

Governor James Monroe's Annual Address to the Virginia Assembly

Sir,

Richmond December 5<sup>th</sup> 1800.

An important incident has occurred since your last session, which I consider it my duty to submit fully and accurately in all its details to the Wisdom of the General Assembly.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August about two in the afternoon m<sup>r</sup> Mosby Shephard a respectable citizen of this County called and informed me, he had just received advice from two slaves that the negroes in the neighbourhood of Thomas H. Prosser intended to rise that night, kill their masters and proceed to Richmond, where they would be joined by the negroes of the city; that they would then take possession of the arms, ammunition, and the town. He added he had long known those two slaves, and had no doubt of the truth of the information they gave him, and that he communicated it to me that the proposed insurrection might be defeated if possible.

This communication was very interesting, and the source from whence derived, calculated  
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to inspire a belief it was true. The day was far advanced when I received it, so that if any provision was to be made to avert the danger, not a moment was to be lost. I immediately called in the officers commanding the regiment of militia and troop of Cavalry in town, and made the best disposition for such an emergency, the time would allow. A guard of a captain and thirty men was placed at the penitentiary where the publick arms were deposited, twenty at the Magazine and fifteen at the Capitol, and the Horse was ordered to patrol the several routes leading to the City from Mr. Prosper's estate, and to apprise me, without delay, if any thing like a movement of the Negroes was seen, or other circumstance creating a suspicion such was contemplated. The close of the day was marked by one of the most extraordinary falls of rain, ever known in our country. Every animal sought shelter from it. Nothing occurred in the night, of the kind suspected, to disturb the tranquility of the city, and in the morning the officer commanding the Horse reported he had seen but one circumstance unusual in the neighbourhood, which was, that all the negroes he passed on the road, in the intervals of the storm, were going

going from the town, whereas it was their custom to visit it every Saturday night. This circumstance was not otherwise important than as it was said the first rendezvous of the Negroes was to be in the country.

The same precautions were observed the next night against the threatened insurrection and the same report made the next day by the officers on duty, so that I was on the point of concluding there was no foundation for the alarm, when I was informed by Major Morby and other gentlemen of character from his neighbourhood, they were satisfied a project of insurrection, such as above described, did exist, and that the parties to it meant still to carry it into effect. These gentlemen stated facts and gave details, which left no doubt in my mind of the existence of such a project. From this period the affair assumed a more important aspect. It did not seem probable the slaves in this city and neighbourhood would undertake so bold an enterprise without support from the slaves in other quarters of the state. It was more reasonable to presume an extensive combination had been formed among them for that purpose. Heretofore I had endeavored to give the affair as little importance as the

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measures necessary for defence would permit. I had hoped it would even pass unnoticed by the Community. But as soon as I was satisfied a conspiracy existed it became my duty to estimate the crisis according to its magnitude, and to take regular and systematic measures to avert the danger. In consequence I issued a summons to convene the Council at ten the next day; and in the interim advised the gentlemen who gave me the information, to apprehend and commit to prison without delay, all the slaves in the county whose guilt they had good cause to suspect. I also gave a like intimation to the Mayor of this City, which advice was duly attended to.

When the Council convened (on the 2<sup>d</sup> of September) I laid before it the evidence I had received of the meditated insurrection of the slaves, and asked its advice as to the measures necessary to be taken in such an emergency. The Council concurred in opinion that such a project existed and ought to be guarded against with peculiar care. But as the extent of the danger was not yet known, it was thought sufficient at the time to confine our measures of defence to those objects which it was understood were to be first assailed,  
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and could only be opposed by a respectable force, which force if the city was surprized, could not be collected in a short time. The probability was if their first effort succeeded, we should see the town in flames, its inhabitants butchered, and a scene of horror extending through the country. This spectacle it is true would be momentary only, for as soon as a body of militia could be formed the insurrection would be suppressed. The superiority in point of numbers; in the knowledge and use of arms; and indeed every other species of knowledge which the whites have over the blacks in this Commonwealth is so decisive that the latter could only sustain themselves for a moment in rebellion against the former. Still it was a crisis to be avoided so far as prudent precautions could accomplish it. There was one other consideration which engaged the mind in the commencement of this affair, from which it was not easy to withdraw it. It seemed strange that the slaves should embark in this novel and unexampled enterprize of their own accord. Their treatment has been more favorable since the revolution, and as the importation was prohibited among the first acts of our independance their  
number



number has not increased in proportion with that of the Whites. It was natural to suspect they were prompted to it by others who were invisible, but whose agency might be powerful. And if this were the case it became proportionally more difficult to estimate the extent of the combination and the consequent real importance of the crisis. On consideration of all these circumstances it was deemed necessary to call out such a force as might be fully adequate to the emergency; such an one as would be likely to overawe and keep down the spirit of insurrection, or sufficient to suppress it in case it broke out. On that principle I called into service on the 9<sup>th</sup> the Nineteenth and twenty third Regiments, and a detachment of fifty men additional from the thirty third; which detachment with the whole of the Nineteenth Regiment and one hundred men of the twenty third were ordered to take post in this city. The residue of the twenty third were stationed in the town of Manchester.

While there was a hope the report of this conspiracy was unfounded, or a possibility of controuling it in silence, that object was pursued with zeal. But as its existence had become known to the publick, it only remained to make the incident as harmless in other respects as circumstances would permit. (Having) with a view to the publick safety, called out a respectable

able force I was resolved to derive from it all the aid it would yield in reference to the objects contemplated. It was paraded daily on the Capitol Square, and trained as well that it might be prepared for action, if occasion required, at that our strength might be known to the conspirators. The effect which the measure produced was easily and soon perceived. It was evident that the collection and display of this force, inspired the citizens with confidence, and depressed the spirit of the slaves. The former saw in it a security from the danger which menaced them; the latter a defeat of their nefarious projects.

On the twelfth of September five, and on the 15<sup>th</sup> following five others, were executed. On those occasions the whole force in service in the city, infantry and horse attended the execution.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> Gabriel, one of the chiefs of the conspiracy, for whom a reward had been offered, and who had been apprehended at Norfolk, was delivered up and committed to jail.

As these executions were carried into effect without any movement of the slaves, and their chief apprehended, it was fair to presume the danger of the crisis had passed. It became, from that period, the object of the Executive to diminish the

the force with a view to less the expence; which object was pursued with undeviating attention. On the 13<sup>th</sup> it was reduced to 650 men including those at the Point<sup>of York</sup>; on the 15<sup>th</sup> to 225; occasional reductions were afterwards made as circumstances permitted, till finally on the eighteenth of October it was reduced to a Sergeant and 12 men at the Penitentiary, and a Corporal and six at the Jail, at which point it now stands.

You will receive herewith a copy of the documents which illustrate this transaction, with a report from the Auditor, of the expence attending it: to which is added a letter from the Treasurer communicating an opinion of the Attorney General respecting payment for some of the slaves, who were executed.

I cannot too much commend the conduct of the militia on this occasion. They were obedient to order, exact in their discipline, and prompt in the execution of every duty that was enjoined on them. Their improvement was rapid, and far exceeded any thing I had ever witnessed. Nor can it be doubted, had a crisis occurred, they would have proved as firm and decisive in action, as they were patient and persevering in the



the Penitentiary, the Capitol, and the Magazine in this city; and the Arsenal at the Point of York. It was natural to conclude the attention of the insurgents would be directed in the outset to these objects; and this presentiment was confirmed by every one who knew and communicated to us any thing of their designs. Accordingly guards were established at those places in this city and an additional force of fifty men ordered to the Point of York. At the same time letters were written to the Commandants of every regiment in the Commonwealth admonishing them of the existing danger, and requesting that vigilant attention be paid to the police of the Country, by ordering out suitable and active patrols in every County.

In the evening of the same day about twenty of the conspirators were brought to town from Mr. Prober's and the neighbouring estates, and as the jail could not contain them, they were lodged in the Penitentiary. The chiefs were not to be found. Some of the arms which they had prepared for the occasion, formed of scythe blades, and well calculated for execution were likewise brought

brought with them. By the information now received, as by former communications, it appeared that the inhabitants of that neighbourhood were, in a particular degree, exposed to danger; the conspiracy commenced with their slaves and they were to be its first victims. It was therefore deemed proper with a view to their safety, by advice of Council, to order from the 33<sup>d</sup> Regiment a guard, of a Captain and sixty men, to take post near Watson's Tavern in the centre of that Neighbourhood. By like advice the troop of the City was at the same time subjected to such duty as should be required of it.

Every day now threw new light on this affair, and increased the idea of its importance. On the 6<sup>th</sup> by advice of Council, an order was issued for the removal of the powder from the Magazine to the Penitentiary; the distribution of the Arms which were stamped and prepared for the several Counties, according to a law of the last Session was suspended; the whole Militia of the City was armed; its guard increased from 60 to a hundred men, and a power vested in the Chief Magistrate to call out such proportions of the Militia of Henrico, Chesterfield and the City of Richmond, as in his judgment the

The emergency might require.

The trials had now commenced whereby the nature and extent of the Conspiracy became better understood. It was satisfactorily proven that a general insurrection of the slaves was contemplated by those who took the lead in the affair. A species of organization had taken place among them. At a meeting held for the purpose, they had appointed a Commander, to whom they gave the title of General; and had also appointed some other officers. They contemplated a force of Cavalry as well as infantry; and had formed a plan of attack on the city, which was to commence by setting fire to the lower end of the town, where the houses consisted chiefly of Wood; in expectation of drawing the people to that quarter, while they assailed the Penitentiary, Magazine and Capitol, intending after achieving these, and getting possession of the Arms, to meet the people unarmed on their return. The accounts of the number of those who were to commence the movement varied. Some made it considerable, others less so. It was distinctly seen that it embraced most of the slaves in this city and neighbourhood, and that the combination ex-

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extended to several of the adjacent Counties, Han-  
-over, Caroline, Louisa, Chesterfield and to the  
neighbourhood of the Point of York; and there was  
good cause to believe that the knowledge of such  
a project persuaded other parts if not the whole  
of the State.

At this time there was no reason to believe,  
if such a project was ever conceived, that it was a-  
-bandoned. Those who gave the earliest information  
and were best informed on the subject thought other-  
-wise. It was understood that the leaders in the con-  
-spiracy who had absconded, were concealed in the  
neighbourhood. And as several of the parties to it  
were confined in the jail condemned to suffer death,  
and many others in the penitentiary, likely to ex-  
-perience the same fate, it was probable sympathy  
for their associates might drive them to despair, and  
prompt them to make a bold effort for their relief.  
The opposite effect was expected from the measures  
pursued <sup>by the Government</sup>, but yet the result was uncertain. Other  
considerations presented themselves to view, in weigh-  
-ing the part it was then incumbent on me to take.  
The number of slaves in this city and its neighbour-  
-hood, comprizing those at work on the publick  
buildings, the canal and the coalpits, was consider-  
-able! These might be assembled in a few hours,  
and

the discharge of every other duty. Their example teaches an useful lesson to our Country. It tends to confirm the favourable idea before ~~entertained~~ of their competence to every purpose of publick safety.

It belongs to the Legislature to weigh, with profound attention, this unpleasant incident in our history). What has happened may occur again at any time, with more fatal consequences, unless suitable measures be taken to prevent it.

Unhappily while this class of people exists among us we can never count with certainty on its tranquil submission. The fortunate issue of the late attempt should not lull us into repose. It ought rather to stimulate us to the adoption of a system, which if it does not prevent the like in future, may secure the Country from any calamitous consequences. With great respect I have the

honor to be yr. most obt. servant

Ja. Monroe



[Transcription Page 1]

Richmond December 5th. 1800.

Sir,

An important incident has occurred since your last Sefsion [session], which I consider it my duty to submit fully and accurately in all its details to the Wisdom of the General Afsembly [assembly].

On the 30th. of August about two in the afternoon Mr. Mosby Shephard a respectable citizen of this County called and informed me, he had just received advice from two slaves that the Negroes in the Neighbourhood of Thomas H Profser [Prosser] intended to rise that night, kill their masters and proceed to Richmond, where they would be joined by the Negroes of the city; that they would then take pofsefsion [possession] of the Arms, ammunition, and the town. He added he had long known those two slaves, and had no doubt of the truth of the information they gave him, and that he communicated it to me that the proposed insurrection might be defeated if pofsible [possible].

This communication was very interesting, and the source from whence derived, calculated

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[Transcription Page 2]

to impose a belief it was true. The day was far advanced when I received it, so that if any provision was to be made to avert the danger, not a moment was to be lost. I immediately called in the officers commanding the regiment of militia and troop of Cavalry in town, and made the best disposition for such an emergency, the time would allow. A guard of a Captain thirty men was placed at the penitentiary where the publick arms were deposited twenty of the magazine and fifteen at the Capitol, and the Horse was ordered to patrol the several routes leading to the City from Mr. Profser's [Prosser's] estate and to apprise me, without delay, if any thing like a movement of the Negroes was seen, or other circumstance creating a suspicion such was contemplated. The close of the day was marked by one of the most extraordinary falls of rain, even known in our country. Every animal sought shelter from it. Nothing occurred in the night of the kind suspected, to disturb the tranquility of the city, and in the morning the officer commanding the Horse reported he had seen but one circumstance unusual in the neighbourhood, which was, that all the negroes he pafsed [passed] on the road, in the intervals of the Storm, were  
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[Transcription Page 3]

going from the town, whereas it was their custom to visit it every Saturday night. This circumstance was not otherwise important than as it was said the first rendezvous of the Negroes was to be in the country.

The same precautions were observed the next night against the threatened insurrection and the same report made the next day by the officers on duty, so that I was on the point of concluding there was no foundation for the alarm, when I was informed by Major Mosby and other Gentlemen of character from his neighbourhood, they were satisfied a project of insurrection, such as above described, did exist, and that the parties to it meant still to carry it into effect. These gentlemen stated facts and gave details, which left no doubt in my mind of the existence of such a project. From this period the affair assumed [assumed] a more important aspect. It did not seem probable the slaves in this city and neighbourhood would undertake so bold an enterprise without support from the slaves in other quarters of the state. It was more reasonable to presume an extensive combination had been formed among them for that purpose. Heretofore I had endeavored to give the affair as little importance as the  
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[Transcription Page 4]

measures necessary [necessary] for defense would permit. I had hoped it would even pass [pass] unnoticed by the Community. But as soon as I was satisfied a conspiracy existed it became my duty to estimate the crisis according to its magnitude, and to take regular and systematic measures to avert the danger. In consequence I issued [issued] a summons to convene the Council at ten the next day; and in the interim advised the gentlemen who gave me the information, to apprehend and commit to prison without delay, all the slaves in the county whose guilt they had good cause to suspect. I also gave a like intimation to the mayor of this city, which advice was duly attended to.

When the council convened on the 2<sup>d</sup> of September | I laid before it the evidence I had received of the meditated insurrection of the slaves, and asked its advice as to the measures necessary [necessary] to be taken in such an emergency. The council concurred in Opinion that such a project existed and ought to be guarded against with peculiar care. But as the extent of the danger was not yet known, it was thought sufficient at the time to confine our measures to defense to those objects which it was understood were to be first assailed [assailed],  
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[Transcription Page 5]

and could only be opposed by a respectable force, which force if the city was surprised, could not be collected in a short time. The probability was if their first effort succeeded, we should see the town in flames, its inhabitants butchered, and a scene of horror extending through the country. This spectacle it is true would be momentary only, for as soon as a body of militia could be formed the insurrection would be suppressed [suppressed]. The superiority in point of numbers ; in the knowledge and use of Arms ; and indeed every other species of knowledge which the whites have over the blacks in this Commonwealth is so decisive that the latter could only sustain themselves for a moment in rebellion against the former. Still it was a crisis to be avoided so far as prudent precautions could accomplish it. There was one other consideration which engaged the mind in the Commencement of this affair from which it was not easy to withdraw it. It seemed strange that the slaves should embark in this novel and unexampled enterprise of their own accord. Their treatment has been more favorable since the revolution and as the importation was prohibited among the first acts of our independance their  
number



[Transcription Page 6]

number has not increased in proportion with that of the whites. It was natural to suspect they were prompted to it by others who were invisible, but whose agency might be powerful. And if those were the case it became proportionally more difficult to estimate the extent of the combination and the consequent real importance of the Crisis. On consideration of all these circumstances it was deemed necessary [necessary] to call out such a force as might be fully adequate to the emergency ; such an one as would be likely to overawe and keep down the Spirit of insurrection, or sufficient to suppress it in case it broke out. On that principle I called into service on the 9th the nineteenth and twenty third Regiments, and a detachment of fifty men additional from the thirty third ; which detachment with the whole of the Nineteenth Regiment and one hundred men of the twenty third were ordered to take post in this city. The residue of the twenty third were stationed in the town of Manchester.

While there was a hope the report of this conspiracy was unfounded, or a possibility [possibility] of controlling it in silence, that object was pursued with zeal. But as its existence had become known to the publick, it only remained to make the incident as harmless [harmless] in other respects as circumstances would permit. Having with a view to the publick safety, called out a respectable

[Transcription Page 7]

able force I was resolved to derive from it all the aid it would yield in reference to the objects contemplated. It was paraded daily on the capitol square, and trained as well that it might be prepared for action if occasion required, as that our strength might be known to the conspirators. The effect which the measure produced was easily and soon perceived. It was evident that the collection and display of this force, inspired the citizens with confidence and, depressed [depressed] the spirit of the slaves. The former saw in it a security from the danger which menaced them ; the latter a defeat of their nefarious projects.

On the twelfth of September five, and on the 15th - following five others were executed. On those occasions the whole force in service in the city infantry and horse attended the execution.

On the 27th Gabriel, One of the Chiefs of the conspiracy, for whom a reward had been offered, and who had been apprehended at Norfolk, was delivered up and committed to jail.

As these executions were carried into effect without any movement of the slaves, and their chief apprehended, it was fair to presume the danger of the crisis had passed [passed]. It became from that period, the object of the execution to diminish  
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[Transcription Page 8]

the force with a view to lefs [less] the expense ; which object was pursued with undeviating attention. On the 13th it was reduced to 650 men including those at the Point ^of Fork ; on the 15th to 225 ; occasional reductions were afterwards made as circumstances permitted, till finally on the eighteenth of October it was reduced to a Sergeant and 12 men at the Penitentiary and a Corporal and six at the jail, at which point it now stands.

You will receive herewith a copy of the documents which illustrate this transaction, with a report, from the Auditor, of the expense attending it: to which is added a letter from the Treasurer communicating an option of the Attorney General respecting payment for some of the slaves, who were executed.

I cannot too much commend the conduct of the militia on this occasion. They were obedient to order, exact in their discipline, and prompt in the execution of every duty that was in-joined on them. Their improvement was rapid, and far exceeded any thing I had ever witnefsed [witnessed]. Nor can it be doubted, had a crisis occurred. They would have proved as firm and decisive in ac-tion, as they were patient and persevering in the

[Transcription Page 9]

the Penitentiary ; the Capitol, and the magazine in this city ; and the Arsenal at the Point of Fork. it was natural to conclude the attention of the insurgents would be directed in the outset to these objects ; and this presentiment was confirmed by every one who knew and communicated to us any thing of their designs. Accordingly guards were established at those places in this city and an additional force of fifty men ordered to the Point of Fork. At the same letters were written to the Commandants of every regiment in the Commonwealth admonishing them of the existing danger, and requesting that vigilant attention be paid to the police of the Country, by ordering out suitable and active patrols in every county.

In the evening of the same day about twenty of the conspirators were brought to town from Mr. Profser's [Prosser's] and the neighboring estates, and at the jail could not contain them, they were lodged in the Penitentiary. The chiefs were not to be found. Some of the Arms which they had proposed for the occasion, formed of scythe blades, ~~and~~ well calculated for execution were likewise brought

[Transcription Page 10]

brought with them. By the information now received, as by former communications, it appeared that the inhabitants of that neighbourhood were, in particular degree, exposed to danger ; the conspiracy commenced with their slaves and they were to be its first victims. It was therefore deemed proper with a view to their safety, by advice of Council, to order from the 33.d Regiment a guard, of a Captain and sixty men, to take post near Watson's tavern in the centre of that Neighbourhood. By like advice the troop of the city was at the same time subjected to such duty as should be required of it.

Every day now threw new light on this affair, and increased the idea of its importance. On the 6th. By advice of Council, an order was ifsued [issued] for the removal of the powder from the magazine to the Penitentiary ; the distribution of the arms which were stamped and prepared for the several counties, according to a law of the last sefsion [session] was suspended ; the whole militia of the city was armed ; its guard increased from 60 to a hundred men and a power vested in the Chief magistrate to call out such proportions of the militia of Henrico, Chesterfield and the city of Richmond, as in his judgement

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[Transcription Page 11]

the emergency might require.

The trials had now commenced whereby the nature and extent of the Conspiracy became better understood. It was satisfactory proven that a general insurrection of the slaves was contemplated by those who took the lead in the affair. A species of Organization had taken place among them. At a meeting held for the purpose, they had appointed a Commandent, to whom they gave the title of General ; and had also appointed some other officers. They contemplated a force of cavalry as well as infantry ; and had formed a plan of attack on the city, which was to commence by setting fire to the lower end of the town, where the houses consulted chiefly of Wood, in expectation of drawing the people to that quarter, while they assailed [assailed] the Penitentiary, magazine and capitol, intending after achieving these, and getting possession [possession] of the Arms, to meet the people unarmed on their return. the accounts of the number of those who were to commence the movement varied. Some made it considerable, others less [less] so. It was distinctly seen that it embraced most of the slaves in this city and neighbourhood, and that the combination extended

[Transcription Page 12]

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At this time there was no reason to believe,  
if such a project was ever conceived, that it was a-  
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-spiracy, who had absconded, were concealed in the  
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-perience the same fate, it was probable sympathy  
for their afsociates [associates] might drive them to dispair, and  
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The opposite effect was expected from the measures  
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-hood comprising those at Work on the publick  
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and

[Transcription Page 13]

the discharge of every other duty. Their example teaches an useful lesson [lesson] to our country, It tends to confirm the favorable idea before entertained of their competence to every purpose of publick safety.

It belongs to the Legislature to weigh with profound attention, this unpleasant incident in our history. What has happened may occur again at any time, with more fatal consequences, unless [unless] suitable measures be taken to prevent it. Unhappily while this class [class] of people exists among us we can never count with certainty on its tranquil submission [submission]. The fortunate issue [issue] of the late attempt should not lull us into repose. Thought rather to stimulate us to the adoption of a system, which if it does not prevent the like in future, may secure the Country from any calamitous consequences. With great respect I have  
honor to be yr [your] most obt. [obedient] Servant  
Jas. Monroe