CHAPTER TWO

"Pregnant with Symptoms of Alarming Decline"

During the winter of 1831-32, Virginians expressed grave concerns over the future of the Old Dominion. During the past decade, a sense of economic, political, and social decline affected the Commonwealth. An extended economic depression was attributed to consistently low tobacco prices, a high rate of emigration, and the federal tariff. A decade of sectional conflict within the state had culminated in the spirited and often hostile debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1829-30. Less than eighteen months after the Convention, Southside Virginia erupted in the horrific violence of racial warfare. In the succeeding months, petitions calling on the legislature to address questions of emancipation and removal of the black population had circulated throughout the Commonwealth. On December 6, 1831, Governor John Floyd inaugurated the legislative session and delivered his official message on the state of the Commonwealth. Floyd detailed the events of the August insurrection in Southampton. He recommended that the legislature strengthen existing slave codes, and he called for the appropriation of funds to deport the state's free black population. Although Floyd had previously espoused gradual emancipation, he now avoided any mention of such a proposal. Central to his message, though, was the theme that Virginia was in the midst of crisis.[1]

This sense of crisis thrust the institution of slavery, previously considered unalterable, into legislative scrutiny. The belief in a declining stature of Virginia permeated the state Capitol that winter. Feelings of anxiety and pessimism emerged time and again in the orations of delegates and in the daily newspapers. William Brodnax spoke of "the decay of our prosperity, and the retrograde movement of this once flourishing Commonwealth."[2] A Richmond newspaper commented about a "dark and growing evil, at our doors," and spoke of a deep-seated disease that "has all along been consuming our vitals."[3]

These feelings of angst were not confined solely to the vicinity of the State Capitol. Many Virginians expressed similar sentiments, even some as far removed as the Hudson River. A young cadet at West Point, Philip St. George Cocke, writing to his father, expressed similar concerns. "I am anxiously expecting the message of our Governor - - he will of course recommend some important measures at this momentous crisis in the affairs of the Old Dominion. This is indeed a re----ble [responsible?] time with our legislatures and public men generally. All their wisdom will be necessary to devise and all their energy to act at a juncture in the affairs of our State pregnant

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[1] *House Journal,* 1831-32, 9-14.

[2] *Richmond Enquirer,* December 17, 1831.

[3] *Richmond Enquirer,* January 7, 1832.

with symptoms of alarming decline."[4] When news of the Governor's message finally reached West Point, Cadet Cocke received little reassurance. Addressing the General Assembly, Governor John Floyd spoke of "occurrences of a grave and distressing character . . . together with the anxiety felt in the future fate of some great subjects which were agitated at your last Session, and the unpleasant aspect of our Federal relations, all conspire to cause the people to turn their eyes upon you at this time."[5]

Economic Malaise

As the Governor indicated, this perception of decline was not entirely credited to the Southampton insurrection. Prophecies of gloom and decay were evident throughout the preceding decade, owing largely to an extended tobacco depression which had effected Virginia's economy in many ways. Since selling for record high prices averaging between $20.00 and $25.00 a hogshead in 1815 and 1816, the price of tobacco had steadily declined to an average market low of $3.00 a hogshead in 1824. These paltry prices were equivalent only to those during the depressed market caused by the War of 1812. During the hostilities with England, and previously during the Napoleonic wars, however, tobacco production had been sharply reduced. In 1824, production levels had actually increased and only declined mildly over the following year.[6]

The failure of tobacco farmers to adjust to market fluctuations stemmed primarily from the production cycle of the crop. Tobacco was (and still is) an eighteen month crop, the planter planted his seedbeds in the winter and then transplanted seedlings into the fields in late April or early May. August was harvest time and afterward the leaves were cured and processed. Packaged leaves only reached market the following June, a month after the new crop has been transplanted. At best, it took a planter two years to adjust to market prices driven down by over-production. And planters, remembering the sudden price rise in 1815, were hesitant to limit potential profits by cultivating less acreage.[7]

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[4] Philip St. George Cocke to General John Hartwell Cocke, December 14, 1831, Cocke Family Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

[5] *House Journal*, Governor's Message, 9-14.

[6] Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market, and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1938), 132-133. Discussion on the tobacco trade in Europe is found in Jacob Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the Tobacco Monopoly, 1694-1791, and of Its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades,* 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973).

[7] The best description of the characteristics of antebellum tobacco farming is still Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929). Also helpful has been Robert, *Tobacco Kingdom*; Avery Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of*

        In the five years after the low of 1824, the tobacco prices had steadily climbed to an average price of $5.00 a hogshead. Prices in 1831 crop recovered after a sharp but temporary decline in 1830 caused by bad weather during the growing season.[8] However, by then, the export monopoly once held by Piedmont farmers was being seriously challenged by tobacco growers in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. Ironically, many of these western planters were emigrant Virginians who had left the Old Dominion because of widespread soil exhaustion and their own exclusion from the political process.[9]

        This flood of emigration was also considered to be a principal reason for Virginia's economic decline. A clause in the petition from Hanover addressed what was a long standing concern: "Many of our most industrious and enterprising people seek new homes in distant and stranger States, where they and their children may be exempt from those dangers and difficulties with which they are unfortunately beset in their native land."[10] On the opening day of the slavery debate in the legislature, Samuel M'D. Moore, of Rockbridge County, expressed these concerns by comparing the population growth of Virginia and New York. "In 1790, the population of Virginia was at least from two to three times as great as that of New York." But by 1830, New York's population had increased almost six times as rapidly as had the population of Virginia. Moore asserted that the problem was compounded when one considered that New York possessed significantly less territory than Virginia.[11]

        As Moore's numbers implied, migration from the state was not a new occurrence. A steady stream of pioneers had been flowing west since colonial days. In the preceding decade, however, events had made the benefits of emigration even more enticing. The Louisiana Purchase and the removal of British outpost following the War of 1812 extended the American frontier beyond the Mississippi River. The forcible eviction of the last, remaining Native American tribes east of the Mississippi opened new lands for settlement in the Old Southwest and the Mississippi delta. Perhaps more significantly, especially in the tobacco regions of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio, a construction boom of internal improvements opened Atlantic sea ports to the agricultural produce of the region. Farmers now avoided the lengthy trip down the Mississippi to New Orleans and instead, shipped their produce by rail and canal to New York, Baltimore, and

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Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1923?); and Frederick Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness: Tobacco and Society in Danville, Virginia, 1780-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

    [8] *Lynchburg Virginian,* May-June, 1831.

    [9] Robert, *Tobacco Kingdom*, 135-143; and Craven, *Soil Exhaustion,* 118-133.

    [10] Legislative Petitions, Hanover County, December 14, 1831.

    [11] *Richmond Enquirer,* January 19, 1832. In 1830, the whole population of Virginia was 1,186,299; that of New York was 1,934,409.

Philadelphia. The rapid introduction of steamboats on America's waterways following the Supreme Court's decision in *Gibbons v. Ogden*, only accelerated this pattern of trade. Additionally, Alabama's 1819 constitution, which stipulated universal manhood suffrage, inspired democratic reforms in many of these western states and offered the "common man" the perception of political equality under the guise of franchise. Thus throughout the 1820's, Virginia's small farmers, faced with a struggling economy and land in need of costly revitalization, looked to the lucrative western states as a viable alternative.[12]

The detrimental effects from the combination of emigration and the depressed tobacco market seemed even worse when compared to the perceived economic growth of surrounding states. The economic successes of Pennsylvania and Ohio particularly scathed Virginia's Cassandras. While many acknowledged the tobacco depression and emigration as symptoms of Virginia's decline, others sought a more nefarious culprit. This culprit appeared to these Virginians in the form of manufacturing and commercial interests, which were centered largely in the northern states. The interests of these manufactures often appeared contradictory to the ideals of "pastoral republicanism" espoused in Jeffersonian Virginia. Making matters worse, during the latter half of the 1820's, the Federal Government seemed to bestow preference on manufacturing activities at the expense of agriculture with the implementation of a tariff.

Many of those who remained in Virginia blamed the state's thwarted economic growth on the Federal Tariff. The re-enactment of the tariff in 1824 coincided with the depressed tobacco market. Since tobacco was primarily an export crop, growers were extremely sensitive to the effects of government interference on the market. As previously discussed, the extended growing season of tobacco limited opportunities for switching crops and forced planters into predicting long term economic trends.[13] The tariff added a political dimension to these economic prognostications.

The Tariff of 1828 further increased the import tax on textiles and also added protection for domestic hemp, wool, fur, flax, and liquor. Virginia tobacco farmers, in the midst of a fragile economic recovery, were outraged at what they perceived as maltreatment by the Federal Government.[14] However, in Virginia, as in the case of the South Carolina planters, the tariff controversy included more than just economic dimensions.[15] Extending back to the controversy

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[12]   Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 118-122.

[13]   John T. Schlotterback, "The 'Social Economy' of an Upper South Community: Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1815-1860," in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus,* eds. Burton and McMath, 3-28. Schlotterback argues that not only was the tobacco market depressed, but the cereal markets of Virginia as well. This further served to inhibit tobacco farmers from planting new crops.

[14]   *Lynchburg Virginian,* September 4, 1828; *Richmond Enquirer,* December 28, 1831.

[15]   William W. Freehling, *Prelude to the Civil War.*

over Alexander Hamilton's *Report on Manufacturing*, the question of protective tariffs revealed a political crisis between differing interpretations of the role of the Federal Government. Tariffs encouraged manufacturing and thus contradicted the Jeffersonian ideal of a "yeoman republic."[16] At the crux of the issue was the exercise of power in the new republic. John Taylor, author of the *Arator* series, concurred with Jefferson in this instance. "The device of protecting duties, under the pretext of encouraging manufactures, operates like its kindred, by creating a capitalist interest, which instantly seizes upon the bounty taken by law from agriculture."[17]

Just as significantly, federal intervention in the economy was also viewed as a threat to slavery. John C. Calhoun depicted this fear in the his essay, *Exposition and Protest*. Calhoun argued that for the Federal Government to act in the "general welfare" it had to be acting in the welfare of all the states. The tariff was a case of the Federal Government acting for the benefit of certain states, but to the harm of others. Calhoun considered such discretionary actions as unconstitutional. Moreover, if the Federal Government could act in this discretionary manner, what restrictions prevented it from abolishing slavery?[18]

By 1831, the tariff controversy had become a highly charged issue. In his message to the General Assembly, Governor Floyd addressed the issue in terms of the Federal Government violating a strict construction of constitutional powers. Calling to mind the consequences of "the usurpations of England," Floyd emphasized the ideology of liberty that had characterized the Revolutionary struggle.[19] Throughout the following year, the issue gained prominence as many South Carolinians argued the strict construction position to the extreme and challenged the authority of the Federal Government during the Nullification Crisis.[20]

Much of the anger directed at the tariff reflected the frustration of Virginians who had been struggling in a long depressed economy. Laying blame upon the Federal Government or the

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[16]   Jefferson, *Notes*, in Peterson, 216-217. For commentary see Edmund Morgan, 375-385.

[17]   John Taylor, *Arator,* 31-33.

[18]   Clyde N. Wilson and W. Edwin Hemphill, ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun,* Vol. 10, 1825-1829 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), 442-539. For discussion see William Freehling, *Prelude,* 159-173. Similar expression over the universality of the "general welfare" clause can be found relative to the Maysville Road veto. This idea of strict construction protecting slavery was also articulated by Robert Hayne during the famous Webster-Hayne debates. See Marion Mills Miller, ed., *Great Debates in American History,* Vol. 5 (New York: Current Literature Publishing Company, 1913), 25-74.

[19]   *House Journal,* 11.

[20]   William Freehling, *Prelude,* 159-173; Merril D. Peterson, *Olive Branch and the Sword - The Compromise of 1833* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

northern manufacturing interests was a convenient means of explaining a person's failure to achieve financial stability. Still, many other Virginians, particularly in the western regions of the state, did not have to look upon the national scene to find a culprit for their economic woes. Westerners often blamed their fortunes on their lack of political representation in the state government. This political inequality was reflected in the limited number of internal improvement projects throughout the Commonwealth. Virginians living to the west of the Blue Ridge Mountains needed a system of roads and canals in order to deliver their produce to market. Without this necessary infrastructure, western Virginians would continue to live mostly as mere subsistence farmers.

Sectional Divisions - - The Constitutional Convention, 1829-30

As early as 1816, western representatives had gathered in the town of Staunton to protest the political inequality created by the structure of Virginia's 1776 Constitution. That document had based suffrage requirements and legislative representation upon the ownership of property. Accordingly, it favored Virginians in the eastern, Tidewater counties where the majority of qualified freeholders lived. In the years follwing the Revolution, however, the white population base of the state shifted to the west. In 1790, only slightly more than a quarter of white Virginians lived west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Twenty years later, the white population of that region represented forty percent of the white population for the entire state. And the numbers kept increasing.[21]

Many of those who settled the west did not own the requisite fifty acres that entitled them to the vote. Additionally, the growing urban population of merchants and manufacturers in the eastern cities was also often denied franchise. As the numbers of disenfranchised Virginians grew, the political hegemony of the landed planters appeared increasingly aristocratic. Western farmers, for example, expressed frustration at their inability to obtain political objectives despite their significant numbers. The appearance of aristocracy was also exaggerated by Constitutional provisions that allowed the eastern dominated legislature to control the executive and judicial branches of government as well. Many believed that these problems could only be rectified by a Constitutional Convention.

For over a decade, westerners advocated for such a convention. Other states had reformed their Revolutionary Constitutions and had extended the franchise in the process. In 1819, Alabama's statehood constitution enfranchised all white males above the age of twenty-one. Virginia lagged behind this general trend toward more democratic governments.[22] Finally, in 1828, a popular referendum called for a Constitutional Convention. Still, during the decade while they had waited for reform, western frustration had grown. By 1829, their initial appeals for reform

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[21]   Alison Freehling, 270.

[22]   Fletcher M. Green, *Constitutional Development in the South Atlantic States, 1776-1860: A Study in the Evolution of Democracy* (Reprinted; New York: W.W. Norton, 1966).

had developed into adamant demands for re-structuring. Eastern statesmen perceived the fervency of western demands. Themselves suffering from the economic malaise, easterners feared that a western revolution would cost them everything. Accordingly, they were determined to tenaciously defend their traditional political ideology. The attitudes of both factions guaranteed a contentious and highly charged debate.[23]

The most significant debates during the Constitutional Convention occured over the proposed reforms to the legislative branch. The issue of representational apportionment was fundamental to equalization of political power. Western reformers argued for a white population based apportionment system. Easterners advocated a mixed-basis method of apportionment that combine population with taxation. Taxation was based almost exclusively on land and slaves in Virginia. Easterners, with the majority of slaves in their region, possessed a substantial advantage under such a mixed-basis representative system. The eastern argument, accordingly, emphasized the centrality of property in government. They argued that government based upon the principle of property prevented the tyranny of the majority. Property, they contended, was the only effective safeguard for the rights of the individual against the random will of the majority. Only under such a protected system could people truly enjoy their natural right to liberty.[24]

The eastern position protected the sancitity of property and thus implicitly defended slavery too. They recognized that democracy threatened slavery and any other form of property. The political philosophy of the Revolution had understood the role of governments to be the guarantor of individual rights. The eastern delegates to the Constitutional Convention embraced this philosophy. They believed that western plans for a white population basis representation would encourage a tyranny of the majority that would act against their slaveholding interest. In their defenses of these intersets, eastern delegates revealed their persistent allegiance to the tenets of Lockean political philosophy that had influenced the 1776 Virginia Constitution. Their arguments also reflected the reciprocal relationship between Virginia's traditional political ideology and the defense of slavery. In this manner, their arguments mirrored the proslavery argument during the Virginia slavery debate.

Western delegates were unsuccessful in their attempt at more equitable legislative representation during the Convention. After several weeks of heated debate, a compromise plan,

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[23]   The factional division did not, of course, fall rigidly between eastern and western regions. The terms easterners and westerners, as they are used here, should be considered generalizations. For a more comprehensive assesment see Alison Freehling, 38-40. For thorough treatment of the Convention, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1982); and Robert P. Sutton, *Revolution to Secession: Constitution Making in the Old Dominion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

[24]   See the speeches of Abel Parker Upshur, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, and John Randolph, in *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-30* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd and Co., 1830),70-76, 152-174, 315-321.

which still favored the eastern counties, managed to attain a majority in the Convention.[25] Westerners also failed to win their battle for extended suffrage. Although in this instance, a more favorable compromise was effected that enfranchised more freeholders, leaseholders, and town residents who paid taxes.[26] Still, both compromises were built on tenuous coalitions. Delegates from both factions departed the Convention uneasy with the results. Talk of dividng the state was common.The new Constitution, normally a symbol of unity and consensus, instead reflected the sharp sectional differences through its ambiguity. The new document failed to alleviate the sense of crisis perceived by most Virginians. Economic misfortune continued with a poor tobacco and wheat crop in 1830.[27] Within a year and a half, events in Southampton County exacerbated this perception of crisis and in doing so, challenged the coalition between Virginia's regions.

Southampton

If the general malaise throughout Virginia was attributed to economic woes, population crises, and political struggles, then Nat Turner must be acknowledged as the catalyst of fear. After midnight on August 22, 1831, Turner and a band of slaves commenced a reign of terror throughout Southampton County. Turner's rebels intended to purge the land of their oppressors and as a method of retribution they mutilated the bodies of their victims. Leaving many butchered carcasses along the roadsides, Turner's band made its way to Jerusalem, the county seat. Just outside the town, Turner's men encountered a hastily organized militia unit guarding the bridge into town. Outgunned, Turner's army broke off the engagement and dispersed into the countryside. Many of the slaves were apprehended immediately, but Turner and others escaped. Turner remained a fugitive until October but his insurrection had been suppressed in a single day. By nightfall of August 22, at least fifty-five people lay dead. But this was only the beginning.[28]

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[25] Bruce, 63-64. A compromise plan offered by William F. Gordon gave the eastern counties a smaller majority of representatives in both the House of Delegates and the Senate than it held previously. Many western delegates still opposed the plan, however, because they believed it made permanent the politcal hegemony of the eastern counties. Still, with the defection of a few western moderates, the plan carried.

[26] *Ibid.*, 66.

[27] *Lynchburg Virginian,* May 2, 1831.

[28] For detailed accounts of Nat Turner and the events in Southampton see Turner's frequently republished autobiography, edited by Thomas Gray, *Confessions of Nat Turner*; Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Published for A.I.M.S. by Humanities Press, 1966); Eric Foner, ed., *Nat Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971); and Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: New American Library, 1976).

The wave of hysteria that swept over Virginia manifested itself in various forms. Initially, panic inspired violent retribution against the black population of Southampton. Slaves and free blacks were randomly accosted, tortured, and sometimes killed as the white community desperately sought vengeance. Posses of armed vigilantes scoured the woods and swamps arresting, shooting, hanging, or decapitating alleged insurrectionists. A North Carolina militia company , which arrived in the county after the uprising had been suppressed, executed over forty African Americans and mounted their heads on poles along the roadside. These grisly symbols of racial warfare remained posted throughout the county for weeks following the insurrection.[29]

By August 28, General Richard Eppes, commanding troops in the area around Jerusalem, declared the insurrection at an end. With the assistance of Federal troops, Eppes had managed to establish martial law throughout the region. His orders proclaimed that any further vigilante activity would be punished by military authority. With order restored, Eppes requested the withdrawal of Federal forces. In the week of violence, well over one hundred Virginians had been killed, most of them hideously butchered. Many of the victims were women and children.[30]

The conclusion of hostilities in Southampton did not signal a subsidence of fear. As word of the insurrection spread throughout Virginia, citizens expressed alarm and prepared for similar upheavals in their own neighborhoods. Request for arms from across the state poured into Governor Floyd's office. Muskets to arm the local militias were needed not only in Tidewater and Piedmont Counties, but in Fincastle, Staunton, Augusta, and Parkersburg as well. Instructors at the University of Virginia requested muskets so that the students could familiarize themselves with the basics of drill. While the citizens of Lynchburg preferred to be equipped with swords instead of muskets.[31]

The specter of insurrection haunted Virginia over the following weeks. A letter from Leesburg claimed that a local Quaker community had instilled an insurrectionary spirit in the region's free black and slave populations. Also fearful of an uprising, the inhabitants of upper Chesterfield County had removed their families to three well protected houses. While in Gloucester County, the burning of a Methodist meeting house was attributed to the activity of slaves. Toward the end of September, a rumor of a slave insurrection resulted in over a thousand people fleeing their homes and congregating at the home of the local militia Captain. As late as October 19, Benjamin Cabell wrote of "alarms [that] have prevailed throughout this and the adjoining counties, which have . . . [driven] helpless females from their beds and homes in the darkness of night, [and] ended in death." Cabell believed that the slaves themselves were starting the rumors "in order to enjoy the spectacle resulting from the unamountable panic of the

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[29] Governor's Papers, Library of Virginia; Oates, 97-101.

[30] *Lynchburg Virginian*, September 8, 1831.

[31] Governor's Papers, Library of Virginia, September-October, 1831. Letter from John B. [Cruss?], November 26, 1831, Parkersburg.

whites."[32]

The anxious excitement that many Virginians experienced transformed itself into an appeal for action. A series of petitions circulated through the counties and called on the upcoming legislature to enact measures to prevent future slave insurrections. A petition from Brunswick County requested legislative acts to strengthen the local militia units. Another appealed to the General Assembly to restrict the common practice of local millers who employed both free blacks and slaves.[33] Most of these legislative petitions, however, advocated the removal of the free black population. Copies of these petitions, often type scripted, were widely circulated through various counties, probably by the Colonization Society.[34] Still other memorials expressed concerns over the increasing black population and advocated a tax to defray the expenses of their removal. These petitions also urged the prohibition of any emancipation not contingent upon removal and a system of classification for free blacks.[35] Finally, a few of the petitions appealed for some scheme of emancipation and the eventual abolition of slavery in Virginia. The petition from the Society of Friends, whose introduction had generated the spirited debate in the legislature during early December, was representative of this class of petitions.[36]

A central theme throughout all of these petitions was the fear of another insurrection. Some directed this fear at the free black population, others at the institution of slavery itself. Nat

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[32] Governor's Papers, Library of Virginia. Letter from Leesburg, September 18, 1831; Letter from the Inhabitants of Chesterfield, No Date [September, 1831]; Letter from Sam. Diggs, Mathews Court House, September 26, 1831; Letters from Benjamin Cabell, October 1 and 19, 1831.

[33] Legislative Petitions, Brunswick County, January 28, 1832; and Charles City and New Kent Counties, December 27, 1831.

[34] Legislative Petitions, Amelia County, December 7, 1831; Isle of Wight County, December 7, 1831; Augusta County, December 9, 1831; York County, December 12, 1831; Loudoun and Faquuier Counties, December 20, 1831; Nansemond County, December 22, 1831; Botetourt County, January 4, 1832; Westmoreland County, January 8, 1832; Surry County, January 11, 1832; Bedford County, January 27, 1832. Another petition for the removal of the free black population that was distinct from those mentioned above was submitted by the citizens of Northampton County, December 6, 1831.

[35] Legislative Petitions, Hanover County, December 14, 1831; Caroline County, December 17, 1831; Rockbridge County, January 16, 1832; King William County, January 18, 1832.

[36] Legislative Petitions, Charles City (Religious Petition), November 24, 1831; Loudoun County, December 20, 1831; Buckingham County, December 28, 1831; Augusta County (Women), January 19, 1832. The Buckingham petition called for a plan of emancipation *post nati.*

Turner had compelled white Virginians to scrutinize their societal relationships. They had found that their position was potentially precarious. An group of women from Augusta County, anxious of their position, described the tangible aspects of their fear. "We cannot know the night, nor the unguarded moments by day or night, which is pregnant with our destruction, and that of our husbands . . . brothers . . . sisters, and children." They appealed to their protectors to remember "the late slaughter of our sisters and their little ones . . . and the strong probability that that slaughter was but a partial execution of a widely projected scheme of carnage."[37] In the minds of these petitioners, slavery was truly evil. And they joined with the many other Virginians who believed that something must be done to abrogate this evil.

Summary

The perception of crisis in Virginia was a significant element of the emancipationists' arguments during the Virginia slavery debate. They blamed slavery for the numerous evils that infected the Old Dominion. Furthermore, they contended that abolition was necessary for the public safety. In the climate of trepidation following Southampton, many listened to this anti-slavery rhetoric and considered it a viable explanation for Virginia's woes. Thus, in the winter of 1831-32, abolition seemed a tangible goal and many sought to attain it. Accordingly, defenders of slavery found themselves in a position where the traditional necessary evil justifications were increasingly inadequate. Instead they chose to articulate the positve aspects of slavery.

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[37]   Legislative Petitions, Augusta County, January 19, 1832.