outnumbering white people. Now we know from speaking with other scholars that communities like Southampton often created laws or put other precautions in place to help prevent rebellions of enslaved people and free people of color. Did Southampton enact any of these laws or other types of precautions before the Southampton Rebellion?

Vanessa Holden: 00:35:20 Sally Hadden's work on slave patrols in Virginia and Carolina was really helpful for me as I started to sift through the primary material that's accident in Southampton. There are still some slave patrol records in existence there in the Library of Virginia's special collections and they range from everything like very small business cards size scraps of paper that just note that a patrol leader was paid a certain amount of money, to full schedules of patrols in the 19th Century. So slave patrols were one of their major precautions, but something to think about is that they didn't really have the technological capability to actually survey Black people 24/7 and white people in the community knew it and Black people in the community knew it. So periodically patrols manned by men from various militia rosters, of all classes from the wealthiest to men

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who could never ever own a single enslaved person would ride out periodically.

Vanessa Holden: 00:36:34 But as I outline in the book, it wasn't actually really that hard for enslaved people to know when that was going to happen and then make savvy decisions about whether or not they would try and go visit a loved one that night or whether or not they would try to go to an illicit church meeting that night or a party that night. And some people went out anyway, and some people decided not to go out as a result. So outside of working hours, whites play this cat and mouse game and try to project mastery, even though everybody in the situation knew you can't possibly actually have total mastery here. That said, if someone was caught by a patrol, they could be particularly brutal and they could enact punishment, but overwhelmingly the legal culture and the culture around personal property. At that time dictated that the buck really stopped with individual enslavers that discipline that punishment, if at all possible should be meted out within the context of individual holdings.

00:37:38 The time where that gets upended and thwarted are times like the Southampton Rebellion, when other more powerful white men step in and say, well, you couldn't keep control of your property so we have to assert mastery to restore peace and order. But even in that situation, the courts are about protecting white men's property rights, that's why they're reimbursing people for executing enslaved people. It's why they're even having trials at all, because they know that allowing militia to just indiscriminately decide who is and isn't a rebel infringes on people's property rights. So I think it's important to note outside of working hours, whites did enact these kinds of containment strategies, but they were far less successful than whites wanted to let on. Now, during the working day, surveillance was pretty intense when African Americans had to devise ways to thwart that constant surveillance.

00:38:52 One of my favorite stories comes from Virginia WPA Narratives. And so it's from a woman who was a little girl during slavery, and she talks about being in a kitchen with her mother and their female enslaver. This is a super common scenario. There's a white woman who runs the household, but she's working alongside an enslaved woman in a kitchen. And as they're working, a coachman walks by the kitchen window and says to her mother, oh Mary, there are weevils in the wheat and keeps walking. And so right there next to

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this woman who thinks she has got a fully watchful eye on this enslaved woman and her daughter that she's absolutely supervising what's happening, her mother gets information that there's going to be a slave patrol that night. And now anybody else who comes through the kitchen that day, which will certainly be a lot of people over the course of a day, she can tell them this information, right?

And it can happen right next to the woman who is keeping an incredibly watchful eye. So something I talk a lot about in the book are competing geographies. I talk a lot about what Stephanie Camp would call geographies of containment. And I also talk about

Vanessa Holden: 00:40:06 geographies of invasion and resistance that are often layered in exactly the same spaces, in sites of labor. I make the argument that while it may be true, that men were overwhelmingly the more mobile gender off of plantations, because sometimes they had access to skilled trades that required them to move from place to place. Enslaved women were far more mobile within plantations, particularly a mid to small size because at any given time in the growth cycle, they could be required to do heavy agricultural work or be pulled into various domestic tasks. So there's a work related reason for them to be just about anywhere during the workday, which means they had incredible access to white families and incredible access to information.

Information that Black men during the workday would not have. In that little anecdote, we see a coachman who has a particularly mobile job speaking to a cook who has sort of a type of labor position that puts her in a hub of information very quickly working together to put out the word and then folks may or may not go out depending.

Liz Covart: 00:41:16 Now that we have more context for the Southampton Rebellion, I'd really like for us to revisit the rebellion as a community event. But first, we really should take a moment to thank our episode sponsor.

Rob Parkinson: 00:41:30 Hi, I'm Rob Parkinson, associate professor of history at Binghamton University in my new book, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence,* published by the Omohundro Institute is out now. This book covers the 15 months between Lexington and Concord and the Declaration of Independence. And we think we know that story cold. Especially in

1776, it is a straight march from Thomas Payne and Common Sense through Thomas Jefferson denouncing the King in the Declaration of Independence. What I have found is we have forgotten so much of what happens in those 15 months and especially about the presence of African Americans and Native Americans in that story. And then worries and opportunities about how we can exploit these fears and use that as a basis for this extremely fragile thing of unity. Get your copy of *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence*, wherever you buy your books.

Liz Covart: 00:42:30 To order your copy of Rob Parkinson's *Thirteen Clocks*, for the low price of $20, visit benfranklinsworld.com/clocks. That's benvranklin'sworld.com/clocks.

Vanessa, if we place Nat Turner on the sidelines for a moment, would you tell us why Southampton's Black communities saw rebellion as necessary and about the different ways that Southampton's Black communities participated in this rebellion?

Vanessa Holden: 00:42:58 The enslavement who initially joined are very clear that the goal is to eradicate their enslavement and to free their neighbors. And Nat Turner most likely had a vision for seizing arms that were held in a cache in the county state of Jerusalem. That's now Courtland, Virginia. But as we look at the ways that women encounter the rebellion, participated in the rebellion, survived the rebellion, one of the greatest assets that this rebellion had was the element of surprise. And while I do not think that women were necessarily particularly surprised, they certainly were making decisions in the moment as things developed and as things happen, I think that the community really did have mixed feelings, that there are some women along the rebellion route who are actively ready to participate in violence. There are others who are willing to pass on information are willing to continue cooking dinner or willing to play the role of intelligence network and supply line.

00:44:12 And then there are other women who are grieved and angry and heartbroken and have a real idea of just how much labor they now have to take up post-rebellion. Another story that comes from the WPA Narratives that I begin the book with is from a narrative by a man named Alan Crawford who grew up in Southampton County. But of course, if he was interviewed in the 1930s, he was not alive for the rebellion. He grew up a generation later. So he was really

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raised by people who survived. And while he does talk about Nat Turner, one of the WPA questions on their questionnaire at the time was an explicit question about insurrection and rebellion. So he does note that he grew up actually at the Travis place where Nat Turner was once enslaved.

He doesn't speak a whole lot about the rebellion violence. He tells one story about a couple of enslaved women that appears in other sources, but his family story that he emphasizes is a story of his grandmother who was enslaved on the Edwards Plantation, a place that Nat Turner was brought through after his capture in October 1831. And the story is that she ran out the front door and hit Nat Turner across the face and yelled at him. How could you take my son away from me? Crawford's uncle Henry could have been the Henry who was at the initial cabin bond meeting. That's not really clear from the sources, but that really human moment of grief, that's his family story that gets passed down.

00:45:45 That's the story he tells this WPA worker, I think really encapsulates some of the really fraught emotions associated with the rebellion ,that it's by and large, the community that then has to absorb the violence, that has to fill in empty spaces during the harvest season, that has to endure white enslavers who are simultaneously trying to pretend that nothing happened, but also who are deeply afraid and shaken that it could happen again at any moment. And so I think it's a little more complicated than either people really this community really wanted the rebellion to happen or the community didn't want it to happen. I think it's more complicated than that.

Liz Covart: 00:46:31 Vanessa, given all of the different historical sources you've looked at, did you ever get a sense of whether there was one thing or a couple of things that really drove the Black communities of Southampton to rebel?

Vanessa Holden: 00:46:43 Slavery. Yeah. I mean, I think this is a question I get asked a lot why do they do this? And the answer is slavery. And the answer is that sure, and Nat Turner may have had a particularly spiritually informed vision, but the people who initially followed him, the men who gathered with him at Cabin Pond may or may not have, and the people who joined in along the way may or may not have, but each of them individually had very deep personal experiences with slavery and with the enslavers they murdered. One historian

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of the rebellion calls it an intimate rebellion. And I think that's really a helpful characterization because these men knew the people they were killing.

They've grown up with some of them. They've been passed down. They've been inherited by some of them. Overwhelmingly, the small to mid-size conditions meant they worked alongside them in one way or another throughout the working day. So of the probably 50 to 75 insurgents who ended up traveling with a rebellion. That means you've got hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of reasons "why" that all boil down to slavery, that all boil down to the violence and end with slavery.

Liz Covart: 00:48:11 So what did the Southampton rebellion mean for Southampton's Black communities after the rebellion? What did it mean for the laws that were put in place to regulate movement and behavior? What happened to African American's ability to live work and to have families? What were the repercussions of this rebellion?

Vanessa Holden: 00:48:30 Nationally, there's a huge uproar about this rebellion. It inspires William Lloyd Garrison to write a scathing editorial that boils down to, well, you had it coming. You know, this is what happens when you abuse people like this. So there's a lot of response and reaction broadly. But one thing I do in my own work is focus in on, well, what exactly is happening here in the aftermath? And the truth is, in Virginia, slavery does not change. There's some rumbling and debate in the Virginia state house about manumission and getting rid of slavery. They do not do that. They do not move ahead with any sort of pro manumission policies, the conclusion that the Commonwealth power structure, but even the local power structure reaches is that like slavery is not the problem. And certainly not anyone's individual enslaved people, whatever want to be involved in something like this.

Vanessa Holden: 00:49:32 The issue was one preacher who was deranged, who had managed to influence a handful of other people. This was very isolated. And if any population was to blame for this, it was free Black people. So sure, the individual relationships between enslaved people and enslavers may have changed, but overwhelmingly, the people whose lives changed the most post-rebellion are free people of color. There is a move to expel free people of color. Now, Virginia had tried to do this before and had laws on the books that made it difficult for free people to stay in Virginia, but often white

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communities who really relied on free Black labor could get around these laws if it was beneficial for them. And there are people who migrate out of Southampton county, the free person of color population shifts to Virginia's urban spaces in significant ways post rebellion.

There's also a large group of free people of color who immigrate to Liberia, fully supported by the colonization society in Virginia that raises money to basically remove them to West Africa. And in other places, free Black people are specifically targeted. So Harriet Jacobs talks about in her own narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, all the way in Eden, North Carolina, free people of color who are the main victims of white vigilante violence. The assumption being that them just being around was enough to inspire enslaved people to turn against white enslavers. So while there's all this sort of big talk and posturing about absolute power, nobody is seriously trying to do away with slavery. Power structure comes to the conclusion then no really it's free Black people who are the problem.

Liz Covart: 00:51:34 In Vanessa's book, *Surviving Southampton*, Vanessa does a really wonderful job at getting at the stories of different community members who participated in the Southampton Rebellion, especially at the stories of African American women who participated in the rebellion. Vanessa, could you talk a bit more about the sources you used to get at these individual and personalized stories, especially of women who never tend to leave enough written records behind? You mentioned that you used the Work Progress Administration or the WPA oral histories and some trial records. What are the other sources that you used to get at these stories?

Vanessa Holden: 00:52:10 Sure. So, overwhelmingly, I looked at the sources that historians have been looking at to study this rebellion for a very, very long time. So I looked at the trial records. So post-rebellion there were about 50 people who were held in custody and either interviewed because they were free people of color or tried by a local court and these slave courts were set up so that it was really a panel of justices adjudicating and then a representative of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and then a defense attorney would argue the cases. So there's a significant trial record that is useful in a couple of ways.

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Vanessa Holden: 00:52:53 So the first way that a lot of historians have used those records is to sort of piece together the rebellion route and the narrative of the rebellion who may have committed which actions I read those same records, but I zoom out on the minute book page a little bit.

So rather than reading the trials disaggregated from the surrounding things during the court date, I took time to really look at the various versions of these court records. I've seen the originals in Southampton County. I've seen the microfilmed versions of these minute books. I've read the Tragle transcriptions. And between those three, I have taken a look at well, what was happening during the rest of these court dates when people weren't on trial and it's there that there's some real important I think aspects of what was really happening at court, that what I do in the book is look at the court and I look at the courtroom and I look at the courtyard and the jail and the hanging tree as their own new geography of containment. And I think about how Black people are navigating this geography. And even as you know, trials are on the docket for the day, groups of free people of color are showing up together to be registered.

00:54:15 So sometimes on a given minute book page, directly juxtaposed with a trial that ends up with a guilty conviction and an execution. There are lists of free people of color who were also there to have their freedom read into the record. There they are at the epicenter and walking through probably a crowd of white people who wanted very much to witness executions, that they are venturing in there. There are a few indentures that happen where free families of color are indenturing their children to white men in the community. Those indenture papers are extent and I look at those as well. And upon closer inspection, they're indenturing their children to white men who don't own slaves. And you know, my best assertion is that what they're trying to do is keep their children in the county, they're trying to keep their families together. So these kinds of freedom-making practices that have to utilize really oppressive labor regimes and oppressive systems are all interspersed with what else is happening at court that day.

00:55:22 I read Turner's confessions. It's a heavily mediated source, but you do get a sense for what he thought was important to talk about. And you get a sense for where he was over the course of the rebellion. So I'm able to demonstrate from women's testimonies at court about where they were the day of and where he says he was

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the day of, right, places where they almost certainly came in contact with Nat Turner himself. Like I said, I looked at slave patrol records. I looked at family papers. I looked at census records and tax rolls. I tried to use place as a source and think about the importance of geography and how these people are traveling in-between locations. And I took some time with children. There's really a dearth of work on enslaved children.

Vanessa Holden: 00:56:16 It's pretty much been overwhelmingly Wilma King holding it down in enslaved childhood studies for a long time.

And yet, there are children and youth who are indicted for being a part of this rebellion. So piecing together what their lives might have looked like involved. Again, looking at indenture papers, thinking through what kinds of labor they did, noting which adults they had been in contact with, thinking through what their testimonies reveal about where they had been and what they'd witnessed. So the long and the short of it is, once I asked the question, where were women in this county and started pulling that string, a whole bunch of other communities became way more visible. And you know, this project, it started as a senior undergraduate honors thesis because after reading Turner's confessions for the first time, I did the math about how long he'd been missing in between the rebellion and his capture and thought, well, who's feeding him?

How's he eating? He can't hunt. He can't risk stealing food himself. So who's keeping him alive? And I don't have a specific name or answer to that question, but it led me to Black women and just starting to try and pull that string. Okay, well, here's where I know women lived. Here's where I know they appear in the trial record. Let's go from there and triangulate.

Liz Covart: 00:57:38 Written sources are one way that we can learn about what happened in the past. Another place that we can learn about the past comes from our individual or collective memories of an event. And in *Surviving Southampton*, Vanessa describes the role that African American women have played in our memory of the Southampton rebellion. So Vanessa, would you tell us about the role that African American women have played in our memory of the Southampton rebellion and why you wish more people understood this role?

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Vanessa Holden: 00:58:08 So I'm a scholar who trusts silence and a number of historians of enslaved people and particularly enslaved women talk about and confront silence in the archive all the time. And as I did this project and worked with the sources I have, one of the things that I really learned, particularly from the enslaved women who are deposed almost certainly under duress in these trials that follow the rebellion, is that silence is also a weapon and a strategy. And you have to trust them that if they aren't going to talk about something that for anybody who's over studied an instrument or studied music, you learn really quickly that rests are as important as the notes on the page. And so I started treating their silence like rests on the page instead of a deficit or an unknowable. So in some ways when they got quiet, I listened more deeply to try and think, well, why might somebody get quiet real quick?

Vanessa Holden: 00:59:20 And when I saw the ways that women appear at certain sites of the rebellion yet, sort of remains circumspect about further details beyond what exactly they've been asked about, it helped me realize that there's something here that these women just aren't going to say, and that's actually a really savvy strategy and it's keeping them safe. So in that way, they've played a huge role in the way that this rebellion can be remembered because their decisions, and strategic decisions around when to be silent, shaped the core record, shaped the record of the rebellion. Additionally, and this is something that Black women's historians have talked about for generations now, women are important history keepers and narrative keepers. Alan Crawford, who I mentioned earlier in our discussion, the story he got is the story that came from his grandmother. You know, she controlled the way that this was going to be remembered in their family.

And that man in his WPA Narrative could still recount from memory, the slave patrol schedule for Southampton county, where he lived as a child. He was only there as a kid and he still knew and could recall that particular schedule from the post-rebellion county. Even working with descendants now, I've had the opportunity to work with one of Nat Turner's descendants in the county on a public history project. And he talks about his own grandmother as being the keeper of his family's history and being the person who would tell him bits and pieces about that "Turner mess" as his family called it. And so I think it's also really important that because Black women are prominent features of the community that survives it's their memories, it's their retellings that shape

historic memory in the county that shape what children are told about this rebellion.

And finally, Black women in the present day are key actors in contemporary public history and contemporary historic memory work. Black women were essential to having Blackhead Signpost road renamed. It was a road named for an intersection where at least one individual's head was placed on a signpost post-rebellion and Blackhead Signpost became the street name on a green street sign for a couple of generations in Southampton County and Black women were a key part of changing that name and then really commemorating that history of generational violence in an official marker, right? So Black women are still doing that very important local history work in the county.

Liz Covart: 01:02:17 Now we should move into the time warp. This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what something had occurred differently, or if someone had acted differently. Vanessa, in your opinion, what might've happened if women had not participated in the Southampton rebellion?

Vanessa Holden: 01:02:56 It would've fallen apart a lot sooner. The word that the rebellion would've gotten out sooner. I talk about in the book, the evidence that there is Nat Turner in fact, learned that white people knew the rebellion was a foot probably from an enslaved woman. Men may have been the calvary and the infantry of this particular rebellion, but women were in charge of the intelligence network and the supply line and a military operation could only go so far without those two things. Yeah. I think if Black women somehow had universally all said we're absolutely not going to help you participate, give you any useful information, you can't rely on the many structures of everyday rebellion that we've participated in for generations. You know, we're shutting it all down. Yeah. The rebellion would've fizzled out much sooner and they would not have gotten nearly as far. I would also venture that, not nearly as many enslaved men would've participated.

Liz Covart: 01:03:56 So now that *Surviving Southampton* is out in the world, what are you researching and writing about now?

Vanessa Holden: 01:04:01 I got some really good advice from a mentor to work where I'm at. And Kentucky is a lot like Virginia in a lot of ways, which is not by accident. And here in Fayette County where I live, there are really

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incalculable volumes of sources in existence. One of the collateral goods of the Commonwealth of Kentucky not seceding from the union during the Civil War is that its major cities were not burnt to the ground. And there's an incredible amount of historical material and accessible. So right now, I'm directing the Central Kentucky Slavery Initiative, which is our project to both tell the Black history of the University of Kentucky from well before integration in the mid-20th century to present.

But it's also a project to more deeply research and tell the history of slavery first in central Kentucky, and then to expand to other regions of the Commonwealth. And there has not been synthetic work about slavery in Kentucky since the early 20th century. And while Kentucky makes a number of cameos and Kentuckians, particularly Black Kentuckians, end up just about everywhere in 19th century America, it's about time to have a comprehensive study about the way that both slavery and enslaved people influence American history. And as a major hub of the internal slave trade with one of the most important slave markets of the internal slave trade, just down the road for me, I feel a real passion for making sure that not only is this history out there for academics and for academic purposes, but for descendant communities.

Kentucky has quite the diaspora and has been a source of migrants for a very long time for success of waves of migration from the exodusters through World War II era, second great migration. So a lot of folks who trace their roots back to Kentucky, but there's still a blank spot when it comes to slavery. And I think the records exist here to help folks more deeply know their own histories. And I happen to live near some truly excellent and amazing local historians who are putting in the work and putting in the preservation work already. So any way to boost what they're already doing, I'm here for.

Liz Covart: 01:06:27 How can we reach you if we want to get involved with these projects or if we have more questions?

Vanessa Holden: 01:06:32 So you can find me on Twitter at Dr. V. Holden. So you can find me there. You can also find me at my UK website by searching for me, uky.edu.

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Episode 336: Vanessa Holden, "Surviving the Southampton Rebellion"

Liz Covart: 01:06:44 Vanessa Holden, thank you for joining us and for taking us through the Southampton Rebellion of 1831. And for showing us what a community effort that rebellion was.

Vanessa Holden: 01:06:53 Happy to be here. Always happy to talk about Southampton County and lovely to chat today.

Liz Covart: 01:07:00 Nat Turner's rebellion involved the actions and participation of more than just one man. It involved an entire community. As Vanessa stated, the Southampton Rebellion took place between August 21 and August 23rd, 1831. And it took place because of slavery and the spread of slavery across the expanding United States. Enslaved people and free people of color in Southampton were in danger of losing their freedom if they had freedom. And being sold further south and west across the nation's growing cotton empire. Afraid for their safety and for the safety of their loved ones and children, Black people in Southampton rose up and violently killed all the white people they encountered in an attempt to end slavery in their community. Unfortunately, for their community, they failed. Although somewhere between 55 and 65 people lost their lives. Virginians did not look at this rebellion as a reason to end their practice of slavery.

Instead, they tried to paint a picture of a mentally unstable Nat Turner, leading a rebellion of just a few people rather than report on how Turner had support and assistance from a sizable portion of Southampton's Black community. Now this shaping of the narrative calmed white Virginians, but it also obscured and hid the participation of freeing enslaved men, women, and children. As Vanessa's research is revealed, the participation of women and children was of vital importance to the rebels. Women and children passed on messages, they passed on supplies, and they likely encouraged people to participate. They also likely did the work to hinder the rebellion with a refusal to participate. We can see from Vanessa's work that the reasons people had for participating or not participating in the Southampton Rebellion varied and were as numerous and individual as each person. Now, the reason we see so few major slave uprisings in the early United States is in part, by the way, whites shaped the narrative. Rather than revealing large numbers of participants in these rebellions, they limited rebellions to just a few participants.

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Liz Covart: 01:08:58 They emphasized how futile it was for the enslaved to resist their enslavement. But when we peel back the layers of the historical record and listen for the silences of what was said, and then what was not said, we can glean a truer picture of what actually happened during these violent and fearful times. We can also look to and interrogate our memories of events to better understand them. Why is it that we remember the Southampton Rebellion as Nat Turner's Rebellion? Would it be possible for one man and a handful of followers to pull off a bloody rebellion without any other assistance? Who else may have participated and who needed to participate in these rebellions to make them possible? By asking questions such as those and interrogating our collective and family memories of events, we can better understand the people and events of the past. You'll find more information about Vanessa, her book, *Surviving Southampton*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for our conversation on the show notes page. Benfranklinsworld.com/336.

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