

The Moses of Charleston: Denmark Vesey

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and motivations of Denmark Vesey, a former slave from Charleston, South Carolina, who in 1822 attempted to lead an insurrection of blacks. Vesey, who spent the early part of his life in bondage, witnessed the atrocities of slavery committed against his people by the white population. The horrors he saw as a slave left an indelible impression that followed him for the remainder of his life. Through the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in 1816, Vesey used his status as a church-leader to bring together the Negro populations of the city and preach a message of God most had never before heard. Though his uprising did not succeed and Vesey was executed for his crimes, his attempts to lead others to freedom served as an inspiration for other rebellions such as those led by Nat Turner in 1831 and Frederick Douglass in 1862.

On a Friday, in the final week of July, in the year 1822, more than twenty South Carolinian slaves with only moments left to live stood along a hastily constructed platform with ropes around their necks. Under normal circumstances, the executions of Charleston criminals would take place in the northeastern part of town known as Blake's Land.¹ Typically, executions occurred infrequently with nowhere near the numbers of those sentenced to die as on this occasion. Due to the high volume of men convicted, the small rickety gallows that were used in usual situations would not suffice. Instead, three low lying benches, (about three feet tall), were placed along a wall that existed on the northern end of town, often referred to as "the Lines."² The white population of Charleston, filled with fear and anger from the thwarted conspiracy, did not want to miss this public execution. Slaves as well as freemen also came for the day's "public entertainment." Some had wished to distance themselves from the plot, while others came to quietly pay respect to their brethren. People from all walks of life arrived to bear witness to the hangings.

The convicted men were said to have "behaved with great firmness"³ in the moments leading up to their death. Much like their leader who was executed several weeks earlier, their admiration for his public demeanor in the face of adversity was something they vowed to emulate, even in their final moments. At the time of the execution, when the benches were kicked out from underneath them, the slaves' fall of only a couple feet did not instantly snap their necks as was typical with a hanging. For several minutes the tightening noose strangled the convicted men. It was a member of the city guard, Captain Dove, who finally made the decision to put an end to their agony. He loaded his pistol and fired a shot in the head of each of the surviving men, reloading as he went down the line.⁴ With the mass execution of those convicted of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, it was the hope of many that Charleston would be safe again from plots of insurrection within its black community. It also led to much speculation about how and why the orchestrator of the plot, Denmark Vesey, chose to conspire in a plot hoping to demolish Charleston.

¹ Douglas R. Egerton, "Freedom, 1800-1817," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1999), 84.

² Egerton, "Judges, June to August," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 196.

³ Ibid., 197.

⁴ Ibid.

Denmark Vesey, the former slave and leader in the town's African Methodist Episcopal Church was the man who inspired those twenty-two slaves who eventually met their end at the gallows. Vesey (1767-1822) was a former slave who, before purchasing his freedom, worked for the captain of a Danish slaving ship. He had been executed three weeks prior to his followers, convicted for his crimes against humanity, dying before he could achieve his grandest ambition of which he had been plotting for several years.⁵ It was his desire to free all of his enslaved comrades in the City of Charleston, South Carolina, and to reestablish their location on the newly liberated island of Saint Domingue, (known today as Haiti). For the role he played in overseeing and orchestrating his plot, which garnered the support of thousands of freed and enslaved blacks in and outside of Charleston city limits, Vesey was eventually met with repercussions that cumulated with his execution. Yet, his legacy continued on. How was this conspiracy able to take shape over the course of several years without garnering enough notice from the white authorities, especially since it was not the first rebellion to take place in South Carolina?

By 1822, over 150 slave revolts or attempted slave revolts had taken place in the United States. In Carolina alone, there had been thirty-three by the time that Denmark Vesey had formulated his plan.⁶ Yet, from all of these insurrections, in which hundreds of Negroes had lost their lives in futile attempts to achieve freedom, there were still those who had hopes of being successful. It was this optimism of there being something better beyond slavery that fueled many slaves to continue trying to attain freedom. This was also a tool Denmark Vesey exploited in order to plot his uprising. Vesey became a master of recruiting followers by appealing to their anguish. Quite aware of the unique social constructs that existed amongst the black and white populations in Charleston, Vesey, fueled by the atrocities he witnessed as a slave, used the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the city, as well as the lax laws concerning the congregation of slaves, to preach his interpretation of an Old Testament God concerned with vengeance and justice. Vesey also appealed to many of the slaves' beliefs in charms and the conjuring of spirits, which were rooted in their African traditions, to convince them that they had the God of the Old Testament, as well as magic on their side. This assured them that victory in their struggle would be inevitable, even if it was not in their lifetime. But to fully understand how Vesey's plot played out, the societies in which he lived and the factors that impacted his life must be examined.

There has been an extensive amount of research on Denmark Vesey dating back to 1822, when the plot was first made public. In these varying explorations, the motivations behind Vesey's actions have been argued often and with no unanimous consensus. In this thesis, both primary and secondary works will be examined in an attempt to further understand why in 1822, Denmark Vesey chose to lead an uprising of blacks in Charleston. Though there is no agreement as to the exact reasons behind Denmark Vesey's motivations, there are several sources and scholars who provide their insights.

From the time that Denmark Vesey's plot was foiled, it became the source of national intrigue. The thought of a freed slave coming so close to leading thousands of his people who were still in bondage away from their oppression, while also destroying the city of Charleston, became a topic of mass hysteria in popular culture and a real terror for many slave-owning states. The idea that a plot like this was so close to success made those in power like South Carolina Governor Thomas Bennett take notice.⁷ Out of the trials emerged a demand by citizens of the nation for a

⁵ Thomas Parker and Lionel Henry Kennedy, *An Official Report*, (Charleston: James R. Schenck, 1822), 140.

⁶ John Lofton, "Negro Insurrectionist," *The Antioch Review* 18, no. 2, 1958, 184.

⁷ Thomas Bennet, "Servile Conspiracy in South Carolina," *Daily National Intelligencer*, August 24, 1822, Accessed January 27, 2015.

more in-depth analysis of the life of Denmark Vesey and the role he played in influencing the attempted uprising. By late into 1822, publishers James Hamilton and Kennedy and Parker published their narratives of the plot in pamphlet form. Both Kennedy's *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes* and Hamilton's *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among Portion of Blacks of This City* (later reprinted as *Negro Plot* in Northern states), were written with a narrative about the life of Vesey as well as court testimonials that put into context how Vesey and his four lieutenants, Peter Poyas, "Monday" Gell, Rolla Bennett and "Gullah" Jack used religion to persuade those belonging to the African Methodist Episcopal Church to join in the rebellion.

The purpose of these pamphlets was to demonstrate to the curious readers of the time how dangerously close to success the blacks of Charleston had come before their plan was thwarted. Both pamphlets also urged the white legislators of South Carolina and other southern states to rethink their positions on the lax laws that existed in their communities that allowed slaves to congregate during daylight hours without any form of white supervision. These two pamphlets and the witness testimonies they provided also served as the crux for most scholarly works written in the past century. Unfortunately, they left little to be desired in terms of how Vesey's upbringing shaped his future actions.

For almost a century, secondary works on the Vesey Plot were virtually non-existent. It was not until the last sixty years or so, and perhaps due to the American Civil Rights Movement, that a resurgence of written works focused on Minority Studies that retold the lives and struggles of slaves appeared. In the case of Denmark Vesey, most scholarly material on his life began being published in the early 1950s.

One of the first twentieth century scholars to write about the Vesey Plot was John Lofton Jr. In his two works, *Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms*, written in 1948, and his 1958 article, *Negro Insurrectionist*, Lofton gives the reader a broad overview of Vesey's life and plot that started with his enslavement to a ship captain as a young man, to his eventual liberation by winning a \$1500 lottery of which he used \$600 to buy his freedom. Lofton's works, though useful, does not provide his readers with a deeper insight into the personal motivations of Vesey that explain how the society in which he lived influenced his actions, something that was not as extensively researched in the works written at the time of his trial.

Historian, Douglas Egerton fills in some of the holes that were left empty by Lofton with his 1999 book, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* and his subsequent article of the same year, *Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology*. Where *He Shall Go Out Free* is an extensive examination of Vesey, the man, a flawed individual who used the strengths he had in an attempt to change society, Egerton's more specific article focuses on the strongest weapon he had in his possession, as well as what will be a focal point of this thesis, which is Vesey's interpretation of the Bible. Vesey had power to wield the Word in such a way that he was able to convince a vast number of others to risk their lives in an attempt to escape the clutches of slavery and live free of bondage on the island of Saint Domingue. But to grasp a deeper understanding of Vesey's plot, as is the aim of this thesis, it is imperative that the world in which he grew up and how it shaped his motivations first be examined.

South Carolina, where Denmark Vesey spent the majority of his life and was executed, was a slave state in the Union with a history unlike any other. Founded in 1670, and originally named Charles Town, in honor of King Charles II of England, the primary focus on the founding of the city was to exist as a slave-society: a society whose economy *could not* exist without the practice of slavery. Some of the first to settle in Charleston were planter sons from the English-owned islands of Bermuda and Barbados who knew that they were unable to inherit their father's lands because

they were not first born.⁸ These islands from whence they came had large slave populations with some of the harshest of slave codes.

According to Walter Edgar, in his expansive history of the state: “By 1670, the Barbadian socio-economic model that would be replicated in the English West Indies and South Carolina had evolved. It was exploitative and materialistic.”⁹ In Barbados, sugar became the export that powered the island’s economy. At first, thousands of indentured Irish prisoners worked the plantations. Later, the planters turned to slaves brought over from West Africa as a cheaper source of labor. From 1627 to 1807, more than 400,000 Africans crossed the Atlantic to work on the plantations.¹⁰ The high mortality rate made a constant flow of new slaves necessary. The Barbados Slave Codes were implemented allowing the planters to control the slaves by any means necessary, without any form of repercussion.

Though the codes were meant to benefit both parties due to the notion that slaves, much like children, could not be responsible for their own well being, it was up to the slavers to make sure that they were kept clothed and protected. For the slaves, the only positive aspect of the codes was a guarantee of a change of clothing once a year. The planters, on the other hand, had the authority to beat, whip, brand, maim, mutilate, burn or kill a slave with no risk of punishment. In their view, it was more profitable for a slave to be replaced than it was to try to keep them healthy. Slaves had none of the rights guaranteed to any person under English common law. In the eyes of the law, they were nothing more than chattel. The Barbados Slave Codes were the first laws implemented in a slave colony for the benefit of the slave owners. Within a few decades, other colonies followed their example. Similar slave codes, adapted to the specific needs of the varying communities, were passed in several Caribbean islands as well as South Carolina.

From 1791-1803, the Haitian Revolution of slaves and free people of color on Saint Domingue had embroiled the French colony in violence; blacks gained independence and created the Republic of Haiti in 1804. Many whites and free people of color fled to Charleston as refugees during the uprisings, bringing many of their slaves with them, who were referred to in the city as “French Negroes.”

Their accounts of the revolution and its success spread rapidly among Charleston's slaves. Lofton writes, “St. Dominique pamphlets which slave-holders objected to as ‘inflammatory’ were smuggled into Charleston.”¹¹ These pamphlets and rumors would eventually reach Denmark Vesey, who was quite aware of the atrocities of slave codes, and was a witness to their horrors as a child. There is no doubt that because of his childhood, he grew to sympathize with those still under their oppression even when he was no longer a slave.

Denmark Vesey or Telemaque as he was known before he changed his name, was born in 1767 to African slaves on the Danish-owned island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean Sea.¹² As mentioned earlier, the slave codes in South Carolina that Vesey witnessed in his later years were similar in viciousness to slave codes created by the Danes. Under Danish law, should a slave runaway, he is to be “pinched thrice” with red hot irons and then hanged. Another legal provision stated that if a slave was found guilty of conspiracy, he was to lose a leg, unless the owners of the slave deemed the punishment too severe, the sentence was 150 lashes and the loss of the slave’s ears. Another law that Vesey grew up with while in the Danish colony was that a slave who failed to

⁸ Walter B. Edgar, “The Colony of a Colony” In *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 38.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Egerton, “The Book of Telemaque,” In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 5.

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Ibid., 3.

report suspicious activity like whispers of an uprising, would have his head branded and receive 150 lashes.¹³

By the late 1700s, the Danes were bringing thousands of Africans to the colony of St. Thomas annually. As a boy, though not out in the fields, Vesey would still have most likely witnessed the acts of brutality associated with being enslaved to work on an island whose primary focus was harvesting sugar cane. Though scholars are unsure how much Vesey saw on St. Thomas before being brought in to service on Saint Domingue, it is believed that his witness to the act of cruelty against his fellow slaves had a profound impact on the rest of his life, an impact that would eventually lead to Vesey one day leading his enslaved brothers and sisters away from the oppression.

In 1781, at around 15 years of age, Vesey was sold, along with 389 other slaves to work on the small French owned island of Saint Domingue. The Danish Captain of the slave carrying ship, Joseph Vesey, observed the “alert intelligent youth and took him into his cabin, dressed him in presentable clothes and made a pet out of him.”¹⁴ But upon their arrival to port in Saint Domingue, Vesey, like his fellow slaves was sold into the servitude of the sugar cane plantation owners. Vesey, who was had never done so before, was forced to work the fields and was expected to do so until his death. Most slaves in Saint Domingue were awakened at daybreak from their small windowless living quarters that were arranged in such a way that up to a few dozen men could fit. According to Egerton, the French colony prided itself on being accomplished “cutters” able to wield their whips so they flayed skin into neat ribbons. Though, as in St. Thomas, there was a slave code introduced in 1685 that set “restrictions” on overseers and were laughably deemed humanitarian. Yet, the punishments dealt were some of the most atrocious seen in the New World.

Vesey, in his most formative years, witnessed cruelty unequal to what he would have seen as a child in St. Thomas. Out in the fields with hundreds of other slaves, witnessing floggings and beatings was commonplace. There was no restriction in the slave codes at the number of lashes an overseer could employ. Also, slaves were routinely branded and butchered without any provocation. Equally common was the practice of smearing salt, ash, or lemon into a beaten slave’s open wounds. Those who tried to flee may have had their shoulders branded, their flesh pierced, or their ears shaved off. If a slave was a repeat offender, their hamstrings would be cut, crippling them and making them of little use for the fields and their owners.¹⁵ Many slaves in Saint Domingue would choose death over another moment in those horrendous conditions. Annually, over 2,000 slaves chose to end their lives.¹⁶ Vesey, like those who chose suicide over servitude, knew that he must escape.

There is still a cause for debate among historians, as to whether Denmark Vesey ever suffered from epilepsy. What is known is that late in the fall of 1781, Denmark Vesey began having “epileptic fits” that would keep him from working in the fields.¹⁷ Egerton asserts that Vesey, who was very intelligent, had an ear for languages and began picking up French within his first few months on the island. This made him familiar with the laws regarding the purchasing of a sickly slave. Due to the statutes, the buyer of Denmark Vesey was given a full refund and in April, 1782, Captain Joseph Vesey returned for the young man whom he had grown to admire for his quick wit

¹³ John Lofton, "Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms," *The Journal of Negro History* 33, no. 4 (1948): 395-417, Accessed January 20, 2015, JSTOR, 399.

¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

¹⁵ Egerton, "The Book of Telemaque," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷ Lofton, "Negro Insurrectionist," 186.

and willingness to work. Vesey was never again recorded of showing any signs of epilepsy leading some historians to question the validity of his claims.

For the next several years, Denmark Vesey served as the personal confidant of Joseph. He spent most of his time on the top deck of the ship learning to read and familiarizing himself in Danish, French, and English. Vesey had escaped the hell that was Saint Domingue but would always carry what he witnessed there with him. Even as a teenager, Vesey noticed the dynamic was changing on the island. There was fear in the eyes of overseers and whispers of revolt from those who no longer would live in a constant state of torment and abuse. By 1791, the slaves of Saint Domingue, under the leadership Toussaint L'Ouverture were in full revolt against their captors, and by 1804, those on the island had declared themselves a sovereign nation.¹⁸

By 1820, the city of Charleston had become the third largest city in the United States with a white population of 10,653 and a colored population of 14,127.¹⁹ Within the population, the dynamic between Blacks and Whites was very different than most other states due to the relatively large population of free Blacks and Mulattos, many of whom became artisans to financially support themselves. Yet, this did not mean that the races were equal. According to Egerton, "As early as 1712, ordinances required slaves traveling into or about Charleston to carry a pass from their master...Slaves caught without a ticket were whipped."²⁰ In 1740, a comprehensive 24-page document known as the "Negro Act" was written with the purpose of showing the hierarchy that existed between the races, and to make abundantly clear, where *all* those of African descent stood in the social order. Slaves, and later, free blacks were forced to wear identification tags that contained information denoting the person's free or slave status.

The badge laws categorized slaves into three groups: "handicraft tradesman", "carters, drayman, porters and laborers" as well as "fisherman."²¹ The black population was required by law to purchase these slave tags with the state's hope of adding additional capital to their revenue stream. It also "turned each white Charlestonian into a constable,"²² who now felt it their duty to report any suspicious activity they may have witnessed. This also added to the racial tensions that Vesey, who had won enough money to buy his freedom from his master on November 29, 1799, would experience when he refused to live by the societal norms of how he, a free black man, was expected to act in a world run by whites.

As a free man, Denmark Vesey was able to experience much more self-determination than he had previously had as a slave. Using the \$900 that he had left after purchasing his freedom, Vesey was able to set himself up in a trade. For the next twenty-two years, Vesey worked as a carpenter in Charleston where he was distinguished for being in "great strength and activity."²³ John Lofton describes the period in which Vesey lived as a time of great prosperity for the free Negroes of Charleston (at least in relation to their enslaved counterparts). From 1790 to 1820, the number of free Negroes in Charleston climbed from 775 to over 3,100. The wealth of some ranged anywhere from \$15,000 to \$125,000.²⁴ The free black population had success in various fields including contractors, merchants, coal and wood dealers, and artisans.

Vesey, (one of eleven black carpenters in Charleston at the time) was reported to have amassed considerable wealth and was considered by many, despite his sometimes peculiar attitudes

¹⁸ Brian Gabriel. "From Haiti to Nat Turner: Racial Panic Discourse during the Nineteenth Century Partisan Press Era," *American Journalism* Historians Association 30, no. 3 (2013): 336-64, 338.

¹⁹ Lofton, "Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms," 409.

²⁰ Egerton, "Nor A Lender Be, 1794-1799," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 62.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lofton, "Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms," 401.

²⁴ Ibid.

towards some, a “solid man of the community who won the confidence of blacks and whites alike.”²⁵ But what distinguished him from others was his learnedness. Vesey, who was fluent in several languages, was also familiar with the society in which he lived. He spent much of his time studying current events happening globally as well as the congressional debates surrounding slavery. Having spent his formative years traveling, he grew to realize that slavery was not the natural condition of his people; and from what occurred in Saint Domingue, it was evident the chains of bondage could sometimes be broken by the edge of a sword. But before Vesey would help those who were still slaves escape their bondage, he would first have to find a way to unify the black populations of Charleston.

What made Charleston unique to many other cities in the nation was the successful free-black population. Many of those who were free men, like Vesey, were either born to a family that was not enslaved or they had purchased their freedom. Also, a large class of mixed-race people (Mulattos) also lived in Charleston. In many cases, these people were the offspring of a white master and a female slave. Instead of forcing the child into servitude, they grew up to live amongst the free class of Charleston blacks. Though still not equal to their white counterparts, the population structure put those who were free in a position of superiority to those who were not. Instead of seeking to help their brothers and sisters who were still in chains, many blacks felt it easier to ignore the problem still faced by their people.

One such group that wished to distinguish itself from those who were slaves was the Brown Fellowship Society. Founded in 1790, it represented, as a microcosm, the racial schism that existed in Charleston. Those who wished to be in the Society were expected to pay monthly dues for the remainder of their life. This naturally made the group exclusive for the wealthy colored class. Despite its motto of “Charity and Benevolence,” the Society existed for the purpose of drawing biologically constructed lines of demarcation between the wealthy browns of Charleston’s sizable black community, whether bond or free.²⁶ Because there was little intermingling between the upper colored and the lower, that also meant that the two did not congregate together on Sundays.

Though it is unknown when Vesey first heard the Gospel, many historians believe he first became a Christian sometime during his years under the ownership of Joseph Vesey, most likely spending that time in one of the city’s Calvinist churches.²⁷ In Charleston, most of the white and black populations went to Church on Sundays. Two of the most prominent denominations at the time were the Protestant Episcopal and the Methodist Church. Most slaves and lower class Blacks attended the Methodist Churches while the upper class would, “assiduously avoid the city’s emerging black churches and instead, flocked to the congregations dominated by white parishioners.”²⁸

The reason Methodism appealed to so many slaves was that it was the most accepting of cultural heritage and traditions. Unlike many missionaries to come out of Catholicism or other Protestant groups, many Methodist missionaries, including its founder, John Wesley, recognized that people were more likely to convert if most of their traditions were allowed to remain intact. Instead of coming from a place of supremacy with a holier-than-thou attitude, many Methodist missionaries would use local converts as a way to gain trust within the population. With their emotional style and emphasis on universal salvation, many were met with great success through baptisms. Also, the emphasis on “theological flexibility” allowed for the retention of many African religious traditions. Though too-clear evidence of “African-Paganism like polygamy might be admonished, but hard to

²⁵ Ibid., 402.

²⁶ Egerton, “Freedom, 1800-1817,” In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 93.

²⁷ Ibid., 92.

²⁸ Ibid.

enforce, the flexibility within the denomination led to many black congregates where they felt they could practice their traditional beliefs while also adopting aspects of their new Christian faith.”²⁹

Vesey, who continued to associate with the slave community of which he had so long been a part, did not have a solid footing in either community and thus, did not find solace in either the Episcopal or Methodist churches, both of which were run by a white oligarchy. Egerton describes Vesey’s unusual social situation as his status being, “neither a member of the Brown Fellowship Society nor the Slave community, [he] initially avoided both Episcopalian and Methodist congregations.”³⁰ It was not until 1817 that Vesey found the church that he eventually called home.

In 1792, former slave, Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (also known to many as the African or AME Church) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Allen was born in to slavery in Delaware in 1760. By the age of 17, Allen had converted to Christianity after hearing the preaching of a Methodist minister. His master, (a Methodist convert) allowed Allen to purchase his freedom and move to Philadelphia where he joined a local parish. In 1792, Allen witnessed church elders pull a Negro from the altar while he was in mid-prayer telling him that he must go to the segregated area on the upper level of the building. Allen, claiming that “Notwithstanding, we had [all] been persecuted” led a mass exodus of Blacks from the church to start an “independent” church within the larger Methodist denomination.³¹ By 1816, the movement would reach Charleston and become the primary catalyst for Vesey to seek his retribution.

In 1816, freeman Morris Brown and former slave, Henry Drayton, traveled to Philadelphia to meet with Allen and discuss the formation of an African Church in Charleston. By 1817, the Cow Alley African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded, drawing many slaves away from the churches that ran in conjunction with their oppressors. The Church drew its leadership from the free black artisan class as well as those from the Brown Fellowship Society who were not as keen to remain divided with the larger black population. Men like Denmark Vesey eagerly signed up, aware of Richard Allen’s movement in Philadelphia. He saw the AME Church as a model of “black self-reliance and resiliency in a hostile white world as well as a purer application of brotherly love”³² amongst the Negroes of Charleston. Other men on whom Vesey would later come to rely as lieutenants in his movement for liberation also joined. Monday Gell and Peter Poyas, as well as the African mystic Gullah Jack also became members of the Church.

As the Church grew stronger and white authorities threatened to close the building, Brown and Drayton surrendered their principle leadership. This led to a much less organized Church structure where a more radical message began being preached. On Sundays, the Church would meet and conduct its usual sermons that would often times be overseen by a white authority. However, during the week, lay clergy conducted nightly classes “in some retired building” or private home. Each class had its own preacher chosen by the clergy. Vesey, who “regarded Brown and Drayton as hopelessly accommodating to white authority” often times led the classes.³³ By 1818, Vesey and his confidant, Peter Poyas, became class leaders and for “four years” according to one Charleston freeman, “preach[ed] [their] gospel of liberty and hate.”³⁴

The tool that Vesey used in order to control the views of his legions of followers was his interpretation of the Scriptures. The way in which he preached and the content of his sermons were

²⁹ Egerton, “Building The House of The Lord,” In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 105.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Douglas R. Egerton, “Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 100, no. 4 (1999), 305.

³² Egerton, “Building The House of The Lord,” In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 112.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Parker and Kennedy, *An Official Report*, “Testimony of Harth’s Robert at Trial of Peter Poyas, June 21, 1822,” 22-23.

unlike any most of the congregation had heard before. And this was by design. For those in power who had wished to keep the black-man subservient, it became the practice to use only parts of scripture that would keep members of the black community complacent in their current predicament with only the hope of it improving after death.

It was argued by some that Christianity, if presented in the properly “sanitized” way, could help the lost souls that were the African people. Many believed that those of color were not as pure as the rest of the population. They supported this argument by using Genesis as evidence stating that blacks were the “decedents of Ham, the cursed second son of Noah” and that “Blacks had lost their freedom through the abominable wickedness of their progenitor.”³⁵ Yet, through Christianity there was hope of teaching slaves to remain compliant to their masters, to turn the other cheek on an aggressor, and perhaps even save them from eternal damnation after their death.

Fredrick Dalcho, the Christian Minister of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Charleston at the time that Vesey lived stated “Slaves might be taught to pray for eventual deliverance in Heaven, rather than attempt to seize it while on earth.” He also advised that white ministers lecture black congregations on “their duties and obligations supported from examples carefully *selected* from the Bible” especially from the “New Testament.”³⁶ This gave way for overseers to treat the slaves with violence while at the same time teaching them that God deemed it acceptable. One slave recalled, “De marstar had to put de fear of God in them sometimes and de Bible don’t object to it.”³⁷ But there was a former slave who challenged that version. He made it his mission for four years while leading Bible studies in secret, away from the white authorities, to present a new interpretation of scripture. A version in which the black population had the right to seek retribution for the crimes that had been committed against them for nearly two centuries.

Egerton claims that “literally *all* of Vesey’s numerous religious pronouncements were drawn from the Old Testament” and that “Vesey and his disciples turned their back on the New Testament God of love.”³⁸ The question that arises is what was in the Old Testament that drew Vesey to preach exclusively from it and most importantly, influenced thousands of people to agree so strongly that they were willing to use violence?

Former slave, Archibald Grimke recalled that Vesey found within the Old Testament a, “stern and Nemesis-like God” with a suitable vision “for a day of vengeance and retribution.”³⁹ Though Vesey drew many parallels between the plights that Blacks faced in America with the Jews in Egypt, according to his disciples, “Vesey focused not on the epic of Moses but rather on the Jewish Bible’s edicts on slavery.”⁴⁰ Though Jewish law did permit the enslavement of nonbelievers, Vesey found solace in the fact that as a believer in Jehovah, the same God worshipped by their Christian slavers, a law existed in Exodus stating that slaves believing in the One True God must be released after a certain time. This is included in the book Exodus, Chapter 21. “He that stealeth a man...shall serve six years and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing.” It is also warned in the same chapter that whoever steals a man and does not let him go after the sixth year, “shall be put to death.” Another one of Vesey’s favorite scriptures was Zechariah, Chapter 14, verses 1 and 2,

³⁵ [Dalcho] *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures, Relative to the Slave Population of South-Carolina Respectfully Dedicated to "The South-Carolina Association"* Charleston S.C., Printed by A.E. Miller, 1823, 8, in Egerton, "Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology," 303.

³⁶ [Dalcho] *Practical Considerations* 21, 32, in “Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology,” 300.

³⁷ *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, (Westport, Conn. 1972) in Egerton, "Building The House of The Lord," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 108.

³⁸ Egerton, "Building The House of The Lord," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 124.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

which foretold the sacking of Jerusalem stating:

Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity.

Vesey also frequently preached from Joshua, Chapter 6 which, in verse 3, told how God's army, "Utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women young and old [with] the edge of the sword." With teachings like this, the congregation grew in their radical ideologies as well as numbers and began to plan for retaliation. They saw themselves as God's chosen people, and Charleston as Jerusalem being ransacked for becoming ungodly. Vesey led the violent rhetoric claiming that no white person shall be shown mercy. In his witness testimony, a slave named Rolla stated, that Vesey "Read in the Bible where God commanded that all should be cut off, both men, women, and children, and he said he believed it was no sin for us to do so, for the Lord had commanded us to do it."⁴¹ No longer was the black population of Charleston going to settle for the subjugation that they were forced to accept all their lives. They knew it was time to act.

Vesey and numerous others had seen atrocities committed against their people for far too long and now had the knowledge that the white population had been lying to them about God. Vesey fashioned a theology of liberation that "fused the demanding faith of the Israelites with the sacred values of Africa."⁴² With this he had formed an army. By 1820 Vesey began looking to traditional African culture that was rooted in mysticism as a way to aid his followers in their plan of retaliation and eventual exodus.

One thing that distinguished the Methodist denomination from the other Christian sects was its willingness to include traditional customs from within a certain population. Vesey fully embraced this notion believing that incorporating their heritage into their faith was integral in building unity between the congregations. It also created separation between themselves and the White population of which they did not wish to be a part. Vesey also knew that there were many within the slave community who were not followers of the Jewish God. Aware that to lead a successful rebellion required a fighting force, Vesey needed to recruit all soldiers he could find.

As a child, Vesey was familiar with the spiritual teachers that were native to Africa. Egerton describes that while on St. Thomas, Vesey saw "holy persons who [were] intimates of the god who made their will known to the black community."⁴³ These priests would cast charms of protection, pray for intervention, and even use poison (a gift from the gods) against their enemies. Though by the 1820s most of the lineage of African holy men had died out, the son of a shaman and slave named Jack Pritchard (also known as Gullah Jack) still had a large following of slaves in the surrounding community. Vesey knew that Gullah Jack would be a useful tool in his rebellion.

Little is known about Gullah Jack, other than he was an African born Slave from Angola who was most likely a prisoner-of-war before being purchased in 1805 by Paul Pritchard.⁴⁴ In the 1822 court trials "Gullah" Jack Pritchard was described as a:

Sorcerer feared by the natives of Africa who believed in witchcraft. He was not only considered invulnerable, but that he could make others so by his charms; and that he could and certainly would provide all his followers with arms. He was artful, cruel, and bloody; his

⁴¹ "An Account of the Intended Insurrection among a Portion of Blacks in Charleston: The Voluntary Confession of Rolla to the Court Made After His Trial but Before His Sentence Was Passed on Him" *August Chronicle*, September 5, 1822.

⁴² Ibid., 124.

⁴³ Egerton, "Building The House of The Lord," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 118.

⁴⁴ Lofton, "Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms," 407.

disposition in short was diabolical. His influence amongst the Africans was inconceivable.⁴⁵ Though his master regarded him as a “skillful and obedient slave” Jack, like Vesey, disdained the white population and was considered by many in the black community as an African Priest of “great power and magic.”⁴⁶

Gullah Jack, like Vesey, found small ways of resisting white-society even while in bondage. This included growing out his beard, which was discouraged by the overseers as well as continuing his practice of West African mysticism. Both these acts, though not illegal, defied the conventions of authority while impressing his fellow slaves.⁴⁷ Jack would also act as a divine clairvoyant, providing readings of the future as well as charms of protection. This built him a large following in the areas outside of Charleston. For this reason, Vesey saw him as potential recruiter for his movement.

Many historians suggest that Vesey, as he began to consider an exodus from Charleston, “consciously used Jack Pritchard to reach the African plantation constituency, while he himself used the AME Church to reach the more assimilated urban Creole population.”⁴⁸ Gullah Jack was more than willing to be part of Vesey’s plan of insurrection. And to Jack and Vesey, no dichotomy existed between their two distinctive faiths. As far as Vesey was concerned, the Old Testament had many points of convergence with African religious tradition. The miracles of the Old Testament that aided Jehovah’s chosen people were congruent with the conjuring and charms done by Gullah Jack. Those who were at first hesitant with the idea of rebellion became more at ease with the idea knowing God would aid them through Vesey’s promise of miracles to be performed by Jack. The numbers of those willing to take part in the plan rose steeply to several thousand.

By the summer of 1822, Vesey’s plan to lead a mass exodus was in place. The plan involved a series of couriers passing segments of vital information to different parts of the city. Several Negro artisans and blacksmiths who were part of the conspiracy provided guns, ammunition, pikes, ropes, and food. Through the secret meetings that brought together members of the AME Church, as well as recruiters like Gullah Jack who provided a mass fighting force, a date of insurrection was set for July 14. Vesey’s plan, in accordance to the stories of the Old Testament, envisaged the annihilation of the white population of Charleston followed by the incineration of its buildings. It was also reported that Vesey, who had still been in contact with officials from the recently liberated Haiti, would “take every vessel in the harbor, kill every man on board except its captains, seize goods in the stores and money from the banks and set sail for [Saint Domingue].”⁴⁹ Vesey believed that as God had delivered the Jews from Egypt so He would liberate the Negroes of Charleston. But with a scheme this convoluted, it eventually leaked to the authorities.

The date of the outbreak was set for July 14, a Sunday, because on that day it was “customary for many slaves to enter the city. Hence they would not be molested by the patrols when they came for the pre-insurrection rendezvous.”⁵⁰ A summer month was also chosen because at this time, many whites left the city and their plantations for resorts that promised cooler weather. This made it easier for those who were part of Vesey’s plan to escape the estates and ransack the city. However, with thousands of participants the risk of information leaking was high. By the end of May, two slaves, George Wilson and Joe LaRoche, who were recruited for the rebellion, felt that

⁴⁵ Hamilton, *Negro Plot*, 38.

⁴⁶ Egerton, “Building The House of The Lord,” In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 119.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁹ Lofton, “Denmark Vesey’s Call to Arms,” 408.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 409.

“God decried such upheavals”⁵¹ and informed their master of Vesey’s plan which led to a citywide panic.

Knowing that this leak in the plot could be their downfall, Vesey and his conspirators moved the date of the rebellion from July 14 to June 16, but to no avail. By the order of the Governor, the city’s militia convened in areas through the city, even employing blacks to acts as spies to find who was operating as a conspirator.⁵² Within the week, the main conspirators, Peter Poyas, Rolla, and Gullah Jack were arrested, followed by Vesey a few days later. By the last week of June, the key collaborators, as well as dozens of others were arrested and brought before the court.

Following the advice of Peter Poyas who said “Die silent, as you shall see me do,”⁵³ Vesey and the main conspirators did not provide any testimony against those involved in the plot. Vesey, sat with his arms folded, his eyes fixed on the floor, and listened closely to the evidence offered against him. Representing himself, he cross-examined several witnesses that left many in the courtroom in awe of his ability to command a room.⁵⁴ But despite his attempt at waging a defense, fifty-five year old Denmark Vesey was found guilty as “the author, and original instigator of [the] diabolical plot” that was designed to “trample on all the laws, human and divine, to riot in blood., outrage, rapine and conflagration , and to induce anarchy and confusion in their most horrid forms.”⁵⁵ For his crimes, he was sentenced to hang.

On July 2, 1822 the key instigators of the plot were hanged, ending any hope the blacks of Charleston had of becoming free. Over the remainder of the summer, 131 Negroes were arrested, 35 were hanged (the majority of which happened on July 26), and 43 were transported out of the state. Fifty-three cases were eventually dismissed.⁵⁶ The white population was in a frenzy over what could have been the worst slave rebellion in the nation’s history. Despite the fact that word of the thwarted rebellion had reached the Monrovia White House and Secretary of War, James C. Calhoun ordered federal troops to Charleston, the population still did not feel safe. News outlets like the Charleston *Courier* fueled the fire by writing editorials designed to keep the public in a state of panic. By the end of the year, after the trials had ended, Charleston Governor, Thomas Bennet, (whose slave, Rolla, had also been executed for his role in the conspiracy)⁵⁷ knew that policy would have to change in order to give the people of South Carolina peace of mind.

What separated Vesey’s failed slave rebellion from the countless others was the size and scope of the plot as well as the ramifications it had on public policy in the South. In his last year of office, Bennet did what he could to quell the fears felt by those in his state. Besides cracking down on unsupervised meetings between slaves, the officials of Charleston decided it best to close down the AME Churches and burn the buildings to the ground.⁵⁸ The state legislature also restricted a slave-owner’s right to free his slaves by requiring that both houses of the legislature approve each act of manumission. This made it almost impossible for slaves to gain freedom, even in cases where an individual or family member could pay a purchase price. The state legislature also restricted the movement of blacks by requiring them to have a documented white “guardian” vouch for his or her character. Also, any slaves that left the state for any reason were not allowed to return.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Egerton, "Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology," 307.

⁵² Lofton, "Denmark Vesey's Call to Arms," 414.

⁵³ Lofton, "Negro Insurrectionist,"193.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Egerton, "Appendix; The Charleston Hanged," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 229.

⁵⁷ "An Account of the Intended Insurrection among a Portion of Blacks in Charleston," *August Chronicle*, September 5, 1822.

⁵⁸ Egerton, "The Temple Finished 1822-1865," In *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 221.

⁵⁹ Lofton, "Negro Insurrectionist,"194.

Out of fears that slaves were in contact with liberated-slave-countries like Saint Domingue, the Negro Seamen Act was passed in to law in 1822. It required that free Negroes on any vessel, which might come to South Carolina, be imprisoned until the vessel was ready to depart and that the captain of the ship pay the expenses of detaining his employees and take them away from the state upon leaving; otherwise they would be deemed “absolute slaves” and sold.⁶⁰ The act was eventually ruled unconstitutional in Federal Court, as it violated international treaties between the United States and Britain. The ability of South Carolina to imprison free black sailors became one of the issues in the confrontation revolving around the Tenth Amendment and Federalism between the State and the Federal government.⁶¹ But even as the paranoia of a Negro uprising began to diminish in the South, Vesey and his rebellion were not forgotten in the black communities.

For a brief time in 1822, thousands of slaves believed that God was to deliver them from their suffering. For a fleeting instance in their lives, those who felt they had nothing to live for saw a momentary shimmer of hope. Though the plot failed, the dream of Vesey and his conspirators did not die in vain. For the next four decades, numerous slave uprisings occurred throughout the region. The most famous of which was Nat Turner’s who in 1831, led 70 enslaved blacks in a mutiny against their white masters and their families. Turner, who was captured and executed for his crimes, knew of Vesey’s plot and was inspired enough by him to risk his life to keep the dream of freedom alive.⁶²

In 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, just as blacks were finally at the cusp of becoming free, Frederick Douglass, a former slave and advocate for the abolitionist movement, wrote an article titled *Men of Color To Arms*. In it he called for former slaves to join the Union Army and “Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston” and “to end in a day the bondage of centuries, and to rise in one bound from social degradation to the plane of common equality with all other varieties of men.”⁶³

Though many saw Vesey’s dream of freeing the blacks of Charleston as noble, there are those who condemned the way in which he planned and hoped to achieve his ambitions. It must be remembered that Vesey, in order to free his people, had no other way to do so except by force. In the early 1800s, there was no outlet for blacks to voice their opinions. During the era of slavery, men like Vesey, even when free, were considered second-class citizens whose opinion did not matter to the white authority. To commit a violent act in order to harbor change was to Vesey, the only logical way to accomplish what he wanted. His upbringing as a slave who witnessed the atrocities that came from living in bondage shaped the ideologies that eventually cumulated with his plot of rebellion. Using the AME Church as an outlet to gain support from freemen and slaves alike, Denmark Vesey, an imperfect man living in a merciless environment, inspired multitudes of people to do what they have never done before, to hope.

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⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ William H. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854*, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 253-270.

⁶² Gabriel. "From Haiti to Nat Turner: Racial Panic Discourse during the Nineteenth Century Partisan Press Era."

⁶³ Frederick Douglass, "Men of Color to Arms!," March 21, 1863.

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