

# Slave Religion, Slave Hiring, and the Incipient Proletarianization of Enslaved Black Labor: Developing Du Bois’ Thesis on Black Participation in the Civil War as a Revolution

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**Abstract** WEB Du Bois argued that black participation in the US Civil War was “the largest and most successful slave revolt,” but he did not link the causative agents of black participation in the war to those that motivated other major slave revolts in the antebellum USA. In this essay, I focus on how two factors contributed to such revolts: (1) slave religion, which provided an ideological justification for overthrowing the slave system and mobile slave preachers to articulate it, and (2) the system of hiring out slaves—especially slave artisans, which increased their disaffection with the slave system, while expanding networks across plantations and rural and urban slave and free black communities. I argue that these two factors provided ideological motivation and institutional coordination for the antebellum revolts and for the slave revolt of the Civil War, as well.

**Keywords** Slave religion · Slave revolts · US Civil War · WEB Du Bois · Black revolution

## Introduction

WEB Du Bois argued that black participation in the US Civil War was “the largest and most successful slave revolt,” but he did not link the causative agents of black participation in the war to those that motivated other major slave revolts in the antebellum USA. I focus on how two overlapping and often mutually reinforcing factors contributed to such revolts: (1) slave religion, which provided an ideological justification for revolt, and (2) the system of hiring out slaves—especially slave artisans, which increased their

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disaffection with the slave system, while expanding networks across plantations and rural and urban slave and free black communities. Slave religion and slave hiring, in tandem, provided ideological motivation and institutional coordination for the major slave revolts of the antebellum era. Although the revolts were brutally suppressed, the networks they emerged from persisted because (1) slave religion continued to be viewed by many slave masters as encouraging slave docility and (2) slave hiring remained profitable. These networks expanded the communicative capacity of slave communities during the antebellum era and continued to do so during wartime, providing information and coordination for the movement of slaves to Union lines. Thus, just as the networks both encouraged and helped slaves to join slave revolts to fight for their freedom in the prewar era, they encouraged and helped slaves to join Union forces to fight for their freedom in the Civil War. Utilizing these networks, slaves transformed a war to preserve the Union into a revolution to overthrow US slavery.

The essay proceeds in four sections. First, I discuss Du Bois' thesis of the General Strike (GS), which lays out the initial case that black participation in the Civil War constituted "the largest and most successful slave revolt." I point out that Du Bois' claim is supported by more recent works of several prominent Civil War historians, which build on his thesis, and I examine the theoretical basis of Du Bois' arguments. I point out that although Du Bois implicates slave religion and the initiatives of slave laborers to generate the GS, he does not link the GS to its antecedents in the major slave revolts of the antebellum era. Therefore, second, I discuss the link between the motivations for the GS during the Civil War and the earlier slave revolts. I review how both slave religion and slave hiring were key factors in the slave revolts of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Third, I discuss how these two factors, eventually intertwined in slave preachers and hired-out proletarianized slave artisans, facilitated revolution by projecting a range of inter-plantation networks while providing spiritual and economic justifications for black participation in the war, ultimately transforming a war to save the Union into a revolution to overthrow US slavery. Fourth, and finally, I conclude with a summary of the main points of the essay.

## Black Participation in the Civil War as a Black Revolution

In *Black Reconstruction*, first published in 1935, Du Bois challenged the prevailing myth that black Americans had not fought for their liberation in the Civil War. He argued that during the Civil War, enslaved blacks prosecuted a "General Strike," which was the "stubborn mutiny of the Negro slave" that furnished about 200,000 black "Federal soldiers whose evident ability to fight decided the war."<sup>1</sup> The following year, in *The Negro and Social Reconstruction*, Du Bois (1985: 105–6) characterized black participation in the Civil War, unequivocally, as a revolt:

What was really the largest and most successful slave revolt came at the time of the Civil War when all the slaves in the vicinity of the invading armies left the plantations and rushed to the army and eventually some 200,000 ex-slaves and Northern Negroes joined armies of the North, in addition to a much larger number

<sup>1</sup> For estimates of the number of black troops from northern and southern states, see Berlin et al. (1983).

of laborers and servants. It was this revolt of the slaves and the prospect of a much larger movement among the 4,000,000 other slaves, which was the real cause of the sudden cessation of the war.

Du Bois viewed the GS as a precursor of proletarian revolutions of the twentieth century; however, in situating it in the religious-based claims of slaves, his thesis belied the Marxist view of religion as an “opiate of the masses” and, instead, conceptualized a religiously inspired political revolution. Before examining these issues further, it is useful to distinguish revolts from revolutions, and among revolutions, themselves.

A revolt is typically an armed and limited mobilization aimed at protesting policies or practices of government—and the conditions associated with them, which in rare cases may include overthrowing the sitting regime. In scope and execution, it is typically larger than a coup d'état, more organized than a riot, but smaller than a civil war: it is closer to an insurrection. In contrast, a revolution is a large-scale armed mobilization aimed at transforming the structures, institutions, and/or processes of government—the polity, the economy, and/or the society.<sup>2</sup> It often takes the form of an insurgency or a civil war (Nolan 1995: 328). The impetus for—or focus of—the systemic change sought suggests the type of revolution, although revolutions often encompass several types. Thus, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions of the twentieth century, which are commonly viewed as among the most prominent *political* revolutions, were also *economic* and *social* revolutions, which transformed not only Russia's and China's polities to communist oligarchies but their economies and societies to socialism and collectivism, as well. Such extensive revolutions are often classified, simply, as social revolutions. In contrast, the American Revolution was more a political revolution with little fundamental change in the economic or social systems other than the former colonies' acquisition of sovereign control of the two systems with the overthrow of British rule. Similarly, *cultural* revolutions—a type of social revolution—seek to fundamentally transform cultural systems. Given that cultural systems often reinforce political, economic, and social systems, cultural revolutions often affect the polity, economy, and the broader society, as well. Cultural revolutions may precede, coincide with, or follow upon, political revolutions. For example, they may be motivated by concerns with creating a “revolutionary personality” among the populace to provide the impetus to organize and mobilize for political revolution, as Cabral suggested; or they may spontaneously generate a “revolutionary culture” through the transformation of the “native” resulting from his/her cathartic use of violence to overthrow colonial authority during the political revolution, as Fanon argued; or they may eradicate remnants of alleged bourgeois or counter-revolutionary tendencies following political revolutions such as in Mao Zedong's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The US Civil War and its immediate aftermath was a revolution that transformed the USA—if only until the end of Reconstruction: It radically transformed the polity by recognizing the citizenship rights of former slaves—and blacks, in general; the economy by outlawing slavery; and the society by establishing a *de jure* basis for black social equality. Thus, it was a political, economic, and social revolution. It did not

<sup>2</sup> For Colburn (1994: 6), “revolution is the sudden, violent, and drastic substitution of one group governing a territorial political entity for another group formerly excluded from government, and an ensuing assault on state and society for the purpose of radically transforming society.” Also, see Goldstone (2001).

transform the cultural system and its white supremacism, which continued to influence the major institutions of the postbellum state. Although for blacks, culture, namely religion, motivated the slave revolution, in the mid-nineteenth century, blacks, themselves, were ambivalent as to what constituted black culture (e.g., was it “African,” an amalgam of African and European, a uniquely “African-American,” or a pathological expression of “white culture”?). Therefore, while the motivation for the General Strike may have been religious, as Du Bois argued, it is less clear how it effectuated the revolution that Du Bois observed. That is, it is less clear how it established the functional links among slaves to allow them to coordinate their mobilization into a purposive act of organized rebellion, which we will examine more fully below. Clearly, although it seemed to promote a black culture based in an activist religion promoting freedom, family, and education (Franklin 1992), it did not transform the prominent American culture largely defined by white supremacism (for both whites and many blacks). In fact, the enduring racist cultural system wedded white Northerners and former secessionists in what Du Bois called a “counter-revolution of property,” which ended Reconstruction, destroyed black political power in the South, abandoned black labor to former slave masters, and re-imposed white supremacy. Thus, for Du Bois, the GS was a slave revolt which transformed the Civil War from a war to “save the Union” to a revolution to transform the USA, and while its impetus was cultural, its objectives were more political and economic.<sup>3</sup>

Although Du Bois’ thesis was largely rejected by scholars of his day, several prominent historians support it today. For example, Steven Hahn (2009: xiii) argues that characterizing the activity of slaves during the Civil War as rebellion “has been almost universally denied or rejected, despite the many thousands of slaves who, by their actions, helped turn the Civil War against slavery and secured the defeat of their owners” (p. xiii). He maintains that the “case for slave rebellion...is neither hidden, archivally silenced, nor subtly discursive,” but “it stares us in the face” (p. 58), and it shared important features of other prominent and routinely acknowledged slave rebellions in the Americas. For example,

It erupted at a time of bitter division and conflict among the society’s white rulers. It depended on networks of communication, intelligence, and interpretation among the slaves. It imagined powerful allies coming to their aid, whose goals and objectives were thought to coincide with theirs. It involved individual and collective acts of flight, not as efforts to redress particular grievances, but as a means of leaving slavery behind and embracing a newly available or imagined freedom. And it ultimately saw slaves take up arms against slaveholders in an attempt to defeat (if not destroy) them and abolish the institution of slavery (p. 86).

He concludes that “[i]n these respects, the slaves rebellion during the Civil War” resembled the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, the establishment of

<sup>3</sup> Genovese (1981: 4–5) notes that “[b]y the end of the eighteenth century, the historical content of the slave revolts shifted decisively from attempts to secure freedom from slavery to attempts to overthrow slavery as a social system,” with “[t]he great black revolution in Saint-Domingue mark[ing] the turning point,” and “[t]he nineteenth century revolts in the Old South formed part of this epoch-making transformation in the relations of class and race in the Western Hemisphere.” Specifically, “the black demand for the abolition of slavery as a social system was something new and epoch-making” (p. xx).

maroons in Brazil and Jamaica, Gabriel's conspiracy of 1800 in Virginia, Charles Deslondes' revolt of 1811 near New Orleans, the Demerara Rebellion of 1823, and the Baptist War of 1831–1832 in Jamaica (p. 86). For Hahn, "in its course and outcome" the slaves' rebellion during the Civil War may most resemble what has long been considered "the greatest and only successful slave rebellion in modern history": the Haitian Revolution (p. 88). Both rebellions were "provoked by massive struggles between powerful groups within the white population and by the belief among slaves that they had allies among white rulers"; "free people of color" played "important roles in setting the direction of political conflict" and influencing the post-emancipation order; "flight from the plantations...was integral to the rebellions and crucial to the growth and maintenance of liberating armies"; "shifting alliances with and battles against large standing armies proved decisive to the rebellions' outcomes"; and "the rebellions became social and political revolutions, eventuating in the abolition of slavery, the crushing military defeat of the slave owners, and the effective birth of new nations" (p. 96).

He adds that "it is arguable that the revolution made by slave rebellion was even more far reaching in the Civil War South than it was in Saint Dominique" especially since "it took place and helped transform a slave society that was by far the largest, most economically advanced, and most resilient in the Americas" (p. 97). He maintains that "[a]lone among the slaves of the Americas" slaves in the US South "were outnumbered by a large, mobile, and armed population of whites who either owned slaves, did the slaveholders' bidding, or wanted little to do with either slaveholders or slaves" (p. 87). Facing arguably the most powerful landed elite in the world and primarily situated on numerically small plantations and farms that precluded large-scale mobilization, and with memories of the suppression of insurgencies as recently as John Brown's of 1859, slaves "waited until their imagined allies struck the first blow" (p. 87).

Hahn's conclusions are echoed by Stephanie McCurry's (2010: 262) that the Civil War involved a "massive rebellion of the Confederacy's slaves." She notes that just as Haitian slaves won their freedom in the context of a war that was "regionally uneven, temporally protracted, dynamic and reversible...in which the[ir] proximity to abolition armies was crucial to [their] prospects of freedom" (p. 261), US slaves pursued a common strategy to destroy slavery "in the context of war and in alliance with enemy armies." They "moved tactically and by stages, men and women both, equal and active participants in the whole array of insurrectionary activities calculated to destroy the institution of slavery, their masters' power, and the prospects of the C.S.A. as a pro slavery nation" (p. 262). Manumission was "regionally uneven, temporally protracted, and linked to the Union army's invasion and federal emancipation policy," but, "to planters and slaves alike, it was unmistakably, too, the consequence of a massive rebellion of the Confederacy's slaves" (p. 262). For McCurry, this slave rebellion in the USA followed a pattern evident from the American Revolution "to the last surrender of slavery in Brazil in the aftermath of the Paraguayan war," including "Saint-Domingue, the Spanish-American Wars of Independence, the U.S. Civil War, the Ten-Years War in Cuba" (p. 311). In each of these cases, "slaves fought for and won their freedom in the context of war" (p. 311) because "[i]t was in the context of war that slave men became the objects of state interest and the focus of intense competition between warring states for political loyalty and military service. In this respect, the American Civil War was hardly unique" (p. 311).

For McCurry, the view of the Civil War occasioning a massive slave rebellion in the US South was evident to “Union and Confederate officials with responsibility for administering the region” who “all called it what it was: a slave rebellion” (p. 258). She argues that “[e]vidence that the Civil War became a massive slave rebellion is to be found in every Confederate state where slaves seized the opportunity of war to rise against their masters, destroy slavery where they lived, and claim allegiance to a nation that had never really been theirs” and “[i]t was not the existence of slave rebellion that makes the difference between say, South Carolina and Virginia, on the one hand, and Louisiana, on the other. It was only that in Mississippi and southern Louisiana, people were more likely to admit it and to make the searing historical analogy to Saint-Domingue” (pp. 260–1). She adds that

Historians have been loath to notice the analogy deployed during the war itself and shied away from any description of the Civil War as a slave rebellion. But that owes to the explosive politics of the analogy for slaves themselves during the war, for their leaders in the postwar period, for Union officials...and for Confederates and their lost-cause descendants bent on denying it, far more than it does to historical conditions in the Confederate South during the Civil War (p. 261).

Hahn’s and McCurry’s conclusions are little different than Du Bois’ (1935: 91) decades earlier:<sup>4</sup>

Here was indeed revolution. At first, this was to be a white man’s war. First, because the North did not want to affront the South, and the war was going to be short, very short; and secondly, if Negroes fought in the war, how could it help being a war for their emancipation? And for this the North would not fight. Yet scarcely a year after hostilities started, the Negroes were fighting, although unrecognized as soldiers; in two years they were free and enrolling in the army.

The avatar of the revolution was the General Strike, which reflected “not merely the desire to stop work” but “was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work” (p. 67). It “involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people” who “wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations” (p. 67). “The Negro,” he argued “became as the South quickly saw, the key to Southern resistance. Either these four million laborers remained quietly at work to raise food for the fighters, or the fighter starved,” and “when the dream of the North for man-power produced riots, the only additional troops that the North could depend on were 200,000 Negroes, for without them, as Lincoln said, the North could not have won the war” (p. 80). He adds:

But this slow, stubborn mutiny of the Negro slave was not merely a matter of 200,000 black soldiers and perhaps 300,000 other black laborers, servants, spies

<sup>4</sup> McPherson (1991: 35) argues that the revolutionary quality of the Civil War was the result of the “enlistment of black soldiers to fight and kill their former masters,” which impelled Lincoln to change his initial limited war aims to “the revolutionary goal of a new Union without slavery” (p. 34).

and helpers. Back of this half million stood 3 ½ million more. Without their labor the South would starve. With arms in their hands, Negroes would form a fighting force which could replace every single Northern white soldier fighting listlessly and against his will with a black man fighting for freedom (p. 80).

He insisted that the role of the abolitionists in securing the freedom of the slaves was exaggerated. Abolitionists' power was limited especially in the South, but "slaves had enormous power in their hands":

Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy with starvation. By walking into the Federal camps, they showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them as workers and as servants, as farmers, and as spies, and finally, as fighting soldiers...[and] by the same gesture, depriving their enemies of their use in just these fields. It was the fugitive slave who made the slaveholders face the alternative of surrendering to the North, or the Negroes (p. 121).

Du Bois was emphatic that "It was this plain alternative that brought Lee's sudden surrender" (p. 121), and this was not lost on commentators at the time as evident in the debates in Congress and the Confederate legislatures. Even Lincoln acknowledged that "[w]ithout the military help of black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won" (p. 716).<sup>5</sup> In fact, approximately 186,000 black troops served in the Union Army, and about 10,000 served in the Union Navy. These troops fought in more than 400 engagements including 40 major battles, most notably at Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, and Fort Wagner. Their gallantry was such that even in the racist context of the time, 16 blacks received the Medal of Honor, the country's highest military honor.

Du Bois argued that the "mutiny of the Negro slave" was followed by the "disaffection of the poor whites" in the South as thousands deserted the ranks of the Confederate forces. Du Bois conceived the efforts of slaves and poor whites as "one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian Revolution had seen" (p. 358). He saw this pattern replicated in the Russian Revolution in which the peasantry deserted the Czar's armies in the field in an act of rebellion that prefigured the Revolution. But even as he attempted to apply a Marxist interpretation to the war and its aftermath, Du Bois recognized its limitations in explicating the processes that he sought to explain.<sup>6</sup>

Robinson (1983: 321) argues that Du Bois' analysis reveals that "[t]he slaves freed themselves...by the dictates of religious myth," and the "idiom of revolutionary consciousness had been historical and cultural rather than the 'mirror of production'" (p. 324)—in fact, it had been rooted in black religion. Robinson notes that contrary to the Marxist view that bourgeois society would provide the precondition for political revolution, Du Bois insisted that "no bourgeois society was the setting of this revolution" and "the ideology of the plantocracy had not been the ideology of the

<sup>5</sup> He added: "Yet one would search current American histories almost in vain to find a clear statement or even faint recognition of these perfectly well-authenticated facts" (p. 717).

<sup>6</sup> Du Bois (1995 [1933]: 543) lamented that Marx did not focus "first hand upon the history of the American Negro" and concluded that Marxism "must be modified in the [US] and especially so far as the Negro group is concerned."



slaves” (p. 322). Instead, “[t]he slaves had produced their own culture and their own consciousness by adapting the forms of the non-Black society to the conceptualizations derived from their own historical roots and social conditions. In some instances, indeed, elements produced by the slave culture had become the dominant ones in white Southern culture” and “[t]his was the human experience from which the rebellion rose” (p. 322).

Moreover, the vanguard of Marxist revolution, the industrial proletariat, behaved in a manner other than what Marx anticipated. Southern white workers, yeoman farmers, and peasants made common cause with the plantocracy, and Northern white workers opposed the war, not in solidarity with their Southern proletarians but largely against privileged Northerners who could exempt themselves from military service through payment. As the war became viewed as one to end slavery, Northern white workers—Marx’s industrial proletariat—vehemently opposed it and initiated anti-Draft riots and pogroms against Northern blacks, even as black slaves in the South initiated the GS.

Consistent with Du Bois’ thesis, Robinson avers that the “revolutionary consciousness” of the slaves motivated their actions in the Civil War, and the format of the GS, in which “peasants and agrarian workers had been the primary social bases of rebellion and revolution” (p. 324), prefigured the pattern of successful revolutions in the twentieth century. But even as Du Bois appreciated the international implications of the outcome of the US Civil War, his analysis of some of the domestic processes motivating the GS had some important omissions. To be fair, Du Bois’ main concern in *Black Reconstruction* was to provide a history of Reconstruction, more than an exegesis of the antebellum precipitants of black participation in the war. Nevertheless, his conceptualization of slave society that he juxtaposes with that which Reconstruction sought to create gives us a sense of why his thesis may have missed some of the factors that are emphasized in this essay. For example, Du Bois (pp. 121–2) argued that prior to the war

...the slave was curiously isolated; this was...the effective policy of the slave system, which made the plantation the center of a black group with a network of white folk around and about, who kept the slaves from contact with each other... clandestine contact there always was; the passing of Negroes to and fro on errands; particularly the semi-freedom and mingling in cities; and yet, the mass of slaves were curiously provincial and kept out of the currents of information.

Such a characterization allowed Du Bois to analogize the condition of US slaves to Russian peasants, whom he viewed as central to the success of the Russian Revolution, but it missed the important networks circuiting slave neighborhoods and even interconnecting them. Focusing on these networks allows us to appreciate more dynamic aspects of slave society that contributed to the radicalization and mobilization of slaves that Du Bois’ thesis captures. For example, an incipient industrialization of some aspects of slave labor was evident in the antebellum era, and it was taking place at the nexus of slave and free society, between cotton fields and cotton mills, throughout the South. Slave labor was not only central to agricultural production, but it was increasingly employed in Southern industries (Barnes et al. 2011). By the last decade prior to the Civil War, the industrial capacity of the South had doubled, and slaves worked in textile mills, iron works, brickworks, tobacco factories, hemp factories, shoe factories, tanneries, coal mines, iron mines, gold mines, salt mines, sugar refineries, rice mills, and gristmills (Starobin 1970: 11).



In industry as in agriculture, slaves could be utilized directly by their owners or “hired out.” The system of hiring out slaves expanded the networks of slaves across plantations and often linked rural and urban slave and free black communities. The vast majority of slaves in industrial settings were directly owned; but, among those hired out, slave artisans were particularly important; and given their skilled labor could earn greater profits for their owners, who returned only a small portion of their hired-out slaves’ earnings while pocketing the rest. Although profitable for slaveholders, the practice of hiring out slaves was potentially dangerous, as well (Martin 2004). It presented a problem of slaves working in a manner similar to that of free-wage laborers, and working for hire allowed the slave to directly experience how the wages they earned from the same work as their free-laboring counterparts were valued differently only because they were not free. For slave artisans, this difference was probably even more apparent, psychologically, insofar as they typically had the same level of training and craftsmanship as their free-laboring counterparts. Thus, hired-out slave artisans came to realize, directly, the “wage burden” imposed on them as a condition of their servitude—evoking Marx’s thesis of surplus value—while slave hire also gave them the opportunity to work in settings with other similarly situated artisans with similar grievances, providing a basis for conspiratorial activity. The potential dangers of hiring out slaves to the maintenance of the slave system were articulated by the most famous hired-out slave, Frederick Douglass (1855: 325), the future abolitionist leader, who said that “the practice, from week to week, of openly robbing me of all my earnings, kept the nature and character of slavery constantly before me.”

For these reasons, it is not surprising that we observe hired-out slave artisans—such a small minority of slave society, prominent among the participants in the major US slave revolts of the nineteenth century. Starobin (1970: 90) argues that “[t]he involvement of Negro artisans and industrial slaves in conspiracies and rebellions indicates that they were greatly disaffected,” and “[s]ince their work provided both a large measure of self-esteem and independence, the leadership of slave rebellions naturally gravitated to them” (Starobin 1988: 123). Slavery appeared to be creating a consciousness among this class of hired-out slaves and artisans, and some of these quasi-proletarians were intent on overthrowing the slave system.

Although Du Bois (1935: 14) put the black worker at the center of the Civil War as “its underlying cause” and as decisive in its outcome, he insufficiently examined the role of slave artisans in his GS. While he appreciated work-based distinctions among slaves, recognizing specifically, “artisans, who had a certain modicum of freedom in their work, were often hired out, and worked practically as free laborers,” he did not reflect on the role of such slaves in previous revolts and project forward to their role in the GS. He recognized that the slaves involved in the GS were utilizing “the same methods that [they] had used during the period of the fugitive slave” (p. 57)—namely, they would “strike” in order “to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations” (p. 67), but he did not seem to appreciate that among these “same methods” were organized revolt. Concerned less with antebellum slave revolts, and more with juxtaposing the repressive conditions of the antebellum South with the emancipatory opportunities that Reconstruction promised, Du Bois did not examine how these revolts foreshadowed the GS, and demonstrated the type of coordinated action that could be achieved even within the “armed and commissioned camp of the South”—even after the suppression of the Turner revolt. Not only the

major slave revolts, Du Bois ignored several conspiracies of the 1850s involving industrial slaves, which may have helped him to appreciate the continuity between antebellum slave revolts and the GS.<sup>7</sup> Without such a focus, the GS was reduced to a spontaneous outgrowth of religious fervor rather than the culmination of processes evident in previous revolts (p. 122).

For Du Bois, the slave revolt of the Civil War was the result of spontaneous, religiously inspired, concerted action—which is partly correct, but, more fully, it was a continuation of the initiatives among religiously inspired slaves and slave artisans that contributed to the major slave revolts of the nineteenth century. Du Bois captured the former, but not the latter. Du Bois' insufficient attention to the earlier slave revolts limited his ability to see how slave religion and slave hiring could reinforce each other in a revolutionary synthesis. A brief review of the planning and organization of the slave revolts of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner reveals these relationships, and this is the focus of the next section.

## Slave Religion, Slave Hiring, and Slave Revolts

Key aspects of the slave revolution during the Civil War were prefigured in the major slave revolts of the antebellum era: those of Gabriel (Prosser), Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Each of these leaders drew on slave religion—utilizing religious arguments and invoking biblical rationales—to justify their revolts and motivate and coordinate their followers (Sidbury 2003: 120). In addition, hired-out slaves—especially slave artisans—were influential in each of these revolts, as well.

### Gabriel's Rebellion

Gabriel, a slave artisan, led a slave conspiracy near Richmond, VA, in 1800. Religion not only provided a rationale for this revolt, but “religious meetings” also served “as occasions for the recruitment of slaves and for plotting and organizing the insurrection.” The influence of slave artisans in this planned revolt was so great that some scholars argue that it superseded religion as the prime motivation for the revolt (Egerton 1993; Mullin 1972).<sup>8</sup> Such claims are challenged by Levine (1978: 75) who notes that although “[i]n other revolts sacred elements were more prominent,” nevertheless, “the Old Testament message played a role” in Gabriel's revolt. Sidbury (2003: 121) argues that the central role of religion in the revolt is evident in the importance of Hungary Baptist Meeting House, which Gabriel and his two brothers appear to have attended, and was the site of many recruiting meetings; the assertions of white commentators at the time that religion was central to the conspiracy; and the “substantial evidence of growing black allegiance to the Baptist Church in the region around Richmond during the late 1790s.” Moses (1993: 36) agrees and notes the importance of religion in the exchange between Gabriel's brother Martin and Ben

<sup>7</sup> Starobin (1970: 89) highlights several revolts and conspiracies involving industrial slaves after Turner's revolt, and while some may have been exaggerated by whites, actual cases such as the slave conspiracy in 1856 was “especially significant, since it involved industrial slaves almost exclusively.”

<sup>8</sup> Sidbury (1997: 88) rejects the claims that the revolt was rooted in “artisanal republicanism.”

Woolfolk, two of the chief conspirators, during one planning meeting, which was reported by Ben in his confession during his conspiracy trial:

Martin said there was this expression in the Bible, delays breed danger...I told them that I had heard in the days of old, when the Israelites were in service to King Pharaoh, they were taken from him by the power of God, and were carried away by Moses. God had blessed him with an angel to go with him, but that I could see nothing of that kind in these days. Martin said in reply: I read in my Bible where God says if we will worship Him we should have peace in all our land, five of you shall conquer an hundred, and a hundred a thousand of our enemies. After this they went on consultation upon the time they should execute the plan (Flournoy 1890: 151).

Sidbury (2003) notes that although the exchange above constitutes “the only direct appeal to the Bible in all of the recorded testimony produced during the trials and investigations” of Gabriel’s plot, nevertheless, there are “reasons to believe that religion did play a central role in the conspiracy” (pp. 120–1). First, the exchange is the only recorded reference to the Bible in the planning, “but that does not mean that it was the only conversation in which the Bible played a role.” Second, the exchange took place during a “pivotal moment” in the planning when one conspirator, George Smith, was cautioning patience—to which Ben agreed and provided Biblical support for his position—and Gabriel was intent on commencing the revolt sooner and turned the floor to Martin who provided a Biblical counterpoint, which seemed to decide the issue. “Martin, in short, laid claim to greater interpretive authority than Woolfolk, and the other leaders of the conspiracy appear to have accepted his claim” since after Martin’s speech the group went into consultation and Martin set the date for the revolt (p. 122; also see Raboteau 1980: 147). That the interpretation of Biblical texts could be dispositive of an issue of such import as the timing of the revolt suggests the significance of religion to the leaders.

Gabriel’s plan purposely focused on urban slaves, primarily skilled artisans, like himself, who hired out their time. Sidbury (1997: 61) acknowledges that “many, perhaps most, of the slaves convicted of participating in the conspiracy by the Henrico County Court had artisanal skills.” In Gabriel’s Virginia, planters faced a depressed tobacco market; thus, they reduced the cultivation of tobacco as a crop and, with less demand for slave labor in the tobacco fields, hired out many of their slaves in order to earn money. Slave artisans, in particular, could be hired out as skilled workers for Richmond’s various industries. Egerton (1993: 23–4) notes that “[e]ven the largest and most efficient plantations could not keep their bond artisans fully occupied year-round, and so many owners occasionally hired their craftsmen out to neighboring farms or town dwellers.” In Henrico County, not only slave artisans were hired out, but female domestics, butlers, and coachmen were leased to elites for their large gatherings, just as unskilled farm laborers were leased to small landholders needing extra hands during planting and harvesting. In fact, “the largest slaveholder in the state, hired out more than two-thirds of his 509 slaves” (Egerton 1993: 21). The hire could be for a few days or leased for fifty weeks. There were designated areas, such as the steps of the County Courthouse in Richmond, from which prospective employers could choose from among the “crowds of servants, men, women, boys and girls, for hire” (p. 24).

As noted above, the practice of hiring out slaves was both profitable and potentially destabilizing for slavers because it had the potential to proletarianize the slaves by raising their consciousness of the degree of their exploitation—both individually and as a class of workers—and encouraging their independence. Hiring out also gave the slave artisan the opportunity to work in industrial settings in which there may be concentrations of similarly situated artisans with similar disaffection with the slave system, providing a basis for conspiratorial activity. Slave artisans, and hired out slaves, more generally, were crucial to Gabriel's conspiracy, and "most of those contacted early on" to join it "were skilled men who hired their own time" (Egerton 1993: 52). Gabriel was one of those slave artisans who either hired out some of his time and/or worked after hours for pay, which would afford him the time and mobility to organize others who were similarly disposed to the slave system.<sup>9</sup> He was among five of the six most important leaders who were blacksmiths (p. 83). In Gabriel's Virginia, blacksmiths "were highly skilled and valued artisans who enjoyed a high level of autonomy while at work, and their shops were often placed on busy thoroughfares" (p. 83). For example, "the shop of Gabriel, Solomon, and Prosser's Ben bordered the road that carried wagon traffic into Richmond from western counties—so these shops could serve as communicative nodal points for slaves communities"(p. 83). Further, "their relative autonomy on the job, their ability to sell work done 'after hours' and thus gain access to the market, and their position in Black communication networks contributed to their status within slave communities," which, "along with blacksmiths very practical ability to make and repair weapons, helps to explain their prominence within the conspiracy." (p. 83).

Thus, slave religion provided the ideological justification for the revolt, while coordination of the revolt was facilitated by a network of hired-out slaves who fashioned a conspiratorial web across plantations and rural and urban areas. To be sure, "[t]he slaves' Christianity was not inherently revolutionary," but it could be fashioned for that purpose, and Gabriel's "use of scriptural arguments to convince other skilled and acculturated slaves to attack their masters shows that at least in 1800 Black Virginians could use their religion for purposes that were in fact revolutionary" (Sidbury 1997: 79).<sup>10</sup>

### Denmark Vesey's Rebellion

Denmark Vesey's planned rebellion in Charleston, SC, in 1822 followed a similar pattern.<sup>11</sup> It was no less religiously inspired than Gabriel's—in fact, even more so. Vesey was a former slave, a carpenter, and an influential member of the AME Church, and his slave revolt relied heavily on hired-out slave artisans and his fellow church members. Vesey used nightly "class meetings" to promote a radical Christianity rooted in the Old Testament and Jehovah's evocations of vengeance and retribution for his enslaved chosen people. Particularly instructive for Vesey were Old Testament passages

<sup>9</sup> On whether Gabriel was hired out, contrast Egerton (1993: 24–5) and Sidbury (1997: 83).

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, after escaping from Richmond, Gabriel was helped by a white boat captain and betrayed by a hired-out slave artisan. Gabriel and more than 30 other conspirators were hanged. In the aftermath, the legislature restricted slave hiring and limited the residency and movement of free blacks.

<sup>11</sup> Several authors—most prominently Johnson (2001)—have argued that the Vesey conspiracy was a fabrication of white politicians, but this claim has been challenged, most convincingly, by Spady (2011).

that spoke of retribution sanctioned by God and carried out by divinely inspired leaders, such as the story of Joshua and the Exodus (Stuckey 1987: 48–9; Robertson 1999: 138). Not surprisingly, “[a]ll but one of Vesey’s closest fellow conspirators were A.M.E. members” (Robertson 1999: 9). One of the prominent leaders of the conspiracy, “Gullah Jack” Pritchard, was both a member of the AME Church and a conjurer; thus, Vesey’s conspiracy was based in both “the doctrinal sanction of Scripture” as well as “the practical protection of conjure” (Raboteau 1980: 163). Egerton (2003: 120) rejects the view that Vesey “consciously used Jack Pritchard to reach the African plantation constituency, while he himself used the AME Church to reach the more assimilated urban creole population” because, in his view, “no such dichotomy existed” (also, see Creel 1988). After all, Gullah Jack was a member of Vesey’s church, as was Monday Gell, an Ibo, and “[n]either man appeared to find any contradiction between the religious teachings of their childhood, and what they heard in Cow Alley” at the AME Church. He concludes that “[i]t was not that the old carpenter cynically used his church to recruit revolutionaries, but rather that this fusion of Old Testament law and African ritual transformed his timid disciples into revolutionaries.”<sup>12</sup> For Starobin (1970: 5), “the Vesey Plot embodied an extraordinarily rich ideology,” which “combined the Old Testaments’ harsh morality and the story of the Israelites with African religious customs, knowledge of the Haitian Revolution, and readings of antislavery speeches from the Missouri [Compromise] controversy.” Creel (1988: 10) viewed Vesey’s conspiracy as emanating from a “resistance culture” among African-Carolinians and described it as “a supreme effort to break the chains of bondage in a spirit of nationalism, unity, and religious self-determination” (p. 160).

If the influence of religion on the revolt was apparent, so was the impact of artisans—especially hired-out slaves, just as in Gabriel’s revolt. Vesey was a free-black carpenter, which afforded him opportunities to meet and work with other artisans—both free and slave—in urban Charleston as well as plantation slaves in the rural areas around Charleston (Lofton 1983: 78). Among his closest co-conspirators, both Gullah Jack and Monday Gell (a harness maker) apparently were hired-out slaves (Greene and Hutchins 2004: 41) and probably Peter Poyas (a ship carpenter), as well. Other important conspirators such as Lot Forrester, who had secured “slow match”—a length of fuse—to facilitate the fires that were to be set throughout the city, were hired-out slaves, as was William Garner, a drayman, who during his trial tried unsuccessfully to convince his triers that the privileges he enjoyed as a hired-out slave militated against his involvement in the conspiracy (Robertson 1999). Jesse Blackwood, who was tasked with bringing slaves from the countryside into the city just prior to the uprising, was ostensibly hired out, but actually, other conspirators raised money to pay his slave master so that he could more effectively recruit for the planned revolt (Greene and Hutchins 2004: 40–1; Pearson 1999: 71).

As in Gabriel’s Richmond, the system of hiring out slaves was expansive in Vesey’s Charleston. In Charleston, “[n]either owners nor municipal officials could effectively monitor the enslaved bricklayers, carpenters, painters, and other craft workers who traveled freely around the city and surrounding countryside between jobs” and “[f]rom the late seventeenth century until the Civil War, a series of provincial and municipal laws unsuccessfully sought to regulate these workers.” The rebel leadership came

<sup>12</sup> A similar argument is made by Raboteau (1980: 163) and, more recently, Harris (2001), among others.

mainly from this discontented group of urban skilled slave artisans and religious leaders (Starobin 1970: 3), and given that “recruits came mainly from the urban, industrial slaves of Charleston,” this “casts great doubt on the assertion...that urban bondsmen and slave hirelings were more content and less rebellious than rural, plantation bondsmen. Indeed the evidence suggests that urban slaves were, despite their supposedly greater privileges and higher standard of living, at least as discontented as rural slaves. No wonder whites were mystified and horrified when even their most trusted servants and apparently contented bondsmen were implicated in the plot” (p. 3).

As in Gabriel’s Revolt, the framework for Vesey’s insurgency was the fusion of leadership grounded in religious justifications coupled with the centrality of artisanal slaves—especially hired-out slaves—which facilitated a clandestine network across plantations. Also, like Gabriel’s strategy, Vesey’s employed diversion, camouflage, concentration of forces, land and river coordination, and, uniquely, international diplomacy—through correspondence with President Boyer of Haiti, but, for all its sophistication, as in Gabriel’s conspiracy, betrayal of the plot—and deployment of militia—doomed it.<sup>13</sup>

### Nat Turner’s Rebellion

No slave revolt prior to the Civil War had the impact of Nat Turner’s in Virginia in 1831. The role of religious ideology in Turner’s revolt is unequivocal. Although Aptheker (1966: 35) describes Turner as being “gifted mechanically”—evoking the thesis of the importance of slave artisans to revolts—Turner was primarily a field hand.<sup>14</sup> What is not in dispute is Aptheker’s assessment that “the supreme influence” in Turner’s life “undoubtedly was religion” (p. 36). Aptheker (p. 35) views Turner as “a highly intelligent man who finds it impossible to accept the status quo and discovers his rationalization for his rebellious feelings in religion.” Turner was a slave preacher who was heavily influenced by passages in the Bible that advocated retributive justice (e.g., Luke 12: 40, 49–51). Turner “perceived a close relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and the great prophets who had called down the wrath of God upon his disobedient people and their enemies” (Wilmore 1983: 65). Such an exegesis of Scripture is markedly different from that found typically in the slaves’ catechism from the missionaries who spoke of Jesus as the meek and humble Lamb of God, obedient to his Master, God the Father. Thus, while Gabriel and Vesey drew their religious motivations from Old Testament texts, Turner drew from the messianic vision of the New Testament and the Gospel of Jesus.

As Turner relates in *The Confessions*, upon seeing what he took as a sign in the heavens—a solar eclipse in February 1831—he said “...the seal was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do to four in whom I had the greatest confidence.” In contrast to Gabriel and Vesey, Turner initially confided only in

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the key informant, George Wilson, was a blacksmith, a class leader in the AME church, and a founding member of the church (Pearson 1999; Robertson 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Oates (1975:161) argues that “[t]hose who describe Nat as a skilled slave are wrong. In 1822, Nat was valued at \$400—the price of a good field hand. During his trial for insurrection, he was valued at only \$375. By contrast, a slave blacksmith also tried for the rebellion was valued at \$675. Moreover, Nat mentions nothing in the *Confessions* about ever being a skilled slave; rather, he refers to himself as a field hand at work behind his plow” (p. 38).



four men “in whom [he] had the greatest confidence,” who either lived on his farm or were from nearby plantations (p. 111). The level of secrecy he maintained appears a deliberate policy because it was not for want of an audience from which he might draw supporters—if he had so desired—that he restricted his recruitment because as a slave preacher he had considerable freedom of movement for religious gatherings. Although few would dispute the centrality of religion to Turner, himself, and the role that it played in establishing his leadership, some maintain that it was less salient for many of Turner’s followers than their more general and specific grievances (Breen 2003: 118). Notwithstanding the motivations of the dozens of slaves and free blacks who supported and subsequently joined the revolt, it was Nat Turner, “[i]nspired by his religious visions,” who “tapped into the latent hope and discontent of slaves and free blacks in Southampton,” and in this way, “[t]he prophet became a general and led his men in a desperate battle against slavery” (Breen 2003: 118).

Turner’s objective appears to have been to take the county seat of Jerusalem (now Courtland) and from there secure weapons and ammunition, presumably in hopes of capturing the entire county with the aid of supporters joining from surrounding areas. Although historians are unclear of Turner’s objectives beyond Jerusalem, the strategy he employed was not poorly conceived. Egerton (2003: 142) is correct that “[h]indsight is often the enemy of understanding” and “[s]ecure in the knowledge that Turner failed in his mission, scholars are tempted to assume that no other outcome was possible. But once Jerusalem was within the grasp of his army, Turner could either have fortified the village and waited for word of the rising to spread across the countryside or, if white counterassaults became too potent, could have galloped the 25 miles east into the Dismal Swamp. Here then lay the basis, not of a fanatical plan doomed to failure, but of a maroon island of black liberty deep within the slaveholding South.”

Turner’s plan was to move stealthily to avoid raising alarms and to use hatchets and axes as weapons to conceal the attacks from neighboring plantations. In the event, after killing slaveholding families, the insurgents confiscated their arms, horses, powder, shot, food, spirits, and money and recruited other slaves to join them. Turner drilled and outfitted his rebels with red bandannas—all acts to inspire esprit de corps and to instill military discipline under Nat’s military authority. Subsequently, he altered tactics and “concentrated his forces and ordered them to charge at full gallop and in full cry to exaggerate the size of their ranks and paralyze the enemy in fear, to ‘carry terror and devastation wherever we went’,” and “[f]or a time, the stratagem seemed to work, drawing ten to twenty more slaves into the uprising” (Kaye 2007b: 717). Their increased numbers “pulled the rebellion in different directions” (p. 717), and three miles outside of Jerusalem, Turner was compelled to split his forces, just as slaveholders and local militia had marshaled to suppress the revolt. In the decisive battle at Parker’s field, Turner reconsolidated his forces after a remnant had been dispersed by a patrol’s fire, and led them in a spirited attack that repulsed the patrol; however, the arrival of reinforcements forced Turner’s retreat (Parramore 2003: 66). The tactical loss concealed a strategic defeat because Turner’s access to the bridges to Jerusalem was cut off by militia and patrolling whites. Fighting would continue into the next day, but Nat’s forces were mostly scattered, captured, or killed, although he would elude militia and mobs for two months before his capture.

In total, Turner’s forces, which at their largest constituted between 60 and 80 men, had killed 57 whites. Slaveholders were reinforced by militia with greater manpower



and more arms—eventually including several artillery companies—and a detachment of sailors. Turner was among the 56 slaves executed for the insurrection, although between 100 and 200 slaves and free blacks were killed by whites in a frenzied campaign of torture, rape, and murder following the revolt. In the aftermath, the Virginia legislature made it illegal to teach slaves, free blacks, or mulattoes to read or write, and to restrict all blacks from holding religious meetings outside the presence of a licensed white minister.<sup>15</sup>

### Slave Revolts and Du Bois' Thesis

The revolts of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner were dramatic but not unique events, and religious factors and slave hiring are implicated heavily in each of them. It is reasonable to conclude that these factors, which motivated and supported the development of sophisticated clandestine plans for revolt, which entailed the coordination and movement of men, women and material across plantations and even across rural and urban communities, also could motivate and support the major slave revolt of the Civil War. In the prewar revolts, slave religion provided the language of revolt, a justification for it, and a promise of its fulfillment. The capacity of slave religion to motivate revolt belies the view that it simply bred docility. Moses (1993: 246) is correct that it is “impossible to conceive” that “uprooted Africans learning their Christianity in North America” would do so while “remaining blind to such concepts as ‘righteous wrath’ and the idea of a God who expects his faithful to behave as instruments of his wrath.” It is not that slave religion mandated rebellion or even counseled it over submission to the slave’s lot; what is important is that slave religion *could* be reconciled with slave revolt. Similarly, the practice of slave hiring increased the mobility of slaves and gave them the opportunities to extend their social and occupational networks. For slave artisans, it increased their ability to develop a collective identity and consciousness based on their shared exploitation as both slave and wage laborer resulting in an incipient proletarianization of these interstitial slaves/workers. Although this awareness may have been greatest for slave artisans, it likely affected hired-out unskilled laborers as well, given that their wages were subject to the same expropriations by their slave masters.

In combination, slave religion and slave hiring contributed to the development of expansive, complex, and coordinated networks extending across plantations and rural and urban slave and free black communities. Such networks became characteristic of slave communities, but also could be utilized to coordinate even sophisticated plans for rebellion. Although these revolts could be—and typically were—brutally suppressed, given that the factors that generated them, slave religion and slave hiring, also served the interests of the slave masters (i.e., the slave masters’ desire for the profits from slave hiring and the promise of religiously inspired slave docility), these practices persisted in some form right up to and throughout the war. Given the persistent impact of these two factors on slave society, it is surprising that Du Bois would not consider them in what he acknowledges as the religiously inspired and slave labor-based GS of the Civil War. It was Du Bois’ desire to juxtapose the stultifying, repressive slave system of the antebellum era, to the awesome opportunities for black autonomy and development

<sup>15</sup> Similar laws were enacted across the slave states, contributing to the vast illiteracy among slaves such that most slaves freed by the Civil War were illiterate.

provided by postbellum radical Reconstruction, which colored his conceptual lens. The major slave revolts were both rare and distant from what he viewed as the major precipitants of the war and its aftermath.

Du Bois appreciated the significance of the black laborer of the South, but he did not draw the explicit link between hired-out slaves—especially slave artisans, motivated by a quasi-proletarianism borne of working in Southern industry and fueled by religious ideology—and the pursuit of insurgency. As both slave and wage laborer, s/he was both religionist and proletarian, and as hired-out slaves, mobile and able to establish networks that linked slave communities. Coupled with the institutional structure of the incipient black Church, such networks provided the latticework for communities of support extending across plantations, linking rural and urban communities, as well. They developed further in the decades leading up to the war, ultimately facilitating the movement of slaves to Union lines during the Civil War. Following these major slave revolts, and right up to the war, it was evident that slave networks were being utilized and extended to facilitate what would eventuate in the slave revolution of the Civil War.

### Slave Neighborhoods, Grapevine Telegraphs, and Networks for War

Slaves utilized the social networks of the antebellum era during wartime, as well.<sup>16</sup> These networks were conduits within slave society that facilitated communication, transportation, and organization within and across plantations and expanded the scope of the slave neighborhood, which comprised both the physical geography and the social terrain of the individual slave (Kaye 2007a: 4). It was a nexus of social relations based in “labor, kinship, struggle, worship, and socializing of every variety” (p. 153). Slave neighborhoods were the “unintended consequences” of slave interaction in a context defined by the plantation system and the will of individual slave owners, who, often unwittingly, helped produce and reproduce them. They often included adjacent plantations and the areas around them, as well (p. 4). Bonds within neighborhoods were stronger than those between them (p. 153), which posed problems for slaves planning escape—much less revolt—because in order “[t]o muster a force of any consequence, rebels had to unite across neighborhood lines (p. 124). Given these “inextricable constraints and obstructions,” the geography of neighborhoods “all but doomed slave revolts”—making the development and execution of major slave revolts all the more remarkable (p. 124).

Slaves whose labor required mobility such as artisans, teamsters, and carriage drivers provided a nexus between plantations, and slave preachers were especially influential. “Preachers, who were mediators in a neighborhood’s relationship to God as well as literate and mobile, brought unique attainments to the task of forging ties between neighborhoods and had a special importance among the conduits” (p. 181). The networks within and across slave neighborhoods included formal institutions associated with slave religion and less formal ones, such as the “grapevine telegraph,” both of which could facilitate revolt by serving as relatively independent conduits of information. The grapevine telegraph was the slaves’ network of communication by which “[h]ouse servants, coachmen, artisans and hired slaves, some of whom had

<sup>16</sup> On networks, skilled labor, slave hiring, and religion, see Schenmerhorn (2011).

gained the rudiments of literacy, carried news from the big house, the courthouse, the tavern and the market-place back into the quarters” (Hahn 1997: 128). Once there, the information “was discussed, interpreted and then further disseminated, when slaves visited kinfolk on other plantations and farms, met each other on the back roads, or held brush-arbour religious meetings.” For Hahn, “[i]n these ways the slaves, in many different locales, learned of the antislavery movement in the North, the sectional conflict and other ‘great events’.” Moreover, “[t]he Civil War and early Reconstruction not only brought the slaves’ communication networks to more public light, but also helped to extend, deepen and institutionalize them.”

Although the neighborhood “was the main field of the grapevine telegraph” in which “slaves rapidly and extensively collected and exchanged information,” the grapevine telegraph was also one of several mechanisms that could be used to circumvent some of the constraints of neighborhood boundaries on slaves and facilitated inter-plantation communication (Kaye 2007a: 24). Litwack (1980: 23) agrees that “[e]xtensive black communication networks, feeding on a variety of sources, sped information from plantation to plantation, county to county, often with remarkable secrecy and accuracy.” Interestingly, “[m]uch of the information circulating in slave neighborhoods originated with owners” (Kaye 2007a: 180), as “[a]ttentive slaves made unwitting owners serve as especially revealing informants” (p. 179). As “[p]lanters read newspapers, corresponded with sons, husbands, kin, and friends” and “men and women of discretion talked over what they knew in the garden or the yard, on the porch, and at table,” often “house servants picked it up and passed it along” (p. 180).

McCurry (2010: 227–8) agrees that “[e]xtensive black communication networks had existed in the slave period,” and slaves demonstrated “the ability to get and relay information of personal and political significance by assembling the required elements into one human network.” As the war loomed, slaves “watched and pooled their intelligence on the aims and prospects of civil war” and “[t]hey fashioned lines of communication, connecting circles of men and women, drawn together in relations of kinship and work, sociability and worship in every neighborhood” (p. 179). Mobile slaves, such as preachers, teamsters, and artisans “made themselves into homespun military experts by their ability to reconnoiter over a broad terrain, canvassing informants, sifting opinion and fancy, separating rumor from fact. Slaves in transit, gathering and dispensing information from neighborhood to neighborhood, connected them along the way” (p. 179). In this context, “a preacher’s calling”, in particular, “lent his reckonings of the war a unique authority. His exegesis of the causes of the war, its turns on the battlefield, and its likely outcome could take on the import of revelation, allegory, prophesy” (p. 181).

In the context of the war, the slave preacher’s mobility—unlike that of other mobile slaves—took on added salience since it facilitated the spread of the invisible institution, itself, further forging the links of communication, information, and religious fidelity of slave neighborhoods. These networks—along with those supplied by hired-out slaves—facilitated, *inter alia*, slave runaways during the antebellum era and, once the war commenced, the movement of slaves to Union lines. For example, Du Bois refers to the “mysterious spiritual telegraph” that slaves appear to have utilized to coordinate their movement to General Butler’s Union forces at Fortress Monroe in Virginia (p. 63). During the war, the grapevine telegraph continued to operate as it did during the antebellum era, but now its techniques of communication and information gathering

and dissemination could be applied to slave revolution and Northern victory in myriad forms (e.g., see McPherson 1993: 60–64, 149–154).

Such was the case with the networks developed by the former slave William Webb who reportedly helped coordinate a secret network of slaves in anticipation of a possible rebellion of the slave states with the coming to power of a Republican regime. O'Donovan (2011) credits Webb with “real genius...in mobilization,” which she attributes to his experience as a hired-out slave, which “made it easier for him to create and sustain a growing network of slaves”—just as was evident in the major slave conspiracies of the antebellum era. Webb's network was a protean, decentralized, “loose assembly of disparate groups,” which he began to organize among slaves as early as 1856 and, by Lincoln's election, could move news across three states (Webb 1873: 13). His plan sought to establish a representative in every state, who would “appoint a man to travel twelve miles, and then hand the news to another man, and so on, till the news reached from Louisiana to Mississippi.” This would allow for a simultaneous rebellion, as Webb argued: “in all the States at one time, so the white people would not have a chance” (p. 13).

O'Donovan (2011: 2) insists that “Webb and his nebulous network was no anomaly” and “it traveled along with marching columns of chained slaves, the infamous coffle lines that remain the iconic face of the domestic slave trade” and “the squalid confines of the South's county jails” (p. 2). For Hahn (2009: 74), the accounts of slaves and former slaves, confessions of slave conspirators, diaries of slaveholders, and reports in local newspapers support the claim that slaves had developed “networks of communication and forums of organization that could extend over long distances,” which “could reverberate with political discussions, narratives, and discourses of expectation”.<sup>17</sup> The broadening of these networks was facilitated by, *inter alia*, work projects in the South that drew primarily from hired-out slave labor and in so doing “contained enormous subversive potential.” The salience of hired-out slaves, so obvious in the major slave revolts, was no less so right up to the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> The resulting networks assisted the escape of an estimated 500,000–700,000 slaves to Union lines (Glatthaar 1992: 142), transforming a civil war to maintain slavery (the Union's and the CSA's original war aim) into a revolution to overthrow it.

## Conclusion

In closing, in this essay, I examined WEB Du Bois' thesis that black participation in the US Civil War was “the largest and most successful slave revolt.” Although recently, several prominent historians have supported this claim, Du Bois did not link the causative agents of black participation in the war to those that motivated other major slave revolts in the antebellum USA. To explain how the previous revolts were associated with black participation in the Civil War, I focused on how two overlapping and often mutually reinforcing factors contributed to such revolts: (1) slave religion,

<sup>17</sup> For a useful synthesis of discussions on enslaved artisan workers and networks of communication, see Buchanan (2004).

<sup>18</sup> The more formal clandestine networks, such as Webb describes, culminated in the Underground Railroad, which by the 1850s “had developed into a diverse, flexible, and interlocking system with thousands of activists residing from the upper South to Canada” (Bordewich 2005: 5).

which provided an ideological justification for overthrowing the slave system and mobile slave preachers to articulate it, and (2) the system of hiring out slaves—especially slave artisans, which expanded networks across plantations and rural and urban slave and free black communities, and in some industries began to proletarianize some forms of slave labor. I argue that these two factors, in tandem, provided ideological motivation and institutional coordination for the major slave revolts of the antebellum era, and, although the revolts were brutally suppressed, the networks they emerged from and created persisted because slave religion continued to be viewed by slave masters as encouraging slave docility, and slave hiring remained profitable. These networks broadened the scope of slave communities by expanding their communicative capacity during the antebellum era, and they continued to do so during wartime, which included providing information and coordination for the movement of slaves to Union lines to fight for their freedom. Utilizing these networks, the slaves joined the Civil War and transformed it from a war to preserve the Union into a revolution to defeat the CSA and overthrow US slavery.

When we consider the theory and practice of revolution that emerges from the behavior of enslaved blacks during the Civil War, it is evident that the confluence of slave religion and slave hiring helped generate a movement of religiously inspired incipient black proletarians who were essential to its successful prosecution. Their actions provide a historical example of successful black revolution in the USA, which had been foreshadowed in the religiously inspired major slave rebellions throughout the US South, and could serve as a template for future rebellion, insurgency, and revolution. Unfortunately, the significance of this revolution—and for most, its qualification as a revolution, itself—was rarely appreciated by prominent scholars, analysts, and activists in the USA prior to Du Bois, and is rarely the focus in modern portrayals of the Civil War or discussions of the termination of chattel slavery in US popular culture or in mainstream academic discourse. Moreover, it rarely informed twentieth century revolutionary activity in black America. The latter was particularly telling with respect to the major revolutionary groups of the black power era of the 1960s–1970s such as the Revolutionary Action Movement, Us, the Black Panther Party, the Republic of New Afrika, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Congress of Afrikan Peoples, the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party, the Shrine of the Black Madonna, or the Black Liberation Army, among others, which all failed to appreciate this homegrown revolution for what it was—the only successful large-scale revolution to occur in the USA (the American Revolution having occurred before the country was constituted as a sovereign state)—and what it both prescribed and proscribed for their subsequent revolutionary pursuits. Oblivious to the revolution “beneath their feet,” these black power organizations, in particular, spent an inordinate amount of time and resources attempting to import models of revolution from abroad that often did not fit the historical context or developmental trajectory of their uniquely African-American experience.

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