

GABRIEL'S REPUBLICAN REBELLION

Graham Russell Hodges

Douglas R. Egerton. *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. xiii + 262 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, maps, and index. \$39.95 (cloth); \$13.95 (paper).

Several years ago, a panel of distinguished scholars convened at Monticello to discuss the turbulent topic of Thomas Jefferson and race. Comments ranged from defensive explanations of the racial attitudes of our third president to the irreconcilable question of his relationship with Sally Hemmings. Never during the two-hour exchange did any expert question if Jefferson's slaves, or any other Virginia blacks, ever *comprehended* his egalitarian ideology. This singular oversight continues in a recent, highly critical collection of essays, aptly entitled *Jeffersonian Legacies*.¹ Similarly, though Jefferson's influence on the formation of working-class radicalism is now well-understood, no scholar has heretofore systematically connected artisan republicanism with the aspirations of free or enslaved blacks in the early republic.

Using the lessons of artisan republicanism to explain African American history is but one of the many virtues in Douglas Egerton's incisive analysis of Gabriel's Rebellion of 1800, and its aftermath two years later. Since Herbert Aptheker first pointed attention to the political tenor of Gabriel's calls for slave revolt, few studies of slave conspiracies have failed to mention Gabriel's partisan appeals.² Egerton is the first to apply theoretically consistent microhistory to this conspiracy. In his sinewy narrative, Gabriel emerges as an assertive, literate artisan, fully aware of other insurrections around the Atlantic basin. The slave blacksmith shared with white artisans a small producer ideology and trusted that white mechanics would support his struggle for liberty. That Gabriel failed to understand racial barriers to revolutionary unity does not undermine the significance of his attempt.

Egerton's book is precisely organized. Historical articulation of rebellion demands an engaging narrative style, so Egerton eschews problem-solving on the surface of his story, preferring to debate other interpretations in his introduction and extensive notes. The introduction also serves to correct historical misperceptions of Gabriel's name, hair-style, and, importantly,

religious motivations. The body of the book begins with a contextual account of the immediate effect of the American Revolution and its aftermath on servile systems in Virginia, followed by a vivid re-creation of the conspiracy. Part 2 reports the multiple trials of Gabriel and his fellow conspirators; these trial scenarios, informed by deep reading of the voluminous trial records in the Virginia State Library, constitute one of Egerton's strongest heuristic achievements. Egerton completes his study with an account of Sancho's conspiracy of 1802 and Virginia authorities' ensuing crackdown on postrevolutionary black freedoms. Useful appendixes discuss Gabriel's religion, his French confederates, and a careful tabulation of executed slaves.

Gabriel's artisan republicanism arose from the ashes of black insurrections during the American Revolution in Virginia. Recently charted by Sylvia Frey,³ black responses to Lord Dunmore's famous proclamation revealed deepening African American demands for liberty. Although slavery survived postwar abolitionism, its existence was insecure. Economic change mixed with postwar egalitarianism, flavored by evangelical religion, prompted slave masters to award emancipation to over ten thousand black Virginians after 1782. When a fearful Virginia legislature quickly tabled St. George Tucker's 1796 plan for gradual abolition, and moved to curtail the numbers of free blacks, literate black artisans like Gabriel prepared to revolt.

Born of slave parents at the Prosser plantation in Henrico County, Virginia, a few miles outside of Richmond, Gabriel experienced life in ways easily comprehensible to a white artisan. Literate and skilled, Gabriel was frequently hired out by his master, Thomas Prosser, a process which gradually made Gabriel think like a free wage laborer. While Prosser gained the bulk of the profits, cash in Gabriel's pockets brought him self-assertion, nominal independence, and a propensity to work for artisans sympathetic to abolitionism. His status allowed Gabriel greater freedom to consort in urban taverns, where he met other discontented blacks and whites more angry about class inequalities than split by racial animosities. Egerton's fine evocation of Gabriel's political education within Richmond's tavern culture demonstrates how barrooms offered heady draughts of conspiracy and intrigue in addition to liquor and common gambols. Like a white artisan defiant of social betters demanding deference, Gabriel ran afoul of the law during a pig-stealing incident. Discovered taking the pig by a former overseer, Gabriel bit off part of the man's ear. Convicted and facing a depth penalty, Gabriel's literacy warranted "benefit of the clergy." Clemency was limited and Gabriel was jailed, then branded. Thomas Prosser was forced to post a one thousand dollar bond for a year to assure the nervous overseer against any future violence by the giant slave. In Egerton's estimation, the branding, imprisonment, and stigma tilted Gabriel toward a rebellious mentality.

Eugene Genovese and Barry Gaspar have noted that slaves seized opportunities to rebel when the white power structure seemed in disarray.⁴ In turn-of-the-century Virginia, newspapers abetted by a local grapevine shared by slaves and artisans reported angry words in Congress over the XYZ Affair, Alien and Sedition Acts, and the conflict over the French Revolution. Most intoxicating for Gabriel was the successful black insurrection in San Domingue which he learned about from a radical Frenchman named Charles Quersey, and refugee blacks. Egerton argues that whether Gabriel correctly understood that Quersey's extreme radicalism did not represent North American republicanism is not significant. These reports, combined with his own punishment, helped Gabriel attain a "psychological autonomy that empowered him to break free from what he had borne for so long" (p. 48).

Now free of servile inhibitions, Gabriel initiated plans for a November surprise to coincide with the elections. Egerton compares Gabriel's hopes to achieve freedom through insurrection with those of urban mobs in the North, who would rise up, not "in protest over a single practice" (p. 49), but to enforce a political presence. Gabriel planned to gather one thousand urban slaves to take Richmond. He designed a banner inscribed "death or Liberty," reversing Patrick Henry's famous plea and reminding other bondsmen of Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. However, Egerton argues that Gabriel failed critically to attract evangelical whites, blacks who combined New Light with African faiths, and women. Gabriel turned instead to artisans, haranguing them at Saturday frolics. As Gabriel recruited a chain of skilled slaves in towns and plantations, the conspiracy grew in numbers and spun out of control. Inevitably, the plot attracted a traitor, Pharaoh, a slave with materialist ties to his master and willing to trade his soul for temporal freedom. Warned, determined whites quickly rounded up the rebels. Word of discovery sent blacks fleeing across the countryside, soaked by a thunderstorm. Rumors that slaves planned to rape white women exacerbated white anger. Although there was no evidence to support these racist fantasies, sexual paranoia gave whites further impetus to deal harshly with the conspiracy.

Egerton handles the ensuing show trials very effectively. Since Thomas J. Davis's remarkable reconstruction of the slave conspiracy in New York City of 1741, historians have treated slave testimony with greater respect. Once dismissed as desperate pleading, bondsmen's evidence in conspiracy proceedings is now accepted as serious narrative.⁵ Egerton's research is especially deep in his accounts of each conspirator's defense, trial, and inexorably, execution. His narrative of the failed dreams of these black martyrs contains marked respect for their courage and faith. Quotes demonstrate slave faith in the pursuit of liberty. One insurgent testified that "I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have . . . had he been taken by the

British and put to trial." The slave continued: "I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause" (p. 102).

Gabriel was still at large. Harbored by a sympathetic sea captain, Gabriel was turned in by a slave eager for the reward. In court, other slaves testified against him; Gabriel's stony response to conviction was a request to hang alongside other condemned conspirators. As in New York City sixty years before, the leader's courage and resolution in the face of death insured the spiritual success of the rebellion. As trials rushed past and the grisly toll mounted, Virginia lawmakers nervously noted the costs of executions. Required to compensate slave masters for twenty-seven executed bondsmen and pay the militia, Governor James Monroe faced financial fees of over thirteen thousand dollars. Gabriel's execution had satiated an angry public; future convictions would result only in transportation.

Little time passed before Gabriel's example inspired a second insurrection. Sancho, a ferryman, designed an insurrection in Halifax, Virginia in 1802. Again, work experience offered the conspirators common ground. Undeterred by the massive blood-letting two years before, Sancho and his men planned a holiday uprising of anarchic killing, followed by negotiations with a wounded white populace. Sancho placed much of his faith in other watermen; unfortunately for his hopes, as the conspiracy spread, he lost control, and a slave informant stepped forth. Monroe's government swept the plotters into jail, and pondered their fate.

This time, Monroe and President Thomas Jefferson had little appetite for a massive round of executions. Transporting the arrested seemed plausible, but Jefferson preferred a new destination. Jefferson observed how the British liberals convinced Black Loyalists to migrate to Sierra Leone, ridding England and Nova Scotia of the republican-minded blacks, and enabling Britain to establish a colonial beachhead on West Africa. Colonization, in the air in America, was favored by such eminent blacks as Paul Cuffe and Peter Williams, Jr. Unhappily, the Virginians learned that English governors, already beset by unceasing demands from black Nova Scotians and, lately, from rebellious Jamaican maroons, had no stomach for seventeen rebels from America. The Spanish West Indies also closed their doors, fearful of the spread of black revolt in the Caribbean. The sole option was to sell the imprisoned slaves to a dealer, at a discount.

Egerton's concluding chapter focuses on the passage of new laws by the fearful Virginia legislature. Intent on crushing black autonomy, abetted by the disappearance of white guilt over slavery, new codes outlawed black liberties. Virginia's woes affected national policies. Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe used the local turmoil to renew hostility toward the black government in San Domingue. Virginia's new police statutes curtailing black movements

were, according to Egerton, especially brutal. Egerton's analysis of the legal ramifications of the two revolts rings true on one level. Virginia lawmakers aimed restrictions on slave nighttime activities and curtailed work permits to free blacks.

Were Virginia's blacks cowed by these new rounds of repressive new legislation? It is doubtful that slave frolics ended for very long and use of blacks as watermen was an entrenched tradition. Moreover, had Egerton pushed his chronology a bit further we might have learned if the memory of Gabriel inspired the hundreds of slaves who fled Virginia with the British for Nova Scotia during War of 1812. Unlike their black republican predecessors who left New York City in 1783, this group has attracted little notice save for some dismissive comments by Robin Winks in his history of blacks in Canada.⁶ As nearly 2,400 of the refugees came from Virginia and Maryland, it is not too great a plunge to argue that Gabriel was a living memory to many.

Is this the definitive account of Gabriel's rebellion? Egerton's search into the trial records and his synthetic re-creation of postrevolutionary Virginia are both exhaustive. Egerton's disavowal of Gabriel's evangelical roots will bother scholars who find revolutionary roots in religion. Still, Egerton's powerful synthesis of artisan republicanism with black revolutionary activity in Jefferson's Virginia sustains a badly needed union between the political hopes of white and black laborers during the age of revolution. In so doing, Egerton offers a solution for a disturbing cul de sac within early American labor historiography. Rather than passively point at the racism of artisans and founding fathers, Egerton has reconstructed a world in which the deferred dreams of white and black workers merged, if only for a moment.

Graham Russell Hodges, Department of History, Colgate University, is the author of Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White (1993) and, with Alan E. Brown, "Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey (1994).

1. Peter S. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies* (1993), esp. pp. 183–86.

2. See Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), pp. 218–35; Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (1972), ch. 5; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slave and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705–1865* (1988).

3. Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (1991).

4. Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (1979); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen & Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua With Implications for Colonial British America* (1985).

5. Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumour of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (1985). For recent use of this testimony, see Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Historical Sociology* (1990).

6. Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (1971), pp. 114–16.