



*Bringing together arts and conversation to examine our nation's history,  
educate our communities, and  
heal the wounds of slavery without shame or blame*

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**For Immediate Release**

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**12 Days of Turner: Reframing History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
October 31– November 11**

**Hosted by JuneteenthVA in Tidewater-Hampton Roads, Virginia – the location of both the first enslavement and first freeing of African men and women on American soil**

Portsmouth, VA ([www.juneteenthva.org](http://www.juneteenthva.org)) -- Starting on the 189<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nat Turner Insurrection, JuneteenthVA is presenting *12 Days of Turner*, a wide range of recorded and live streamed programs that will start the process of reframing our nation's story to incorporate its *full truth* -- its triumphs and its failings.

Programming will run over the course of 12 days, with updates available throughout that time on [Juneteenthva.org](http://Juneteenthva.org) and [WJVAradio.org](http://WJVAradio.org). Content will include conversations with local, regular folks doing well and those needing some help. Readings from the *Confessions of Nat Turner* will include appearances by some of the famous activists, entertainers, and athletes who call Hampton Roads home. There will be a Nat Turner look-a-like contest with no restrictions on gender, race or age. Puppets, paintings, and sculptures are acceptable entries. Whatever your vision of what Nat Turner represents, the viewing audience will determine, with their votes, if you hit the mark. Rehearsals for *Summers in Suffolk* written by JuneteenthVA founder Sheri Bailey will be free and open to the public with social distancing and masks required.

“Whether you admire or despise Nat Turner, this week marks the 189<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nat Turner Insurrection, and a pretty good argument can be made that that event qualifies as the first battle of the Civil War mostly fought from 1861 to 1865, but truly started in 1831,” explains Ms. Bailey.

Thirty-one-year-old Southampton native Turner successfully escaped from the farm where he was enslaved. About a month later he returned from freedom and a few months later led a group determined to inflict harm on the slaveholding class. Although Turner's insurrection was not the first or only uprising of enslaved people, over time he became a profound symbol of how slavery would ultimately end in America - violently. Almost 60 members of the slaveholding class died in the first 48 hours of Turner's coordinated action as a steadily growing group of followers moved from farm to farm, killing all occupants, regardless of age or gender.

After hiding on the outskirts of the Great Dismal Swamp, Turner was captured Oct. 31, tried, and hanged on Nov. 11. Turner was immediately denounced as a lunatic with no sense of decency. Less concern in the news accounts of the day can be found regarding how generations of enslaved people had been treated for centuries, or that, in the immediate weeks and months after the insurrection, more than 300 Black men, women and

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children were sold, tried and executed. Many were beheaded, their heads stuck on poles and placed in a location by U.S. 58 that is today known as Blackhead's Crossing.

The 1831 Nat Turner uprising is the first event in what is often called *The War Against Slavery (WAS)*. The WAS “ended” with the end of Reconstruction – the 1877 withdrawal of Federal troops that were tasked with protecting the new rights of the formerly enslaved. What followed was a path that crashes directly into the 2020 killings of unarmed black men and women, killings that are just the most recent expression of four centuries of inhumane treatment, oppression, racism, and injustice.

*12 Days of Turner* asks, why is it important to understand the insurrection nearly two centuries later? “Because as part of our nation’s reckoning with race, we must reckon with understanding our history. There is a direct connection between 1831 and 2020, and we will use the programming to examine the many thoughts and ideas around that history,” Ms. Bailey has said.

The hosting of *12 Days of Nat Turner* in Tidewater-Hampton Road has great significance in JuneteenthVA’s historical lookback: it is the exact location (Point Comforte, later named Fort Monroe) of both the first British-American *monetization* of African men and women as indentured servants (August 1619) and the first *freeing* of enslaved African Americans -- Frank Baker, James Townsend, Shepard Mallory – when they commandeered a rowboat and escaped across the Chesapeake Bay to the Union camp at Fort Monroe where they petitioned Gen. Benjamin Butler for asylum. They didn’t use that term, but that’s what they wanted. When the men’s owner came to claim his property, Butler refused to hand the men over under a federal policy defined as “contraband of war” which allowed confiscation of enemy property.

On May 23, 1861 Butler put Baker, Mallory, and Townsend on the federal payroll, which essentially put them on the path to citizenship. They were free men. Within days dozens, then scores, of Black men, women and children started arriving at *Freedom Fortress Monroe* to claim FREEDOM as a result of what is known as *The Contraband Escape* (May 1861)

*“My family has been in the Tidewater region for generations. From the drama of the local historical coincidences grew my lifework: To write plays rooted in history, to bring people together to watch those plays, and to lead people in public conversations to heal the wounds of slavery without shame or blame. 12 Days of Turner is a continuation of that mission.” -- Sheri Bailey*

12 Days of Turner serves JuneteenthVA’s mission: *Bringing together arts and conversation to examine our nation’s history, educate our communities, and heal the wounds of slavery without shame or blame.*

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