Early in the morning of August 22, 1831, a band of eight Black slaves, led by a lay preacher named Nat Turner, entered the Travis house in Southampton County, Virginia and killed five members of the Travis family. This was the beginning of a slave uprising that was to become known as Nat Turner’s rebellion. Over a thirty-six hour period, this band of slaves grew to sixty or seventy in number and slew (killed) fifty-eight White persons in and around Jerusalem, Virginia (seventy miles east of Richmond) before the local community could act to stop them. This rebellion raised southern fears of a general slave uprising and had a profound influence on the attitude of Southerners towards slavery.

Since the 1790's when slaves rebelled in Santo Domingo and slaughtered 60,000 people, Southerners realized that their own slaves might rise up against them. A number of slave revolt conspiracies were uncovered in the South between 1820 and 1831 but none frightened Southerners as much as Nat Turner's rebellion.

Nat Turner was born a slave in Virginia in 1800 and grew to become a slave preacher. Gradually he built a religious following justifying revolution against his white masters. He believed that God had chosen him to lead the blacks to freedom. After seeing a halo around the sun on August 13, 1831, Turner believed this to be a sign from God to begin the revolt. Beginning on August 22 and lasting for two days, Turner and seventy recruits went on a rampage. They killed Turner’s master and fifty-eight more men, women and children. Many blacks did not join Turner because they feared the futility of his effort. The revolt was crushed within two days and Nat Turner managed to escape.

The first report of the Turner revolt was sent in the form of a letter from the Postmaster of Jerusalem to the Governor of Virginia. This letter as sent by way of Petersburg and was first published in the Richmond Constitutional Whig (newspaper in Richmond, Va.) of August 23, 1831. The text read: "Disagreeable rumors have reached this city of an insurrection of the slaves of Southampton County, with loss of life, in order to correct exaggerations, and at the same time to induce all ... caution, we state to following particulars. An express from the Honorable James Trezevant states that an insurrection had broken out, that several families had been murdered, and that those Negroes were embodied, requiring a considerable military force to subdue them."

"The names and precise number of the families is not mentioned. A letter from the Postmaster corroborates the intelligence. Prompt and efficient measures are being taken by the Governor, to call up a sufficient force to put down the insurrection, and place lower Virginia on its guard."

This group of 40 (or so) Blacks, led by Nat Turner, terrorized the white population of Southampton County, Virginia and killed 60 whites before the Virginia Militia and local residents killed or captured the insurgents. Even though the rebellion was over on August 23, the leader of the Blacks, Nat Turner, escaped capture by the militia.

On August 24, militia units from the surrounding counties descended on Jerusalem, Virginia and a massacre of Blacks in Southampton began. Much of this torture and killing of Blacks was done by vigilante groups, bent on revenge. Hundreds of blacks were killed, most of whom were totally innocent of any involvement or knowledge of Nat Turner's rebellion.

By August 31, 1831 almost all of the insurgents had been captured with the exception of Turner himself. Despite a large-scale manhunt and a continuing stream of newspaper accounts of his escape or capture, he was able to hide in the woods of Southampton, not far from where the rebellion had begun.

By October 31, 1831, Benjamin Phipps, a local farmer, spotted and captured Nat Turner at gunpoint. On November 5, Turner was convicted of insurrection and sentenced to hang and on November 11 the sentence was carried out.
The first newspaper report of Nat Turner's capture was printed in the American Beacon of Norfolk, Virginia on November 2, 1831. This report came in the form of a letter from the postmaster of Jerusalem, Virginia (T. Trezevant) to the editor of the Norfolk Beacon and read as follows:

Post Office, Jerusalem, Va.,
31st Oct. 1831

"Messrs. Shields and Ashburn, Editors of the Beacon, Norfolk, Va.

Gentlemen -- Last night the 30th inst. about 9 o'clock, news reached our little village that Gen. Nat was taken alive; today at a quarter after one o'clock, he reached this place, (well guarded) and was delivered into the hands of James W. Parker and James Trezevant, gentlemen, Justices, and after 1 1/2 or 2 hours close examination was committed to Prison. -- During all the examination, he evinced great intelligence and such shrewdness of intellect, answering every question clearly and distinctly, and without confusion or prevarication (lying). He acknowledges himself a coward and says he was actuated to do what he did, from the influence of fanaticism, he says the attempt originated entirely with himself, and was not known by any other Negroes, but those to whom he revealed it a few days before, and then only 5 or 6 in number! -- he acknowledges now that the revelation was misinterpreted by him, and says it was revealed to him not to follow the inclination of his spirit -- he is now convinced that he has done wrong, and advises all other Negroes not to follow his example. He was taken about 12 o'clock on Sunday, in a Cave that he had just finished and gotten into; and while in the very act of fixing the bushes and bows to cover him, a gentleman by the name of Benjamin Phipps, walked up near the spot, and was only led to examine it by accidentally seeing the brush shake; after removing the covering he discovered Nat., and immediately pointed to kill him with his gun, but he exclaimed "don't shoot and I will give up," he then threw his sword from the Cave, that being his only weapon, and came out and went with Mr. Phipps, until they reached some other gentlemen, when after staying at the Keys all night they proceeded here today."

Respectfully, T. Trezevant, P.M.
Back in colonial times, Americans raised most of the food they ate and made most of what they wore. They spun their own yarn, wove their own cloth, and stitched their own clothes. They dipped candles and built tables and chairs. Wealthy colonists who wanted fancy dishes, fine cloth, elegant furniture, or handsome books sent to England for them. Most manufactured goods were made in England; raw materials came from the colonies.

It was a system that worked well. America provided lumber, pitch, tobacco, cotton, and grains. England took those raw materials and turned them into usable products that could be sold around the world.

During the American Revolution the system stopped. Wham! Suddenly there was no place to send raw materials and no supply of fine goods. What did the colonists do? They used their heads. They looked for new markets for their raw materials. Their ships sailed to faraway places: to Spain, to China, to India, to Turkey.

After the war the new United States began trading with England again. But American society was changing. We were now a democracy with a strong and growing middle class. It wasn’t only the very rich who wanted to buy things. Ordinary people wanted them, too.

In England something was happening that could make that possible. That something was an “industrial revolution.” Let me explain. It is the end of the 18th century, and if you want a new shirt, this is what you have to do:

Take some wool, or flax, or cotton, and sit down at a spinning wheel. Try wool. You have to turn that sheep’s wool into yarn. That
takes carding (combing) and then spinning. It is a slow process. Since you’ve been working all winter, you do have a supply of yarn. How about dipping the yarn in indigo (blue) dye? Now, unless you plan to knit your shirt, you’re still not ready to make it. You need to sit at a loom and weave the yarn into cloth. When you’ve done that, then, finally, you can get a scissors, cut out a pattern, and sit back with your needle and thread and start sewing. Do you now see why you have only two shirts—one for everyday and one for church?


And here is what Lucy Larcom had to say (you’ll read more about Lucy in a minute):

I think it must have been at home, while I was a small child, that I got the idea that the chief end of woman was to make clothing for mankind...I suppose I have to grow up and have a husband, and put all those little stitches into his coats and pantaloons. Oh, I never, never can do it!

Well, something was happening in England that was changing that made-at-home way of making things. It was a revolution—an industrial revolution (although no one called it that for a while). It was a new system of organizing work, based on new ideas in science and technology and business.

Things once made at home were being made faster, and sometimes better, in factories. Tasks were divided in new ways. People began working in teams, and that was much more productive than working alone. It was machinery that made it all possible. Americans wanted some of those machines.

The English weren’t about to share their new knowledge. They wanted to be the only ones with the machinery that made factories possible. They wanted to keep the Industrial Revolution in England. They wouldn’t let anyone who worked in a cotton factory leave England.

Some Americans offered a big reward to anyone who could build a cotton-spinning machine in the United States. Samuel Slater, a young apprentice in a cotton factory in England, had a remarkable memory. He memorized the way the machines were built. Then he ran off to London. In London he pretended to be a farm worker. He didn’t tell anyone he had worked in a cotton mill. It was 1790 when he sailed for America; he brought the key to the Industrial Revolution with him.

Slater built a small factory next to a waterfall on the Blackstone River at Pawtucket, Rhode Island. (Moses Brown and William Almy were his partners. They provided the money.) Waterpower turned the machines that spun cotton fibers into yarn. Soon there were spinning mills beside many New England streams. (Women working on hand looms in their homes wove Slater’s yarn into cloth.)
Now that factories could turn cotton into yarn—quickly and easily—you can see there would be a great demand for raw cotton. Anyone who could grow cotton would make a lot of money. Cotton grew very well in the southern states.

The cotton that grew in the coastal region was easy to use. It was called “long-staple cotton” and it had seeds that fell right off the cotton bolls. But the tidewater coastal lands were in poor shape. There wasn’t much good land left. People didn’t practice scientific farming. They often destroyed land by growing the same crops year after year. Then, when the land was no longer productive, they moved on.

Short-staple cotton was the only cotton that would grow inland. However, short-staple cotton has lots of dark seeds, and those seeds stick to the cotton bolls. You can’t spin cotton that is full of black seeds. It took a worker all day to remove the seeds from just one pound of cotton. If only there were an easy way to get rid of those seeds...

Eli Whitney heard all about that problem when he came to Savannah, Georgia, to take a job as a teacher. Whitney, a New Englander with an inventive mind, had just graduated from Yale College. It took him very little time to come up with a simple machine that removed seeds from cotton. He called it a “cotton engine”—the name was soon shortened to cotton gin. Instead of taking all day to remove seeds from a pound of cotton, a worker with a cotton gin could clean 50 pounds of cotton in a day—and clean it better than he ever could by hand.

The invention of the cotton gin, in 1793, did something that no one expected: it encouraged slavery.

The South had been having economic problems. Slavery wasn’t as useful as it had been in the early colonial days. Tobacco had used up the soil. There wasn’t enough work for the slaves. Many slaves were set free because owners no longer wanted to feed and house them. Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders thought slavery might gradually disappear.

Eli Whitney’s cotton gin changed things—really changed things. If you could grow a lot of cotton you could get rich. So Southerners looked for land to grow cotton and workers to plant and harvest it. Slaves became very valuable again. Whitney didn’t mean it, but his invention helped turn the American South into a slave empire. It made the South into a land of cotton. It kept it rural.