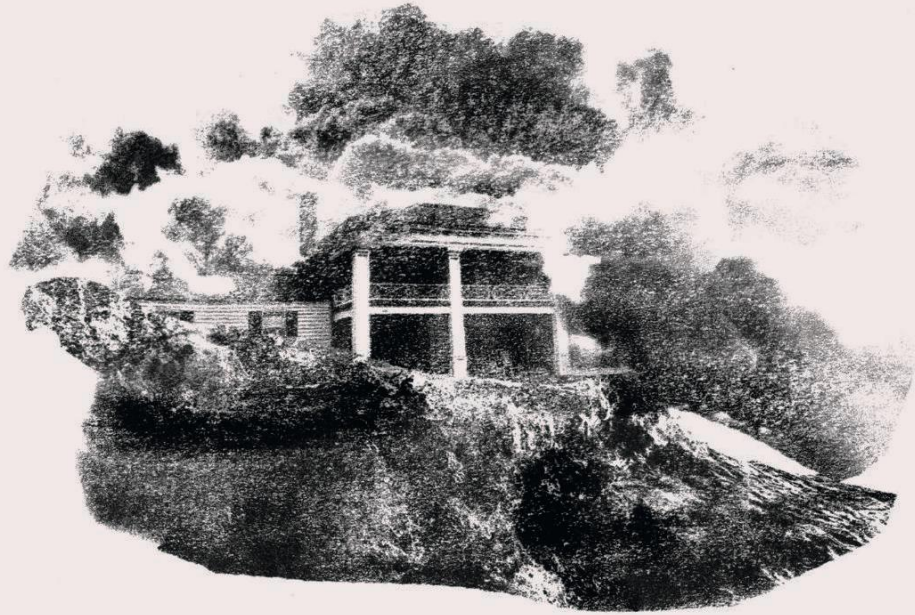


● Aug. 30, 1800: Gabriel Prosser, a 24-year-old literate blacksmith, organizes one of the most extensively planned slave rebellions, with the intention of forming an independent black state in Virginia. After other enslaved people share details of his plot, Gabriel's Rebellion is thwarted. He is later tried, found guilty and hanged.



As he approached the Brook Swamp beneath the city of Richmond, Va., Gabriel Prosser looked to the sky. Up above, the clouds coalesced into an impenetrable black, bringing on darkness and a storm the ferocity of which the region had scarcely seen. He may have cried and he may have prayed but the thing Gabriel did not do was turn back. He was expecting fire on this night and would make no concessions for the coming rain.

And he was not alone. A hundred men; 500 men; *a thousand men* had gathered from all over the state on this 30th day of August 1800. Black men, African men — men from the fields and men from the house, men from the church and the smithy — men who could be called many things but after this night would not be called slaves gathered in the flooding basin armed with scythes, swords, bayonets and smuggled guns.

One of the men tested the rising water, citing the Gospel of John: “For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” But the water would not abate. As the night wore on and the storm persisted, Gabriel was overcome by a dawning truth: The Gospel would not save him. His army could not pass.

Gov. James Monroe was expecting them. Having returned from his appointment to France and built his sweeping Highland plantation on the periphery of Charlottesville, Monroe wrote to his mentor Thomas Jefferson seeking advice on his “fears of a negro insurrection.” When

the Negroes Tom and Pharoah of the Sheppard plantation betrayed Gabriel's plot on a Saturday morning, Monroe was not surprised. By virtue of the privilege bestowed upon him as his birthright, he was expecting them.

Gabriel Prosser was executed Oct. 10, 1800. Eighteen hundred; the year Denmark Vesey bought his freedom, the year of John Brown's and Nat Turner's births. As he awaited the gallows near the foot of the James River, Gabriel could see all that was not to be — the first wave of men tasked to set fire to the city perimeter, the second to fell a city weakened by the diversion; the governor's mansion, James Monroe brought to heel and served a lash for every man, woman and child enslaved on his Highland plantation; the Quakers, Methodists, Frenchmen and poor whites who would take up with his army and create a more perfect union from which they would spread the infection of freedom — Gabriel saw it all.

He even saw Tom and Pharoah, manumitted by the government of Virginia, a thousand dollars to their master as recompense; a thousand dollars for the sabotage of Gabriel's thousand men. He did not see the other 25 men in his party executed. Instead, he saw Monroe in an audience he wanted no part of and paid little notice to. For Gabriel Prosser the blacksmith, leader of men and accepting no master's name, had stepped into the troubled water. To the very last, he was whole. He was free.

By Barry Jenkins