



The Virgin Islands Cultural Education Notebook

Denmark Vesey

Edition 3



Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education



Denmark Vesey




Researchers state that Denmark Vesey was born in 1767, probably on St. Thomas, Danish West Indies. Denmark Vesey was transported from St. Thomas to Cap-Français, Saint-Domingue (present-day Cap-Haïtien, Haiti). Denmark assumed his slave owner's, Captain Joseph Vesey of Bermuda, last name. Vesey accompanied Captain Vesey on numerous voyages. In 1783, the Captain and Denmark settled in Charleston, South Carolina. Denmark spent time in Saint Domingue and was familiar with Haiti's revolutionary spirit. While working as a carpenter, Denmark read anti-slavery literature and followed reports of the Haitian slave revolt of the 1790s.




Native Taino and Ciboney people of Hispanola (the present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti) were enslaved by the Spanish Empire shortly after Italian navigator Christopher Columbus sighted the island in 1492. The island's indigenous population were forced to mine for gold and were ravaged by European diseases and brutal working conditions. According to scholarly contributors, by the end of the 16th century, the Taino and Ciboney people virtually vanished. Thousands of African slaves were then imported by French colonizers, but the enslaved revolted in what is called the Haitian Revolution, 1791 - 1804.



A bronze statue of Denmark Vesey stands in a park-like setting with trees in the background. He is depicted in a dark suit, holding a book or document in his left hand.

According to the Encyclopedia of Race and Racism, on September 30th, 1799, Denmark happened upon a handbill announcing the "East-Bay Lottery." Denmark bought a ticket and won the top prize of \$1,500, a princely sum at the time, particularly for a slave." Denmark was allowed to purchase his freedom from the winnings of the lottery. At the age of thirty-three on December 31st, 1799, Denmark became a free man.

A black and white photograph of Denmark Vesey and his family. Vesey stands in the center, wearing a light-colored suit and a dark vest. To his left is a woman, and to his right is another woman holding a child. In the foreground, there are two more children.

Denmark Vesey was part of the Charleston Methodist Church but left the fraction when whites in Charleston discovered that black Methodist had been secretly pooling money to buy freedom for enslaved congregants, which they opposed. Vesey joined the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church, also known as the A.M.E. Church in 1817.

Vesey became a leader in the black Charleston Methodist Church and was documented to have entertained small groups in his home during the week. Vesey taught radical new liberation theology of the day. Vesey reportedly spoke only from the Old Testament and quoted scriptures from the Book of Exodus telling congregates that they were the new Israelites, whom God would lead to freedom. Vesey's closest friends: Peter Poyas, a literate ship carpenter; Monday Gell, an African-born Ibo who labored as a harness maker; Rolla Bennett, the manservant of Charleston Governor Thomas Bennett; and "Gullah" Jack Pritchard, an East African priest and woodworker purchased in Zinguebar, Africa, joined the A.M.E the church as well.



Vesey enlisted Gullah Jack to help aid his rebellion and free Charleston slaves. Gullah Jack was an Angolan priest and healer whom the enslaved community revered. In 1822, Vesey and other leaders from the African Methodist Episcopal Church began plotting their rebellion.



Even as a freeman, Vesey was unsatisfied with people of color's oppressive conditions. Vesey planned and organized an uprising of cities and plantations. The plan reportedly called for the rebels to attack guardhouses and arsenals, seize their arms, burn and destroy the city, and free the slaves. Research indicates that Vesey knew that neighboring towns would retaliate and thus planned for freed slaves to flee to Haiti. Historians differ on the number of slaves and freed people involved, but many estimate that 6,000 - 9,000 enslaved persons planned to participate. At the time, Charleston alone was home to 12,652 slaves.

Two slaves betrayed Vesey in June 1822 who revealed the rebellions plan to their owners. A Charleston Mayor called up the city militia and captured Vesey on June 2nd. Vesey was hanged on July 2nd, along with 35 torchbearers.



The Charleston African Methodist Episcopal Church was targeted and burned down that same year because authorities suspected the church was the meeting place for planning the rebellion.

When all black churches were outlawed in 1834, the congregation notes the AME church worshiped underground until 1865, when it was formally reorganized. The name Emanuel AME Church was adopted.

Legacy of Denmark Vesey and the A.M.E Church

Rev. Morris Brown, the founder of the Charleston African Methodist Episcopal Church was imprisoned for many months after Denmark's revolt to free enslaved persons in Charleston was uncovered. Brown was not convicted of any crime and was released; however, when Brown was released, he and several other prominent members of the Charleston African Methodist Episcopal Church fled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The Charleston African Methodist Episcopal Church, which became known as the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church became a focal point again in the The 1950s and 1960s, when black leaders used it as a rallying point in the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech at the church in April 1962, urging the black community to register and vote in elections.



International Outcry

In June of 2015, Dylann Roof walked into Mother Emmanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina, sat down in a prayer circle, listened to the parishioners for an hour, and then shot nine of them to death. The killings were investigated by state and federal law, which found. Dylan Roof left a manifesto detailing his racist views on a website before shooting the members. Roof confessed that he committed the shooting to ignite a race war.



Legacy of Denmark Vesey and the A.M.E Church Continued

Muhiyidin El Amin Moyeto was a noted Black Lives Matter activist and stated in an interview that Denmark Vesey inspired him. Moyeto grew up in Hollywood, South Carolina, and also attended the University of South Carolina. Moyeto was involved in public debates and protested police brutality in South Carolina. He gained notoriety in 2017 when he crossed police lines to take down an oversized Confederate battle flag at a protest. Moyeto lost his life in 2018 in New Orleans when he reportedly was shot during a bicycle robbery while he was riding. Watch Interview at Link address: <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/680225347655/>

Song Selection



My youth, stay focussed, stand firm
Don't be anxious, stand firm
Be instructed, stand firm
'Cause liberation is my only concern

My youth, be courageous, stand firm
Be a warrior, stand firm
Break the barriers, stand firm
'Cause liberation is my only concern

DENMARK VESEY'S BAR



WHITE STAR HOTEL

Denmark Vesey in Film

Lovecraft Country is an American horror drama television series. The African American main characters traverse across the U.S. in the 1950s during the Jim Crow era. Jim Crow (institutionalized racial segregation in the U.S. South from the end of Reconstruction to the mid-20th century). Lovecraft Country's characters often met in fictional Denmark Vesey bar in Chicago. The bar is a haven for artists and activists in the black Chicago community. Denmark Vesey's legacy is immortalized in the award-winning television series.



In 2014, a monument dedicated to Denmark Vesey as a carpenter and holding a Bible drew large crowds to Hampton Park in Charleston, South Carolina. The monument's design was commissioned to sculptor Ed Dwight.