

Come August, Come Freedom Research Notes 09.03.2012

Each fall during the three years I spent writing COME AUGUST, COME FREEDOM, I visited the 11th grade U.S. History classes at Saint Gertrude, an all-girl high school in Richmond, Virginia where I live. History teacher Nancy Rives and I created a Gabriel module that includes an original song written and performed by Mrs. Rives and an overview of the insurrection plot with maps, trial excerpts, and discussion. The girls' Frequently Asked Questions are similar from class to class, year to year: *Is this a true story? How much is true? What happened to Nanny? Where did all of this take place? Why did you write this story? How much do we really know?*

When you finish reading COME AUGUST COME FREEDOM, I encourage you to read the public documents and historical works about Gabriel's Insurrection. Come visit Richmond. Sit at Young's Spring and quiet your mind. Stand near I-95, down the hill from Virginia's capitol, and know that beneath you Gabriel and many enslaved people from centuries past are buried below the pavement, the cobblestone, and the clay.

Come here and make a pilgrimage of reconciliation. Stand where Gabriel stood and find your easy breath.

When you reach your innermost stillness, just observe: What do you hear in your heart? How do you imagine Gabriel and Nan? Find a way to tell someone else how the story speaks to you. Tweet it. Make a collage. Write a song. Write a play. Draw a portrait. Pick up your guitar. Pick up your pencil. Pick up your hammer.

How much do we really know? After all of my researching and praying, talking and writing and rewriting, listening and walking around wondering, here is what I know: I'm wrong about what really happened. I'm wrong about who Gabriel and Nan were. And, I'm right that Gabriel and Nanny's story should be told and remembered and integrated into our American story and our shared global Freedom story. Here's what else I know: Gabriel and Nanny remind me that, every day, we are each called to rise and pursue life, liberty, and happiness. They also remind me that none of us are free until all of us are free.

Thank you so much for reading my book,

Gigi

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this a true story? How much is true? The public historical record speaks primarily to the court proceedings surrounding Gabriel's trials of 1799 and 1800, and those sources present Gabriel through the filter of the state authorities who condemned and executed him. Altogether, the trial documents illuminate barely a year of his life.

A Commonwealth of Virginia tax record confirms that Gabriel lived at Brookfield, a two-thousand acre tobacco plantation in Henrico County about six miles north of Richmond, the capital of Virginia. Gabriel's two brothers, Martin and Solomon, also lived there. In *GABRIEL'S REBELLION: THE VIRGINIA SLAVE CONSPIRACIES OF 1800 & 1802* (1993), Douglas Egerton identifies that Thomas Prosser's tax roll of 1783 lists all three brothers; Gabriel would have been about seven years old. The tax record is located at the Library of Virginia and it lists Gabriel, Solomon, and Martin as among those who were enslaved at Brookfield. Testimony from the insurrection trials confirms Martin and Solomon as Gabriel's brothers. I have followed Egerton's suggestion that Martin was the oldest by far, Solomon, the middle brother, and Gabriel the youngest.

Brookfield is no longer standing, though a Mutual Assurance insurance policy drawing from 1806 shows how the house likely looked during Gabriel's life time. The property was up the hill from a creek called Brook Run, which empties into the Chickahominy Swamp. For most of Gabriel's life, a planter named Thomas Prosser owned Brookfield. When Thomas passed away on October 7, 1798, his son, Thomas Henry, inherited the plantation.

Most historical works cite Gabriel's birth year as 1776, though some say 1775. In *GABRIEL'S REBELLION*, Egerton concludes that Gabriel was born in 1776 when he references a statement given by Thomas Henry Prosser in September of 1800 that Gabriel was at the time twenty-four years old. Gabriel and Thomas Henry Prosser were the same age – both born in 1776 – Thomas Henry on November 5th of that year.

It seems likely to me that the two boys would have played together, found trouble together, and maybe even slept in the same room in the main house on occasion. Stories that I read of slave narratives and eyewitness accounts, particularly Belinda Hurmence's *WE LIVED IN A LITTLE CABIN IN THE YARD*, describe how young children – black and white – played together on plantations. Some accounts describe how white children denied the bonds of friendship as they stepped into the role of master or mistress and went from protesting the whipping of slaves to laying it on themselves.

The public historical record doesn't directly identify Gabriel's parents, so I referred to works by Belinda Hurmence, Jacqueline Jones, James Sidbury, and Lorena Walsh to ignite my imagination about Gabriel's family, family life in slave quarters, and the roles of women in post-colonial Virginia. Egerton conjectures that Gabriel's mother may have been African-born.

Robert King Carter, one of the wealthiest planters in Virginia, may have owned as many as 1,000 slaves at the time of his death in 1732. My understanding of the patterns of slavery in Virginia in the 1700s is that it often involved white men, such as Carter and Prosser, selling slaves within the state. In fact, Prosser did place notice in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1770, advertising seven slaves for sale in Cumberland County. Reflecting on all of this, I fabricated a set of parents for Gabriel with Pa being Virginia-born and Gabriel's paternal grandfather a captive African king purchased by Thomas Prosser from Robert King Carter. I created Ma as an African-born woman sold into slavery in Richmond.

Did young slaves from the countryside apprentice with white blacksmiths in the city? I took that question to the [Virginia Historical Society](#), and, in the book *The VIRGINIA NEGRO ARTISANS AND TRADESMEN* (1926) by Raymond Bennett Pinchbeck, found data to support my plot choice of sending Solomon and Gabriel to apprentice with Jacob Kent. Whether Gabriel apprenticed at Brookfield or in Richmond, I don't know, but I wanted to get him to the city as soon as possible and under the influence of the river, the laundresses, and freedom-minded men like the fictional Jacob Kent. I wanted the city to be Gabriel's transformative world.

Who taught Gabriel to read? The reward notice issued for Gabriel, testimony in the 1800 trials, and oral tradition concur that Gabriel could read and write. Someone educated Gabriel. Was it Ann Prosser? In my research, I found an old Richmond newspaper article from the 1890s (ninety years after the events) that printed the oral history of Gabriel's Rebellion and mentioned that Brookfield's mistress taught him to read. In essays written in the early 1930s, Gabriel's literacy is also attributed to the mistress of Brookfield. Did she really teach him to read? No record on this exists, only a couple hundred years of folks speculating that it was Ann Prosser. On this question, I stuck with tradition and assigned Ann Prosser her own act of resistance.

Did Gabriel really bite off Absalom Johnson's ear? Yes. Court evidence from 1799 [the pig incident] and 1800 [the insurrection] shows that Gabriel frequently socialized with a man named Jupiter, who was enslaved by Colonel Nathaniel Wilkinson and who lived at the farm next door to Brookfield. Wilkinson rented out land, Jupiter, and other people to Absalom Johnson, a newcomer to Henrico County from the more rural Dinwiddie County, where Johnson had worked as an overseer. Jupiter, Solomon, and Gabriel did steal a pig; Gabriel did bite off "a considerable part" of Absalom Johnson's left ear. For Gabriel, maiming was a capital offense punishable by death, but in 1799 Gabriel was spared death at the gallows by invoking benefit of clergy, a sort of loophole that, in 1800, existed in Virginia law for slaves charged with capital crimes, excluding insurrection. [To learn more about benefit of clergy and criminal law and slavery, consult *TWICE CONDEMNED: SLAVES & THE CRIMINAL LAWS OF VIRGINIA, 1705-1865* (1988) by Philip J. Schwarz.] The 1799 trial documents do not identify which Bible verse Gabriel recited; the verse I gave Gabriel was a continuation of the Psalm invoked by Ma in Chapter Two. [For all Bible verses, I used the NEW JERUSALEM BIBLE because it's the translation that I read and has the contemporary flavor that felt right to me for this story.]

There's no evidence to guide us in knowing exactly why the young men went to steal the pig that day, so I fabricated motives for the theft and for Gabriel's branding of Absalom Johnson forevermore as one-eared Absalom Johnson. Insurrection trial testimony describes gatherings of slaves from neighboring farms to worship, to celebrate, to mourn, and to reunite with family and friends. Court testimony surrounding the insurrection trials of 1800 references Prosser's Tavern, Young's Spring, Brook's Bridge, Littlepage Bridge, and Half Sink as important gathering places for the community of people who were enslaved in the neighborhood of Brookfield. This all led me to imagine that Gabriel needed the pig for his wedding feast, since I wanted this book to be, in part, a love story between Gabriel and Nanny. While the 1799 trial records indicate that Gabriel and Absalom did scuffle before Gabriel bit off the farmer's ear, the records give no hint as to what words were exchanged between them. I gave Johnson the villainous task of exploiting his perceived power over Gabriel by threatening Nanny.

Was Gabriel's wife really named Nanny? Where did she live? What happened to her? The public record doesn't reveal too much about Nanny. Some secondary sources refer to her as Nancy. On the 1783 Brookfield tax roll, there is no slave listed as Nanny. In my research, which was not at all an exhaustive effort to find every enslaved woman name Nanny or Nancy in the region, I twice encountered documentation [other than the court transcripts] of an enslaved female named Nanny living in the nearby vicinity of Brookfield during the early 1800s. The written rental agreement between Absalom Johnson and Colonel Wilkinson itemizes the land and slaves that the Colonel rented to Johnson. Among the slaves: Old Jupiter and what appeared to me to read Nanny. I also saw an 1803 reference to a Nanny of childbearing age in the slave logs of the Tinsley family at Totomoi in Hanover County. Were these the same Nanny? Are either of these women Gabriel's wife? I don't have those answers. While the trial documents do [implicate Nanny and confirm her involvement in the plot](#), I am not aware that she or any woman was brought to trial in 1800. Recently, *Richmond magazine* published online "[The Blood of Gabriel: Reaching to the roots of a slave rebellion](#)" (June, 2012) by Harry Kollatz, Jr., which, for the first time that I'm aware of, records the family history of Gabriel as told by Haskell Bingham, a descendant of Gabriel's and the current family historian.

When did Gabriel start planning the rebellion? The public record of Gabriel's life indicates that he spent a month in the Richmond jail after being found guilty of maiming Johnson. He was released to Thomas Henry Prosser on November 5, 1799. [Thomas Henry Prosser spent his twenty-third birthday at the jail and the courthouse bailing out Gabriel and appearing before the court to swear that Gabriel would act "peacefully toward all the good people."] The testimony surrounding the 1800 plan for freedom says that Gabriel started planning for the rebellion – even making weapons - shortly after the "last harvest", though whether that was in 1799 or 1800 is not indicated. By June of 1800, plans were well underway. Trial witnesses place Gabriel, at different times throughout the summer of 1800, in Henrico, Hanover, Richmond, and Caroline. His recruits testified that he and Solomon were making weapons and that he and Martin forging bullets. Gabriel also had money in his pocket. He gave money to Ben Woolfolk and Sam Byrd to buy grog for men around the region during recruiting missions.

According to testimony, sometime in August, a few weeks before the insurrection was to take place, Gabriel's men held an election between Gabriel and another enslaved man named Jack Ditcher. They voted Gabriel as their general by a large margin, and at the same meeting voted to initiate "the business" on the evening of Saturday, August 30th. Two things happened to mess that plan up. First, a tremendous storm came up from the west and flooded the countryside and the city. Diaries and correspondence say it was a once in a lifetime storm. Governor James Monroe wrote that every living thing sought shelter from it. Two hundred and four years later to the day, Richmonders felt the wrath of such a storm when Tropical Storm Gaston parked over the city and dropped fourteen inches of rain in eight hours, leaving more than a dozen people dead and bridges and roads washed out all over town. In 2004 during Gaston, there was no moving about in the daylight; we were a city at the mercy of the weather. On August 30, 1800 Gabriel, Solomon, and Nanny ran from quarter to quarter rescheduling the insurrection for Sunday night - same time, different place. They had no idea that even as they were busy delaying "the business," Governor Monroe had already been informed. Two enslaved men – Pharoah and Tom – had betrayed the insurrection and named Gabriel as its leader. Private patrollers ventured out into the storm, but discovered nothing. By the next day, the militia had descended upon Brookfield and neighboring farms. Gabriel and Jack Ditcher escaped; Ditcher eventually turned himself in to the authorities in Richmond. Gabriel made it to Norfolk before being apprehended there, shackled, and transported upriver back to Richmond.

What did Gabriel look like? Virginia's official description of Gabriel and Thomas Henry Prosser's statement describe Gabriel in terms not only of his size, stature, and complexion but also the markings on his body: missing teeth and scars on his forehead. The proclamation issued by the Commonwealth in September 1800 states, "Gabriel is a Negro of a brown complexion, about six feet, three or four inches high, a bony face, well made, and very active, he has two or three scars on his head, his hair is very short, and has lost two front teeth."

Slave narratives and eye-witness accounts document that slave-owners commonly inflicted people held in their captivity with distinguishing marks so that if they ran away it would be easier to identify and capture them. These kinds of abuse were also mechanisms for humiliation, domination, and physical and psychological control. The record omits the details of how Gabriel lost his teeth or why his forehead had marks, but I decided to use these physical traits of Gabriel – which are the types of body marks described in slave narratives – to illustrate the abhorrent practice of one class of people marking their ownership over another.

Are all of the characters in the book real people? The characters in *Come August, Come Freedom* include those inspired by real people and those entirely fabricated. Many, many men – by some accounts tens of thousands – joined Gabriel's army. The trial documents list two different Gabriels, two Solomons, several Toms and Bens, and dozens more. In my early drafts, I included a character named and modeled after Gabriel's co-leader, Jack Ditcher, but I found that his presence distracted from what I wanted to be primarily a story about love and family. In later drafts, I cut the Jack Ditcher character. I did fabricate a few characters completely. Jacob Kent, Pa, and Ma are totally imaginary as are Old Major, Kiskey, and Venus.

Why did you create fictional secondary characters at all? Why not just use the historical figures as the basis for the story? The court records indicate that the actual plot involved mostly men and, to me, this story felt like a story about family, love, marriage, and the insistence to engage in family life freely and by choice. Nanny is the only woman named in the actual trial documents, other than a few widowed slave owners whose names were recorded as a means of identifying their slaves and compensating them once those men were put to death or sent out of state. Yet more than just needing women in the story, I wanted to create for Gabriel a sort of lineage of self-determination by showing all sorts of acts of resistance and insistence undertaken by the men and women in his family and his community.

The diary entries of Thomas Prosser, sprinkled through the book, reflect only the words and thoughts of my fictionalized Thomas Prosser. I fabricated these entries and leaned on the language and cadence of the personal diaries of the Tinsley family in Hanover, Virginia. A Tinsley descendant lives on her family's farm, the former Totomoi plantation. The main house and land have changed very little since the late 1700s. My sister arranged for me to spend an afternoon there reading through diaries, old tax records, the family bible, and an invoice for a year's worth of blacksmith jobs that kept the farm in working order. These documents and the hours spent at Totomoi helped me imagine certain details about life at Brookfield: how the weather was unbearable for Prosser, yet the "hands" still worked in the fields, Prosser's dependence on Kissey and Old Major, and his indulgence of Thomas Henry. I can't say enough how deeply those hours spent at Totomoi inspired me. That afternoon proved to be the closest I would come to finding my time slip and this book is immensely different due to the generosity of the Tinsley family.

How much is true about Gabriel's capture? On the night of August 30, 1800, Gabriel's plans unraveled due to the big storm and the betrayal by two enslaved men – Pharaoh Sheppard and Tom. Even as the storm approached, Mosby Sheppard was hearing of the plot from Pharaoh and Tom. Even as Gabriel, Nanny, Solomon, Jupiter, and Sam Byrd ran from quarter to quarter postponing the rising until Sunday night, Virginia Governor James Monroe was rousing the militia. Gabriel disappeared from Brookfield sometime on Sunday, August 31st. The record places him next on the night of September 11th in Hanover County, asking about passage to Jamestown. [Four slaves associated with [Hanover Tavern](#), which is still in operation, participated in the plot]. Governor Monroe circulated a reward notice and Gabriel's description in newspapers. Not only the entire state of Virginia, but as far north as Philadelphia and as far south as North Carolina and Mississippi soon heard of the plot.

During this crisis of his term, Monroe sought the advice of Thomas Jefferson. John Adams' slanderer, James Callender, wrote to Jefferson about the insurrection, too. From the Richmond jail, where he was being held on charges stemming from violation of the Sedition Act, Callender had a firsthand view of the unfolding events because the same jail held Gabriel's men. In early drafts, I included extracts from letters to and from Thomas Jefferson but like Jack Ditcher, found that the letters detracted from the personal story of Gabriel. The correspondence is accessible online at the Library of Congress as part of the [American Memory Collection's The Thomas Jefferson Papers](#).

Gabriel did hitch a ride on the Mary with former overseer, Richard Taylor. When he first waded into the river, the slave Billy recognized Gabriel and said something to the effect of: *Aren't you Gabriel, the one they're after?* Gabriel replied that he was only called Gabriel, that his name was really Daniel. In all that I read, I believe this is the one of the final records of Gabriel speaking, so it seemed important to me to explore this statement from him. Was Gabriel speaking in code? Was he invoking scripture or sending a message as the biblical Daniel did: *I am not divine; I am a man*. The trial records of 1799 where Gabriel invoked his benefit of clergy speak to Gabriel's familiarity with the bible. He was able to recite a verse from memory. Trial testimony describes how Gabriel's brother, Martin, spoke of the book of Exodus and demonstrated a familiarity with scripture. [Biblical scholar and award-winning author, Kristin Swenson, helped me think about the parallels between Gabriel and Daniel. At her suggestion, I turned to the JEWISH STUDY BIBLE to further study The Book of Daniel.]

The schooner, Mary, reached Norfolk where Billy went ashore and turned in Gabriel to the local authorities. I included the [letter from the sheriff of Norfolk, Thomas Newton](#), because this is a primary source description of Gabriel's return. I also read other accounts of Gabriel's capture, namely newspaper accounts and a journal entry of John Boyce on film at the Library of Virginia. Boyce, a planter in Henrico, had dined with Mr. Young [presumably Mr. Young of Westbrook, the site of Young's Spring] the night before Gabriel's return to Richmond. Boyce noted in his journal that it was a cold, gray, rainy day when Gabriel arrived back in Richmond and was taken before the Governor.

Gabriel was hung at the 15th Street gallows in Richmond, on October 10th, 1800. That same day, four of his men were hung near Brookfield at a makeshift gallows. More than two hundred years after Gabriel's hanging, the [Virginia Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) and the [Defenders for Freedom, Justice, & Equality](#) sought to restore Gabriel's place in history by asking the Commonwealth of Virginia to pardon Gabriel. On August 30, 2007 then Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine did informally pardon Gabriel, stating that "Gabriel's cause – the end of slavery – and the furtherance of equality of all people – has prevailed in the light of history."

When did you first learn about Gabriel? I must have studied Gabriel with Dr. Schwarz in college, but I also skipped a lot of classes when I was a freshman. I only remember learning about Gabriel's Rebellion in 1998, when I accidentally happened upon Spring Park in Henrico County. At the time, I lived just up the hill in Richmond's Bellevue neighborhood and had driven down to the bank. Spring Park practically sits in the bank's parking lot. I walked over and read these words, "Adjacent to this park, in a location known as Young's Spring, Gabriel, a slave of Thomas Prosser, was appointed leader of the rebellion in the summer of 1800. He lived on Brookfield Plantation. His objectives were to overtake the capital and convince Governor James Monroe to support more political, social, and economic equality between members of society. Gabriel targeted area slaves, white artisans, freemen, religious supporters and French sympathizers as recruits for his revolution."

Where did all of this happen? Court testimony states that Gabriel went into Richmond every Sunday to plan, recruit, and gather information. Gabriel's Richmond was largely a new city, just freshly torn out of the forest, when Virginia moved its capital from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780. In his lifetime, the roads changed from dirt to cobblestone, the houses from wood to brick. The [James River and Kanawha Canal](#) was completed and the Spring Street penitentiary built, as was the capitol building itself. Change was the constant factor in Richmond during Gabriel's life time.

I used *PLOUGHSHARES INTO SWORDS: RACE, REBELLION, AND IDENTITY IN GABRIEL'S VIRGINIA, 1730-1810* by James Sidbury, *THE RIVER WHERE AMERICA BEGAN* by Bob Deans, *FACTS AND LEGENDS OF THE HILLS OF RICHMOND* by Wayne Dementi and Brooks Smith, and *POE'S RICHMOND* by Agnes Bondurant to help me better understand Richmond of the late eighteenth century – the architecture, the topography, the society, the politics, and especially, the river. And even though more than two centuries have passed, I went back to some of the places that informed [Gabriel's sense of place](#). I think when students ask, *Where did all this take place?* they are asking for help in considering their own sense of place and who they must become once they know how their America and Gabriel's intersect.

Why did you write this book? In the early 2000s, Ana Edwards, a colleague and friend, organized The Defenders of Justice. Among their concerns were to bring more attention to Gabriel, the historic site of Richmond's 15th Street gallows, and the Negro Burial Field in Richmond's historic Shockoe Bottom neighborhood. When I heard Ana tell Gabriel's story, I thought someone ought to write it down for young readers. Someone else. For a few years, I dipped into research and scribbled down a few notes, but didn't think I was the best person to tell this story that was tugging at my heart. Well, the mind supplies reasons aplenty to keep the heart from facing what yearns for thoughtfulness, self-reckoning, and action. By immersing myself in the history and documents related to Gabriel, I eventually realized that if Gabriel's story is to be lifted up as an essential American story, then we all must tell this story over and over again so that Gabriel's story takes its place in our canon of defining moments.

Many founding heroes, *sheroes*, and patriots have become part of America's collective story. Tales of such people teach us something and exemplify the qualities we admire in our great citizens. Gabriel's Rebellion reveals so much of the thinking of our leaders in the early days of America, the rampant liberty fever that was worldwide by 1800, and how enslaved people were engaged in the pursuit of freedom and the call to end to slavery long before the Civil War broke out. To me, Gabriel and Nan's story ought to join our larger American story of freedom-loving patriots who lived and sacrificed for the cause of our liberty.