



## Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802

By Douglas R. Egerton

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*Gabriel's Rebellion* tells the dramatic story of what was perhaps the most extensive slave conspiracy in the history of the American South. Douglas Egerton illuminates the complex motivations that underlay two related Virginia slave revolts: the first, in 1800, led by the slave known as Gabriel; and the second, called the 'Easter Plot,' instigated in 1802 by one of his followers. Although Gabriel has frequently been portrayed as a messianic, Samson-like figure, Egerton shows that he was a literate and highly skilled blacksmith whose primary goal was to destroy the economic hegemony of the 'merchants,' the only whites he ever identified as his enemies. According to Egerton, the social, political, and economic disorder of the Revolutionary era weakened some of the harsh controls that held slavery in place during colonial times. Emboldened by these conditions, a small number of literate slaves--most of them highly skilled artisans--planned an armed insurrection aimed at destroying slavery in Virginia. The intricate scheme failed, as did the Easter Plot that stemmed from it, and Gabriel and many of his followers were hanged. By placing the revolts within the broader context of the volatile political currents of the day, Egerton challenges the conventional understanding of race, class, and politics in the early days of the American republic.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In a volume certain to provoke debate, Egerton ( *Charles Fenton Mercer and the Trial of National Conservatism* ) analyzes two important slave revolts of the early 19th century as having to do with economics and class as much as with slavery and race. The more important of the two revolts was led by Gabriel Prosser, a much mythologized figure whom Egerton tries to recover from his murky past. As reconstructed by Egerton, Gabriel was a blacksmith whose skill gave him a special status--he was allowed to hire himself out off the plantation; he led his rebellion against the white merchant class, who exploited laborers like himself. Betrayed by one of those involved, the revolt failed; Gabriel was summarily tried and hanged. Two years later, Sancho, another slave who had been peripherally involved in the Gabriel plot, also planned a rebellion. This attempt met with similar results, and Sancho followed Gabriel to the grave. Well written and meticulously documented, the account of these two abortive revolutions will hold the interest of students and lay readers alike. In the end, however, the book fails in its intention to refute considerable evidence offered by other scholars that Gabriel was religiously motivated.

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Review

May well be the definitive work on its subject. . . . Egerton's work in primary materials, archival and otherwise, is unparalleled. Daniel C. Littlefield, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Review

Well written and meticulously documented, the account of these two abortive revolutions will hold the interest of students and lay readers alike.--*Publishers Weekly*

Egerton's book is not only a bold and masterful account of one of the most intriguing might-have-beens in the bumpy course of slavery's hold on the American South; it is also a significant contribution to our ever-growing appreciation of the particularities in time, place, and circumstance that made the American slave experience so varied and complex.--*Australasian Journal of American Studies*

Will be regarded as the definitive work on the plots of 1800 and 1802.--*American Historical Review*

A masterful account of the Easter conspiracy in 1802, barely mentioned in history textbooks.--*Arkansas Historical Quarterly*

A terrific book. . . . The author tells a dramatic and important story, firmly grounding his narrative in extensive primary research as well as a careful reading of the latest scholarship on early national Virginia and slavery.--*William and Mary Quarterly*

May well be the definitive work on its subject. . . . Egerton's work in primary materials, archival and otherwise, is unparalleled.--Daniel C. Littlefield, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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