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Cover: Louisa County Courthouse, 1818-1905

## "POOR DELUDED WRETCHES!"

### The Slave Insurrection of 1816

William H. B. Thomas\*

Among domestic notices tucked inside the *Richmond Enquirer* the first week of March 1816 was one from Fredericksburg dated Saturday, March 2. "A rumour, of a most alarming nature," readers were told, "has for some days past agitated the public mind in the neighboring counties,"<sup>1</sup>

What the cautious Fredericksburg correspondent characterized as "so indistinct" that he could not report it to the public was news of a slave insurrection in Spotsylvania, Louisa, and Orange counties. But investigations were under way. The "novel and alarming case" of Commonwealth v. Boxley and others would be tried before the Spotsylvania court on Monday, March 4; those of various slaves — Mack, Ned, and others — would come before the Louisa court the next day, Tuesday, March 5.<sup>2</sup>

Already the governor, Wilson Cary Nicholas, had been informed of "the horrible plot" by the Spotsylvania authorities.<sup>3</sup> According to the details, one George Boxley of that county had begun fomenting a conspiracy in 1815 to free the slaves. Considerable data was furnished the governor about Boxley and more came out in the press accounts of his trial. He was supposed to be between thirty and forty years of age, slightly over six feet tall, stoop shouldered, thin of face and figure, displaying large whiskers, a sallow complexion, and sparse light or yellowish hair. He liked to talk and spoke rapidly. But more than that, he was described as "naturally a man of restless and aspiring mind; wild and visionary in his theories, and ardent in the pursuit of his designs."<sup>4</sup>

Portions of Boxley's personal life was also revealed. He had "respectable" connections, a wife, and eight children. He possessed what the newspaper reported as a "decent property," on which with modest effort could have given him a comfortable living.<sup>5</sup>

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\*The writer expresses his thanks to Porter C. Wright of Louisa for calling to his attention to the Louisa County Minute Book entries on which this article is based and for other assistance in its preparation.

<sup>1</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, March 6, 1816.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* and *ibid.*, March 13, 1816; Louisa County Court Records, Minute Book 1815-1818, p. 38, March 5, 1816. The Louisa proceedings are noted in Malcolm H. Harris, *History of Louisa County, Virginia* (Richmond, Va., 1936, 1963), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Waller Holladay and James M. Bell to Governor Wilson Cary Nicholas, *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts*, edited by William P. Palmer (11 vols., Richmond, Va., 1875-1893, hereinafter referred to as *Calendar*), X, p. 433-436.

<sup>4</sup>For notice to governor and quotation, see *Calendar*, X, p. 433; for description of Boxley, see *Richmond Enquirer*, May 22, 1816.

<sup>5</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, March 13, 1816.

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In the report to the governor, Boxley's earlier career was spelled out. He had once sought to represent Spotsylvania County in the General Assembly but was persuaded to defer to another. Later, while serving as an ensign in the War of 1812 with a reputation as a good drill officer, he failed to secure appointment as a regimental staff officer. Later, during a temporary stint as an adjutant, he was displaced.

Such repeated disappointments, according to the Spotsylvania authorities, had embittered him. He often declared that the distinction between rich and poor was too great, that positions were given for wealth rather than merit. He seemed to advocate "a more leveling system of Government." And for many years, the authorities claimed, Boxley had expressed his disapproval of Negro slavery and his wish that the slaves were free.<sup>6</sup>

It was in the late summer and early fall of 1815 that George Boxley initiated his conspiracy to free the slaves. He kept a little country store where he sold merchandise and whiskey, and there the Negroes frequently came to deal. Gaining their confidence by giving them presents, he talked of emancipation and told the blacks they ought to be free and, if they would listen to him and obey, they would be free. Boxley infused religious feeling and superstition into his advocacy. He told his eager listeners, the *Enquirer* reported, that he was inspired by Heaven "with the holy purpose of *delivering* his fellow creatures from bondage; that a little *white bird* had perched upon his shoulder and revealed it to him."<sup>7</sup>

To further his plans, he confided to the Negroes, he had agents in Fredericksburg and Richmond and in different counties who were enlisting men in the cause. He read to them letters purportedly from gentlemen of known respectability promising arms and money. One of his proselytes was a preacher, who spread the word at religious meetings. On such occasions large numbers of blacks could talk among themselves without exciting suspicion, without alarming the patrols which roamed the countryside on the lookout for illegal assemblies. As plans developed that fall and winter, the first of the following March—March 1816—was set as the time to move. But the *Richmond Enquirer* of March 13, 1816 could only describe the slaves—who were largely acting from bona fide ideas of freedom according to the paper—as "Poor deluded wretches!" For the first of March that year had seen Negroes committed to jail, with some certain to die on the gallows.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Calendar, X, p. 433.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., X, p. 434, p. 435; *Richmond Enquirer*, March 13, 1816.

<sup>8</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, March 13, 1816.

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Sometime during the week beginning Monday, February 19, Lucy, a Negro woman belonging to Ptolemy Powell of Spotsylvania, told her master about a slave plot to destroy the white people. Powell, at first doubtful what to do, kept the news to himself; but then, swayed by Lucy's tearful entreaties, he made known the plot to the magistrates. Certain Negroes, including one hired out to George Boxley, were examined by the Spotsylvania authorities for information of the conspiracy which they were supposed to possess. They were persuaded to talk—with assurances of protection—and, as the magistrates noted, separately, without previous warning, and with no possibility of having communicated with one another. As a result, a number of slaves were apprehended and confined. George Boxley, of course, was suspected immediately of participating in the conspiracy.<sup>9</sup>

On Saturday, February 24, Boxley wrote a letter to the Spotsylvania magistrates "in which, with much affection and in strong language, he disclaimed all knowledge of the conspiracy, and declared his own innocence." About one o'clock that afternoon, armed with a musket, sword, and razor, he mounted his horse and rode off. He was, as the magistrates informed the governor, "trembling in every limb and pale as death." Going but a short distance, he stopped at his house, called his wife, and told her not to be concerned if she never saw him again—he would as soon be dead as alive. With that he went on. In fifteen minutes his horse returned without bridle or saddle. Friends, searching for him that evening and the next morning but finding no trace, supposed he had killed himself.<sup>10</sup>

On Sunday, February 25, word was received from Louisa that Boxley had been in that county the previous night, gathering his cohorts, and was probably then heading a small band of Negroes. It was believed that he intended to attempt a rescue of the slaves already in custody; indeed, he was reported to have told his followers that if any were caught he would rescue them. Guards for the prisoners were reinforced; two patrols were ordered out. Though the Spotsylvania magistrates had as yet no legal evidence on which to take Boxley into custody, they intensified their search. They went to his house where he reportedly had been seen, but, if there, he heard them coming and fled. On Monday sixteen armed men arrived from Louisa with a magistrate's warrant for Boxley issued on the facts known in that county. The warrant was renewed in Spotsylvania.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*Calendar*, X, p. 434.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, X, p. 434-435.

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What had taken place following Boxley's disappearance on Saturday afternoon began to be pieced together and finally became apparent at the subsequent Louisa trials. Boxley had slipped into Louisa County that afternoon and from then into the night went about from place to place trying to rouse up the Negroes. Mack and Ned, slaves belonging to Joseph Boxley, spread the word that he was raising a company to go to a free country, that they were going, and that they wanted others to go. The scheme was to meet, get their masters' best horses, march to Fredericksburg where they would seize arms and money by force, and then go on to Richmond to do the same. They would kill all horses as they went, cutting their throats, to prevent pursuit and the sending of warnings on ahead of them.<sup>12</sup>

That night Boxley, with a group of about ten including the slave Ned, came to William Mansfield's plantation in Louisa. Ned tried to persuade another Negro, Sam, the property of Winston Young and later a witness against Ned, to join. Tom, one of Boxley's companions who called himself a sergeant, pressed a gun to Sam also in an effort to make him go along. But Sam refused and the conspirators went off.

At some point Boxley and his group, including Mack, Ned, and Tompkin, a slave of Samuel Cole, crossed the North Anna back into Spotsylvania. They came to what was described as Francis Jerdone's place, Pigeon Quarter. According to Abraham, one of Jerdone's slaves and later a witness in the trials, Boxley had a gun and Tompkin, a bayonet. Boxley said there were twenty or twenty-five Negro prisoners tied to trees at Mt. Hermon "for having done little or nothing, and something too." He added that Abraham's son was among them and that he, Abraham, should go along to help, for, as Mack and Ned blurted out, they were going to rescue the prisoners at Mt. Hermon. At Pigeon Quarter also Kit, Matt, and another Ned, slaves of Jerdone's, were persuaded by Boxley to leave with him, though apparently reluctantly, two hours or so after dark. Even before all of this had happened the slave Matt had told Jerdone's overseer that he expected to be shot or carried to Louisa Court House, but the overseer, knowing Matt to be "a saucy fellow," had paid little attention.

Most of the activity that night occurred at William Cole's in Louisa County, some six miles from Pigeon Quarter, where a Saturday night "frolic" was going on. A number of Negroes there were later called as witnesses: Benjy, Robert Garland's slave; Johnson, Cole Dickinson's; Lee, Hicka Dickinson's; and Hardiman,

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<sup>12</sup>For record in Louisa trials on which this and succeeding paragraphs are based, see Louisa County Court Records, Minute Book 1815-1816, pp. 38-44.

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John S. Boxley's; and Sam, Winston Young's. All told what they had seen and what had happened. George Boxley arrived with about a dozen companions, some armed with guns, swords, or bayonets. Boxley himself carried a broadsword. Their story was much as had been given before: they were going to Mt. Hermon to cut loose the Negroes there; then they were going on to Fredericksburg to sieze arms, ammuniton, and money, and after that to Richmond to do the same, and finally, to a free country. Boxley was reported to have added that if the white people resisted, they were to be killed. The slave Mack, representing that one of his cousins was among those tied up at Mt. Hermon, boasted that he was "going to release him at all events—that life was but life and had as well lose his in one way as another."

It was now after midnight. George Boxley attempted to get all those at the frolic to join him. He insisted that all would be set free. Two hours passed. At last Boxley admitted that "he had met such a cool reception he could do nothing there." He ordered his men to parade and march, remarking they would retreat to some suitable place until the next night. Then, he said, he would turn out and call on all he met with and "if they did not go, he would drop a ball through them."

When the warrant from Louisa arrived in Spotsylvania on Monday and after it had been renewed there, the search for Boxley and his band continued. Monday night armed men from both Spotsylvania and Louisa combed the area where he was known to have been and watched the different approaches to his house. "It seemed impossible," the magistrates believed, "for him to escape unless he abandoned his wife and children and fled from the country." At last the Negroes, by now afraid, deserted him. On Tuesday morning, George Boxley surrendered to the authorities.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence from Louisa, together with his own confession, convinced the Spotsylvania magistrates to jail him and arrange for his trial by an examining court on Monday, March 4. Boxley admitted, the governor was informed, assembling the Negroes in Louisa, though he insisted it was for the purpose of getting testimony to prove the innocence of the slaves who had been captured. He admitted also that he had held out promises of freedom to them and that he had spoken of "arrangements to be made for their assembling in great numbers on horse back near his house to be by him conveyed to a 'free State.'" But he denied ever having intended to deceive them. Since no conspiracy would have ever been carried into effect, he argued, there was no intention to do ill and hence he ought not to be punished. And his

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<sup>13</sup>*Calendar*, X, p. 435.

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relations immediately began to put forward the plea of insanity, "tho' nothing of the kind was ever thought of before the discovery of the conspiracy."<sup>14</sup>

According to the *Enquirer's* account, many of the Negroes whom Boxley solicited refused to join the conspiracy—some from lack of confidence in Boxley, others from remembering the fate of those involved in earlier revolts, and still others because their feelings as fathers and husbands triumphed over their feelings for liberty.<sup>15</sup> Altogether nineteen slaves were committed in Spotsylvania County, eight in Louisa, and a lesser number in Orange. Yet the belief persisted that the insurrection was far reaching; Boxley said that it extended to Fredericksburg and Richmond, and a rumor had it that one was intended in Lynchburg. In view of the feelings engendered, the Spotsylvania magistrates advised the governor that the name of the woman in that county who had informed on Boxley and the slaves should not be made known. She should be protected from the rage of her own people, they asserted, particularly because the life of a Negro man in Louisa who had revealed Boxley's activities had been endangered.<sup>16</sup>

On Monday, March 4, 1816 George Boxley was brought before the Spotsylvania court. He was accused of having advised or conspired with certain slaves to rebel or make insurrection and having stolen and carried away two slaves. His case was remanded to the next Superior Court of Law for the county of Spotsylvania, and he was returned to jail. Of the nineteen slaves tried for their part in the conspiracy, a number were found guilty, several were hanged, and others, though destined for a similar fate, were recommended to the executive for clemency—transportation out of the state.<sup>17</sup>

At Louisa court the following day, March 5, there were sitting Peter Crawford, Garland Anderson, William Wash, Reuben Cowherd, James Michie, Ludlow Branham, and Duke Cosby, Gentlemen Justices. Eight of the Negroes were arraigned and tried. Six were found guilty. These—Mack and Ned, Joseph Boxley's slaves; Matt and Kit, Francis Jerdone's; Tom, Sarah Gardner's; and Tompkin, Samuel Cole's—were ordered remanded to jail until March 29, on which day they were to be taken by the sheriff to the public gallows and there to be hanged by the neck until dead between the hours of twelve o'clock and sunset. Matt was

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, March 13, 1816.

<sup>16</sup>*Calendar*, X, pp. 435-436.

<sup>17</sup>Spotsylvania County Court Records, Minute Book 1816, March 4, 1816.

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valued at seven hundred dollars; the others, at six hundred; and these amounts were ordered to be certified to the Auditor of Public Accounts.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime George Boxley was waiting out his fate for what the *Enquirer* called his "desperate folly and depravity."<sup>19</sup> But on the night of May 14 Boxley escaped from the Spotsylvania jail. Four days later a proclamation was issued by the governor, Wilson Cary Nicholas, and upon the advice of the Council of State, offering a reward of one thousand dollars for the apprehension and return to custody of George Boxley. The proclamation, which appeared in the *Enquirer* of May 22, required all officers, civil and military—and exhorted "the good people" of the Commonwealth—to use their best exertions to capture the escaped man.<sup>20</sup>

But there were already suspicions about how Boxley made his escape. By May 25 the Spotsylvania grand jury found bills of indictment against the jailor for neglect of duty and against Boxley's wife for aiding in his escape. She had furnished the implements—a file and a candle—with which he broke out. Then, George Boxley, who had led the "poor deluded wretches" to a futile end, disappeared apparently forever.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Louisa County Court Records, Minute Book 1815-1818, pp. 38-44.

<sup>19</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, March 13, 1816.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, May 22, 1816.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, May 29, 1816; for implements used in escape, see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University, No. 501 (New York, 1943), p. 256, which discusses the 1816 insurrection. See also Nicholas Halasz, *The Rattling Chains: Slave Unrest and Revolt in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1966), pp. 110-112, for additional treatment.