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PEOPLE OF FAITH: Denmark Vesey ▶



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Denmark Vesey



“ He then 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. ”

-- Testimony of Rolla, belonging to Thomas Bennett, recorded in the Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822

In 1771, fourteen-year-old Denmark Vesey was transported from St. Thomas to Cape Francais by slave trader Captain Joseph Vesey. Upon a return trip to Cape Francais, Captain Vesey was forced to reclaim Denmark, who his master said was suffering from epileptic fits. Denmark accompanied Captain Vesey on his trading voyages until the Captain retired to Charleston, never again showing signs of epilepsy.

In 1799, Vesey won the lottery and bought his freedom for \$600. He could not purchase the freedom of his wife and children, however, and some claimed that this fact motivated his crusade to destroy the institution of slavery.

Vesey joined the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1817. He became a "class leader," preaching to a small group in his home during the week. White Charlestonians constantly monitored the African church, disrupting services and arresting members. An angry Vesey began preaching from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus, and taught followers that they were the New Israelites, the chosen people whose enslavement God would punish with death.

In 1822, Vesey and other leaders from the African Church began plotting a rebellion. His chief lieutenant was an East African priest named Gullah Jack, who led conspirators in prayer and rituals and gave them amulets to protect them in battle. Vesey's theology of liberation, combined with Gullah Jack's African mysticism, inspired potential participants, and word of the rebellion grew. Vesey set the date for revolt on July 14, and men from Charleston and surrounding plantations planned to seize Charleston's arsenals and guard houses, kill the Governor, set fire to the city, and kill every white man they saw. But in June, several nervous slaves leaked the plot to their masters, and Charleston authorities began arresting leaders. Vesey was captured on June 22, and he and the conspirators were brought to trial. Despite torture and the threat of execution, the men refused to give up their followers. On July 2nd, Denmark Vesey and five other men were hanged. Gullah Jack was executed several days later, with the total number of executions reaching 35 by August 9th.

In the aftermath of the Vesey rebellion, the African Church was burned down and authorities passed a series of

laws further restricting the rights of Charleston slaves. Vesey became a martyr for African-Americans and a symbol for the abolitionist movement, while the increasingly militant politics of white America dragged the country toward Civil War.

“At almost every meeting, it was said, Vesey or one of his comrades ‘read to us from the Bible, how the children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage.’ That theme was struck insistently: the deliverance from Egypt, the movement of God among his captive people. (No wonder, then, that in some black tradition it was said that Vesey or his fellows were the inspiration for the ageless black song of faith and struggle, ‘Go Down, Moses’...)”

-- Vincent Harding, *There is a River*

KEY MOMENTS OF FAITH

VESEY LEAVES THE WHITE CHURCH

In 1815, whites in Charleston discovered that black Methodists had been secretly pooling money to buy freedom for enslaved congregants. Whites moved to restrict black autonomy. They planned to construct a hearse house on top of a black burial ground, a move Charleston blacks saw as a final insult. Over 4,000 black members left white churches in protest, and formed an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Denmark Vesey followed them, leaving the segregated Second Presbyterian Church, where slaves were taught the words of St. Paul: "Servants, obey your masters." In the AME Church, Vesey found the freedom to preach his beliefs.

PLANNING A REBELLION

At weekly AME "class meetings" held in his home, Vesey taught a radical new liberation theology. He spoke only from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus, casting his followers as the new Israelites, whom God would lead to freedom. In 1818, white authorities disrupted an AME service attended by free black ministers from Philadelphia and arrested 140 people. Vesey considered leaving Charleston for Africa, but he decided to stay and "see what he could do for his fellow creatures." With a new urgency, he preached that freedom for slaves would be realized, and he began plotting a rebellion.

VESEY ENLISTS AN AFRICAN PRIEST

Following the 1818 raid on the African Church, Vesey enlisted Gullah Jack, a Church member and an Angolan priest and healer, to recruit native Africans to join his rebellion. As a conjurer who could control the supernatural world, Jack was respected among the slaves working on Charleston's plantations. At secret nighttime meetings, Jack led men in prayer, singing and ritual meals that transformed them from powerless slaves to rebels with a common purpose. He prescribed a special diet and gave them crab claws as amulets to protect them in battle. Through Jack, Vesey was able to reach many more recruits.

BETRAYED BY A CHRISTIAN

Like Denmark Vesey, George Wilson was a class leader in the AME Church, but he followed the Christian doctrine of loving one's neighbor, and was devoted to his master. When fellow slave Rolla Bennett told him of the rebellion, Wilson pleaded with him "to let it alone." Five sleepless nights later, on June 14, Wilson told his master of the plot, confirming the confession of another man and leading to the arrest and execution of Rolla Bennett and his conspirators. Although he was granted his freedom as a reward, Wilson eventually lost his sanity and committed suicide.

BEYOND THE GRAVE

After the executions of Denmark Vesey and 34 others, Charleston authorities exiled the African Church leaders and razed the building. Although devastated by the destruction of their church, black Charlestonians continued

to honor Vesey's revolutionary Old Testament theology in secret. For abolitionists such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Vesey became a symbol of resistance and an inspiration in their writings. White Charleston responded by increasing efforts to convert slaves to New Testament Christianity, and by passing legislation to further restrict the rights of slaves. This increasingly militant path eventually led to the Civil War.

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