Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot That Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter

John Lofton

Peter C. Hoffer

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TO FORT SUMTER
John Lofton
New Introduction by Peter Charles Hoffer
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THE KENT STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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NEW INTRODUCTION

THE RETURN OF DENMARK VESEY

The Civil Rights movement spurred a revolution in the writing of American history, particularly on the history of blacks in the South. To be sure, there were precedents. W. E. B. DuBois was a historian as well as a sociologist, and his 1915 *The Negro* was a work of scholarship as well as advocacy for African Americans’ rights. Carter G. Woodson earned a Ph.D. in history from Harvard in 1912 and was the founding editor of the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916 and a decade later introduced Negro History Week (expanded to Black History Month in 1976). John Hope Franklin, born the year that *The Negro* was published, began his storied career in the 1940s with the publication of *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1780–1860* (1943). But the 1960s saw the beginning of a surge of young black men and women entering the historical profession. With them came the publication of a history in which people of color were not only victims but agents and heroes of their own stories. Men of color who as late as the 1930s were dismissed as ignorant or bestial in racist historical accounts were restored to their rightful place as spokesmen for an oppressed people.¹

Nothing so oppressed people of color in America as chattel slavery. In the 1950s, a new generation of scholars, led by Franklin and Kenneth M. Stampp, denounced the moon and magnolias school of slave histories for what they were, a myth, and reminded readers of the harshness of slavery. In the 1970s, black scholars like John W. Blassingame joined white scholars like Eugene D. Genovese to recreate the cultural world the slaves made. They explored the many ways in which slaves resisted their bondage. Earlier studies such as Herbert Aptheker’s 1939 classic account of American slave revolts were reprinted and taken seriously.²

In this “peculiar institution” men and women were regarded by law as pieces of personal property, with no rights as people, none, according to one Chief Justice of the United States, “which the white man was bound to respect.” Slave codes based on English West Indian
colonial law denied slaves any semblance of legal personhood. They could be sold, given away, inherited, used to pay debts, rented out or leased, and moved about like any other pieces of personal property. They could not sue, serve on juries, make contracts, own, acquire or dispose of property of their own, legally marry, raise their children, and in some states learn to read or write. They could not carry firearms, travel, nor congregate without passes from their masters or under white supervision. Masters who wanted to free slaves had to remove them from the slave states.

Not all of these laws were enforced to the letter, for the slavery system was above all a labor system, and the slaves’ labor could only be fully exploited if slaves were allowed to hunt, fish, cultivate their own gardens, go to market, sell their own crafts, and otherwise participate in commercial activities for their own benefit—at least according to law. In the case of South Carolina, such contradictions twisted the laws every which way. For much of its colonial existence, and the better part of the antebellum period, South Carolina had a black majority, and its laws, modeled on those of the British Sugar Islands in the Caribbean, were harsh. But when some South Carolina legislators wanted to mandate the execution of runaway slaves, the majority of the Commons House demurred. Was that because a runaway was still a valuable piece of property, or because masters and slaves knew that many runaways simply ran from a cruel new owner back to a decent former master? Why require that slave fishermen pay for a license when slaves were not allowed to own boats? Was it because slave fishermen were very able, and fish plentiful in the creeks, rivers, and along the ocean shore? The Assemblymen refused to deny to slaves the practice of going to market for their masters, whatever liberties this allowed the slave to trade on the side for himself.³

Indeed, no state was more wedded to the institution of slavery than South Carolina. Its rice and later cotton crops were great prizes in the Atlantic market, but without slaves, Carolina’s coastal wetlands would never have been profitable enough to merit cultivation. With slaves, no planter ever rested wholly secure in his bed. South Carolina slavery has drawn to itself some of the finest studies of slavery in the post–Civil Rights era: Peter H. Wood’s pathbreaking study of African influences on low country slavery; Peter A.
Coclanis’s lyrical reimagining of life on the rice plantations; Robert Olwell’s insightful analysis of the political ideology of slavery and mastery; Philip H. Morgan’s comprehensive comparison of rice country slavery with slavery in the Chesapeake; S. Max Edelson’s study of the economics of the slave plantation; and J. William Harris’s poignant tale of a free black ship captain executed on the eve of the American Revolution—despite the intercession of the royal governor.

Slaves were present in all of the British North American colonial cities, and although state gradual emancipation laws ended slavery in Boston, Newport, New York City, and Philadelphia, slaves abounded in the southern cities of the early republic, especially port cities like Baltimore, Norfolk, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans. No city had more slaves per capita, and no slaves were more visible than those of antebellum Charleston. They outnumbered whites by 63,615 to 18,768 in the Charleston district in 1800. There were slightly fewer than six hundred free blacks in the city at that time. Freedom for these men and women came with strings—their children were still slaves, as were their spouses in many cases.

Some whites did heavy labor, but they could depart the city if they chose. Slaves could not cast off their burdens so easily. They carried the bales of cotton, the barrels of rice, and the other heavy goods laden on the port’s ships. They worked as porters and carters in the city’s markets, as coachmen and draymen on its streets, and as artisans and craftsmen in its shops. They were domestics in its homes. Some dressed with colorful flair and moved about with a pride that often annoyed their white neighbors. Industrious and trusted slaves bore numbered badges naming their occupation. These were not marks of submission or bondage, but tickets to a limited kind of freedom and self-esteem. But not all masters gave their slaves such liberty, for most were viewed as idle and disorderly or worse, harborers of runaways from the fields or criminals who lurked in the dark corners of the city. Most slaves did not appreciate the occasional kindness of masters but chafed at their own bondage. Who would not feel aggrieved as they watched as auctioneers on the steps of the city hall and the cotton exchange auctioned off the members of slave families as though they were prized livestock?
For the institution of slavery itself was oppressive—it had to be, for the majority of South Carolina’s people were bound to labor and their labor was the white community’s greatest source of wealth. Whipping was not an everyday occurrence, but it happened often enough to send the message: slaves must stand in fear of the master class. It was a capital offense to offer resistance. Thus one of the classic puzzles of antebellum chattel slavery was why there were so few open rebellions in the United States—the Louisiana German Coast Uprising of 1811, the Fort Blount, Florida rebellion of 1816, the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1830—are among those documented in which actual armed conflict occurred, though in many parts of the antebellum South, including coastal South Carolina and Georgia, the black bottom lands of central Georgia and Alabama, and in the Mississippi Delta, slaves outnumbered whites. Though whites were better armed than slaves, slaves could employ everyday tools like axes and scythes as weapons, and they had access to firearms. Whites employed nightly patrols, enrolled heavily armed militias, and imposed swift and deadly punishment when rebellion was rumored. Many more slave rebellions were rumored than were punished. A few of the latter, including Gabriel’s plotted rebellion in and around Richmond, Virginia, in 1800, and the subject of the present book, Charleston’s Denmark Vesey alleged conspiracy in 1822, led to mass trials and executions of suspected plotters.6

In 1964, journalist John Lofton published a monograph on the Vesey rebellion with the Antioch Press. In many ways, he was a perfect candidate for the enterprise. According to the archivist’s biography of Lofton in the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, Lofton was born on April 11, 1919, in McClellanville, in the Low Country of South Carolina, the son of John Marion Lofton, Sr. and Vivian Lucas Lofton. He attended local schools in the town, and he graduated from the College of Charleston in 1940. He then moved to Durham, North Carolina, and earned a law degree from Duke University. Thus far, he was a son of the Old South, and he immediately gained admission to the South Carolina Bar. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and upon discharge elected not to practice law but to become a journalist. He worked for a number of smaller South Carolina newspapers and then rose to the post of associate editor of the Arkansas
Gazette in Little Rock, Arkansas. But something in him did not love what the white South in the 1950s had become, as defiant in its defense of segregation as the antebellum white South had been in defense of slavery. He moved north to work on the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, earned an M.A. in History from the University of Pittsburgh in 1956, and became an associate professor of speech at the University of Pittsburgh. He remained a newspaper man, however, and in 1975 moved on to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Along the way he published two books on freedom of the press and was awarded prizes by both journalism and legal societies. He died at Graniteville, Kansas, in 1990.

A closer inspection of the many boxes of personal and professional papers he donated to the South Caroliniana library revealed “Lofton’s involvement in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Unitarian Church, political events during the tumultuous years of racial integration and Vietnam War protests, and such related issues as the environment, disarmament, and world peace. . . . The collection reflects the progress of Lofton’s thought and interests from his formal and practical education as a boy growing up in lowcountry South Carolina to his retirement in 1985 as a senior editorial writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. . . . The correspondence series consists chiefly of personal correspondence and family correspondence revealing the love and devotion among members of a southern family despite their substantive differences with regard to social issues of integration and religion.” Lofton was a liberal Southerner growing up in a Low Country white South determined to maintain racial supremacy, and Lofton rejected this ideology without rejecting his attachment to family and friends. He left Charleston because he wanted to and he could, unlike Denmark Vesey, whose freedom was never complete enough for him to travel, for all his children were slaves. But part of Lofton remained in Charleston, and that part gave rise to his first major work, a history of the Vesey rebellion. His sympathy for the slaves and the free blacks was evident, as unusual in a white southerner of his background as it was integral to the character of the author.7

John Lofton’s 1964 monograph on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy trial of 1822 was a pioneering work on a subject that had become very important. A brief review in the *New York Times* called
Lofton thanked archivists in Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina, where the records were then kept (they are now in the library at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in their new site outside of Columbia). He had done due diligence in the collections, tracking the voyages of young Vesey in the Caribbean and Vesey’s purchase of his freedom in Charleston. Where the records were scant, Lofton filled in likely details about the life of Denmark Vesey. Like a good journalist, he knew that Vesey must remain at the center of the story.

Lofton had assumed, along with the prosecuting magistrates in Charleston, that Vesey was the ringleader of the plot. Lofton found no reason to doubt that assumption, particularly in light of the testimony of many defendants that Vesey led them. As a trained lawyer, Lofton knew that such collaborators’ testimony must never be taken at face value. The trials were held in secret, and the newspapers were circumspect in their coverage. The white population of the city exchanged rumors and slaves in the streets were abused and threatened. In this atmosphere, one could hardly call the trials fair. But the preponderance of the evidence taken by the magistrates convinced Lofton of Vesey’s and his comrades’ guilt.

But even as balanced an account as Lofton’s did not appease Charleston’s segregated press. As Lofton wrote in the preface to the reprinting, segregationist reviewers of his work decried any defense of Vesey. By contrast, the NAACP and the black press regarded Vesey as a long-neglected hero. Clearly, the book had stirred controversy, but that did not disturb Lofton. He was rightly proud that he had brought Vesey and the affair back from obscurity.

But even as the book was appearing, historian Richard C. Wade was challenging his colleagues to show that the haste and pitilessness of the interrogations and trials were not actually proof that Charleston’s elite had fabricated the entire plot. Wade’s seminal article on the alleged revolt found much in the two sets of manuscript testimony taken at the time, followed by the two published accounts of the trials, that seemed coerced. He asked if there were ever really a plot, or had some other more sinister plan been concealed behind the show trials?
Lofton’s 1983 preface gave Wade’s hard work the credit it was due, but Lofton was not persuaded that the magistrates had either been misled by what slaves had told them or deliberately invented the conspiracy. Lofton found support for his own view that the conspiracy existed in the work of William Freehling, a leading student of antebellum South Carolina politics. Freehling believed that the slaves had indeed plotted to set themselves free, in the course of which they would gain some measure of revenge on their masters. By 1983 the way seemed clear for historians to see in Vesey’s story proof that free blacks and slaves could rise up against an oppressive regime. Sixteen years later, Edward Pearson, Douglas Egerton, and David Robertson would publish their own accounts, each one heroicizing Vesey far more than the more circumspect Lofton.¹¹

But the wheel of controversy was still turning. In 1999, Johns Hopkins historian Michael Johnson accepted an assignment to write a review essay of Pearson’s, Robertson’s, and Egerton’s books for the *William and Mary Quarterly*. In 2001, that essay appeared. Johnson found from the three authors that Vesey was “a bold insurrectionist determined to free his people or die trying,” in the process claiming “the human rights” including the right to rebel were “monopolized by whites.” But Johnson was not convinced. There were problems with this interpretation on its face, for Vesey was free, not a slave, a city man, not the leader of field hands, a religious man who worshiped in church, not a fanatic who preached in the fields, and perhaps most important, a man who never confessed to anything like the plot he was accused of planning. Nor was there any evidence of a single act—the gathering of men or firearms for example—in furtherance of the rebellion. To Johnson, it began to seem like smoke blown in front of mirrors, and historians who took the record of confessions seriously “failed to exercise due caution in reading the testimony.”¹²

Johnson was not the first one to raise a red flag about the resurrection of the rebels. Albert J. von Frank, a historian of literature who published on slavery, lamented “a distinctly uncritical, even hagiographical coloring to the narrative,” which, in Egerton and Robinson especially, seems an effect of choosing to regard the 1822 plot as the dramatic denouement of Vesey’s life. Von Frank was similarly
critical about Pearson’s edition of the texts. “Stunningly, Pearson has hit upon almost the only way of stripping this text of its usefulness: He decides to supplement the manuscript material by selectively mingling passages from the published version—as though his two sources are in no sort of conflict but homogeneously tell the same story. Since the order of the trials and the order of witnesses within trials vary considerably between the two accounts, the mixing of the texts results in a maximum of confusion.”

To von Frank’s general concerns, Johnson added a close reading of the Pearson edition. When it was published in 1999, Pearson’s *Designs Against Charleston* drew praise from all quarters. James Sidbury’s, Winthrop Jordan’s, Graham Hodges’, and other reviews in the major scholarly journals lauded his editing of the trial records and praised his defense of Vesey’s intentions. But Johnson, after reading the original documents, found that Pearson had not only conflated the various accounts, taking pieces from one or another and inserting them into his single version of the trial record, he had also made so many errors—over five thousand discrepancies including added words, omitted words, and misspelled words—in his transcription that his publisher ceased to distribute the book and destroyed its stock. Pearson was aggressively unrepentant, retorting that “In fact, Johnson’s article should not be regarded as a review essay as such—commonly characterized by a balanced discussion of the arguments advanced, the issues illuminated or obscured, the questions answered and raised, along with some comments on the works’ overall merits and failures—as his central premise is that these books are so flawed and their authors’ interpretative and historical skills so limited and naive, that they have very little merit” and conceding only that “In his condemnation of my work, however, Johnson is half right. I plead guilty to his charge that my transcription of the trial record is deeply flawed. He is correct, therefore, to alert the historical community to its unreliability as a source, providing overwhelming evidence about material inadvertently introduced or omitted in my version. Moreover, Johnson’s discussion of the trial record effectively demonstrates the ways in which I inadvertently corrupted the document.”

Johnson had done more than strike a blow for reliable historical editing. He had questioned the very foundation of the ac-
count: he argued that there was no conspiracy, save that among the mayor, James Hamilton, and his political cronies, to embarrass the governor, Thomas Bennett, and his circle. It was all white politics, in which the slaves were doubly victimized. Once again they were pawns rather than players. A great deal more than the reliability of an edition of a historical record was thus at stake. Were slaves accused of plotting their own freedom ever really able to rise up? Was their manhood always so curbed and constrained by slavery that they never thought of its alternative? Or, by contrast, were they always plotting rebellion, waiting for the right moment, fearing that one of their number would (as so often happened) reveal the plot to authorities?\footnote{15}

While the facts of the precipitating events remain in dispute, the facts of the aftermath of accusation and inquisition are clear. Over 100 slaves were tried for the crime of petty treason (mislabeled treason in some of the contemporary accounts, as well as some of the modern histories—petty treason was the killing or conspiracy to kill a servant’s master, a slave’s owner, or a wife’s husband), by two “freeholder’s courts” (composed of two magistrates and three propertied white males). Many confessed, but others pleaded not guilty. Some testified against others. Some remained silent. Thirty-five of the slaves were hanged of the sixty-seven blacks who were convicted, forty-one were banished (including a number of the slaves acquitted of the charges). Four whites were convicted at regular trials, but there was no jury for the slaves—juries were not impaneled for slaves accused of crimes. The bench was the trier of fact as well as the judge of law. The governor was not convinced of the participation of his own slaves (though he did not doubt the existence of a conspiracy), and he hired counsel to defend them, to no avail. Four of the governor’s slaves, including his trusted butler, were among those jailed, interrogated, and executed. Two of the magistrates published an account of the affair, as did the mayor, somewhat later in the year. All of the accounts quoted the slaves’ testimony that a plot was underway. Details of the plot elicited under coercive means confirmed the magistrates’ worst fears. The slaves were not only ungrateful for their relatively benign treatment in the city (as opposed to the labor required of slaves on the rice plantations), they were positively wicked.\footnote{16}
Vesey had a white lawyer to represent him, but his cross-examination of the witnesses failed to convince the court of his innocence. In his case, as in the others, the traditional requirement that the prosecution bear the burden of proving guilt, and that the accused was innocent until proven guilty, were reversed. Apparently the slaves were assumed to be guilty, and they had to show that they did not take part in this particular conspiracy. Why was that?

The magistrates believed that slaves were always conspiring to mitigate the malign effects of their bondage. They hid, argued, malingered, negotiated, ran away, broke tools, lied, and stole. The law made mere words a crime if slaves uttered them to one another. For the slave code of South Carolina defined a criminal conspiracy as any two or more slaves discussing committing a crime. The crime could be stealing chickens, breaking into a dwelling to sleep, or something more serious, like arson or homicide. If the victim of the crime was a white person, the offense was petty treason. Slaves quietly discussed such offenses among themselves all the time. So too did gangs of white persons who stole, fenced stolen goods, and committed other violations of the law. But the makers of the slave code feared slave criminal conversations because they might entail rebellion.¹⁷

How is the historian to sort out all of this? One might simply take the evidence the magistrates gathered at face value. Some of it might be coerced. Some of it might be exaggerated for spite (against other slaves) or anger (against masters). This is the course that Pearson, Egerton, and others argued in response to Johnson’s critique of the surviving documents. Where there is enough smoke there must be some fire. No act in furtherance of the conspiracy need have been undertaken, unlike modern criminal conspiracy law. Thus at any time in the slave communities of the antebellum South there were thousands of potential cases.

The issue then becomes why the authorities would decide to take such criminal conversations seriously—seriously enough to take testimony, hold trials, execute valuable slaves, and put the entire city in a state of panic. Here is where Johnson’s alternative to the slave conspiracy—a conspiracy by elements of the white power structure against the governor and his clique—might overlap the slaves’ own conspiracy. One might argue that the affair occurred when it did because of the overlap between the two conspiracies,
new introduction

an explanation which would accommodate both sides. Even if Hamilton and others precipitated the crisis for their own reasons, it would not preclude the slaves and Vesey from colluding.

The key to this interpretation lies in events beyond the boundaries of the city. The bitter debate over the admission of Missouri as a slave state had roiled Congress for nearly two years. During the controversy, southern representatives warned that rivers of blood would flow if Congress acted to curtail the expansion of slavery. The same external triggering mechanism led to other cases, for example on the Mississippi Delta's Second Creek district at the onset of the Civil War. Slaves who had heard about the hostilities then became objects of heightened scrutiny, and perhaps scapegoats.¹⁸

To conclude: there are three ways to tell the story of Vesey’s rebellion, and all revolve around this most elusive of men. The first, the story in Egerton, Robertson, and Pearson, is a tale of a people who rose up to plot their own freedom, led by a man of courage, faith, and vision, an unwilling if not unwitting victim of his own yearning for his people’s freedom. In this story, Vesey’s own life becomes a vital clue to the conspiracy. For he had gained his freedom, was part of the establishment of a black Baptist church in the city, and though free, was trusted by many of the slaves. His involvement was voluntary, a stroke against the system that denied to black men their most basic rights. As Egerton characterized this Vesey, he was a preacher of a “radical theology” of revolution through violent upheaval, a man who did not shy away from bloodletting in the cause of liberation, a man who believed that Jehovah would protect him and his people as he led them out of bondage.¹⁹

The second story is that of a man and his acquaintances victimized by the system he had seemingly surmounted, as unscrupulous and as vicious as white politicians made him and his friends the pawns in their contest for power. Here Vesey becomes not the protagonist but another victim. This is Michael Johnson’s Vesey: “instead of an insurrectionist, perhaps Vesey was a fall guy for both the court and the witnesses who testified against him,” an easy target because he was the best known of the black freedmen, a religious heretic, and a dangerous man. He “spoke truths” about the evils of slavery, frightening whites and compliant blacks, and thus an almost too easy victim of “collusion” among whites eager to suppress the hint of black resistance, and blacks cowed into cooperation.²⁰
The third story is the one that I think is the most viable and perhaps important, the story of a set of laws that demeaned the black man and deluded the white man, so persistently and so profoundly that candor, decency, and justice would always be victims. This is Lofton’s story, judging Vesey a man who had “a dual impact” on the history of slavery, on the one hand convincing some lawmakers that the only defense of slavery lay in an “unyielding defensive stance” in defiance of all efforts to end slavery, and on the other, inspiring those who opposed slavery. It is this story that requires us to read Lofton once again.\

For whether inspired by Vesey or not, some slaves did actually intend to raise rebellion. They were aided and abetted by abolitionists who did know about Vesey, and they added the executions in Charleston to the long list of slavery’s atrocities. Men like John Brown of Kansas were more directly inspired by Vesey than the slaves who stood on the wharves at Charleston and watched the bombardment of Ft. Sumter that humid morning of April 17, 1861. Yet they would owe their liberation not to their own arms, much less to Vesey’s example, but to the resolution of a million men from places as far away as Maine and Minnesota, and to the determination of an Illinois man, Abraham Lincoln, the most reluctant of abolitionists, to win the Civil War.

Can one justify Lofton’s most important and original claim, that Vesey’s trials led to the South’s secession, the Civil War, and the end of slavery? Certainly, it would have been a very long fuse. But kept burning by Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia and rumors of rebellion thereafter, by fears of abolitionist literature falling into the wrong (slaves’) hands, and by John Brown’s raid on the Harpers Ferry arsenal in 1859, the fuse led slave owners in South Carolina to give special importance to the presidential campaign of 1860. When Lincoln and his Republican Party gained the highest office and control of Congress, South Carolina’s fears exploded and a special secession convention meeting in Charleston (coincidently not far from Denmark Vesey’s house) voted unanimously to leave the Union. When the secessionists explained their thinking, they argued that Northern agitators “have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloid the property of the citizens of other
States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection.”

What then is the final value of this reprint? Has it been so eclipsed by later works and so marginalized by the uncertainties that Wade and Johnson raised that one need not read it? The answer, I think, is quite the opposite. Of all the clamorous voices raised on the subject, from 1822 to the present, Lofton’s is one of the most sensible and measured. He came from the Low Country, but saw it and its people with the perspective that his unique experience and training enabled. Like a good historian, he had mastered the primary sources and knew how to read them critically. Like a good journalist, he had an eye for the telling detail, and he knew how to tell a cracking good story. And like a trained lawyer, he recognized that with a slave code so unfair to them, slaves had to violate it every day.

Peter Charles Hoffer
The University of Georgia

NOTES


8. Lofton, Vesey, 134.

Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter (Kent, Ohio; Kent State University Press, 1983), v.


15. Full disclosure: at the time that Johnson’s bombshell burst on the scholarly community, I was writing an account of the rumored slave uprising of 1741 in colonial New York City (later published as The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime and Colonial Law [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003]), and my readers for the press, James Henretta and Philip Morgan, both insisted that I take Johnson’s larger point seriously. I did, sharing a draft of my introduction with Johnson. In it I wrote, “with Johnson’s masterful deconstruction of the Vesey record in hand, one may well worry” about the records I relied upon to recount my story. Ibid at 6.

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

Had Denmark Vesey succeeded in carrying out in full his plan for a black slave insurrection in Charleston, S. C., in 1822, he would have wreaked terrible carnage on the community. Hence, it is not surprising that Vesey aroused strong emotions in his own time. His white judges found him guilty of “treason” and other “crimes of the blackest hue.” What is perhaps a little more surprising is that similar emotions are still evident in modern times. When this book was first published in 1964 (under the title of *Insurrection in South Carolina*), a reviewer for the *Charleston News and Courier* took the occasion to retroactively denounce abolitionists, whom he accused of fomenting “just such cruel and destructive schemes” as Vesey’s; he also excoriated abolitionists for applauding Vesey “as a martyr.”

Another commentator on the book in the same newspaper referred to “Vesey and his voo-dooed band of brigands” and chided this author for his portrayal of the circumstances that led eventually to what the reviewer called “the War of Northern Aggression (1861–65).” He also castigated the author for holding that Southerners are (in the reviewer’s words) “always the villains and Negroes the heroes.”

Taking a sharply different view, a top official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, after reading advance proofs, wrote to the publisher that he could not commend the book. “I have always thought of Denmark Vesey,” he said, “as a Negro hero and martyr; Mr. Lofton pictures him as one who unheroically disavows his principles and who was a most reluctant and unwilling martyr.” What I tried to do, of course, was to portray Vesey as neither god nor devil but as a man with those human strengths and weaknesses that were attributed to him by contemporary observers. Although it
seems to me that he emerges as a man with strong leadership qualities and a fierce determination to free his people, I leave to the reader the judgment of his character.

Was Vesey a traitor or a martyr? The answer depends on one’s perspective. In 1822 many blacks visualized Vesey’s cause as being supported by God, which meant they hardly saw their leader as a traitor. A pamphlet written by a black and published in 1850 dubbed Vesey and his followers as patriots. In a pamphlet published in 1901 by the American Negro Academy under the title, “Right on the Scaffold, or the Martyrs of 1822,” Archibald H. Grimke lauded the Vesey conspirators as heroes.

Each side in a revolutionary confrontation extols its own virtues, accepts the necessity for violence in defense of its own rights, and denounces violence on the other side. Thus, while Charleston authorities condemned Vesey for planning “to riot in blood, outrage, rapine . . . and conflagration,” they proclaimed God to be on the side of the slaveholders and consigned Vesey and thirty-four of his followers to the gallows for trampling “on all laws, human and divine.”

Although South Carolina officials in 1822 charged Vesey with being “totally insensible of the divine influence of that Gospel, ‘all whose paths are peace,’” they themselves eschewed the gospel of peace when they condoned an 1823 vigilante attack on runaway slaves in which a woman and child were killed and one of the runaways was decapitated and his head stuck on a pole and publicly exposed as a “warning to vicious slaves.”

Like the leaders of other unsuccessful revolutionary efforts, Vesey suffered the obloquies of those who suppressed his movement. On the other hand, when revolutionists win and write the history of their country, their leaders are celebrated as patriots and heroes. Thus, when slaves of St. Domingue revolted in 1791 and triumphed over their French masters, Toussaint L’Ouverture and other leaders became patriots of the new country of Haiti. In South Carolina during the Revolutionary War, rebel guerrillas, on the one hand, and supporters of the king, on the other, engaged in ferocious and indiscriminate acts of pillage, burning, and killing against each other. After the
war, the guerrillas were honored as patriots; the loyalists were ostracized as Tories. Ironically, South Carolina slaveholders, like the earlier rebels against the king, were to adopt their own modes of insurrectionary activity—in their case, against the federal government. And after their unsuccessful counterrevolution of 1861–1865, they were themselves the targets of the historical obloquies of the victors.

For obvious reasons, then, Denmark Vesey has not achieved a generally recognized status as patriot or hero. But since this book was first published in 1964, his importance has been far more generally recognized both in the historical literature (which will be dealt with further on in this comment) and in the popular media. In 1982 the Public Broadcasting Service aired nationally a ninety-minute television drama entitled “Denmark Vesey’s Rebellion.” Produced by Yanna Kroyt Brandt and directed by Stan Lathan, it attracted much favorable comment by press reviewers. An oratorio, “Denmark Vesey,” written by Waldemar Hille and Aaron Kramer, has been widely performed. At the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute of Harvard University, as this was written, composer Walter Robinson was at work on a folk opera, to be entitled “Look What a Wonder Jesus Has Done” (after an old slave hymn), based on the Vesey affair.

Even in Charleston, where the historical attitudes of victor over vanquished still flourish, Vesey has now won a significant measure of recognition. In the 1970s the city of Charleston commissioned a portrait of him. Since no likeness of Vesey survives, the picture shows him addressing a black audience, with his face featureless and seen from an oblique angle. The portrait was hung in 1976 at the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. At the ceremony at which it was put on display, Mayor Joseph P. Riley, a white, made a speech that would have been remarkable in 1964, when the new civil rights movement was just gaining momentum and was still encountering strong resistance in white Charleston and elsewhere in the South.

Mayor Riley said: “[T]his is . . . part of the effort . . . of the administration to see that parts of history hereto-
fore forgotten are remembered—because it is important that all of us have the opportunity to consider our heritage and those who came before us. And that has not been the case in these United States for a great part of our history, our black history.” The mayor added, perhaps with political wistfulness: “There have been writings of history that would attribute to Mr. Vesey actions and attempts that were not his. We should not see him as a man, as reported by some, who sought to kill, because I do not believe that was the case. . . . I find it difficult to believe his plan was to annihilate his city.” The mayor observed that Vesey should be considered in present day history “not as a person of hatred, but as a man of love, as a man of compassion, a man who was interested in righting the wrongs, a man who was free and a man who was ahead of his time.” He called upon his listeners to make the ceremony one “of white and black Charlestonians because it’s a victory when we can come together so soon after a time of such great difficulty and look back to a very dark past and see someone as a hero, who gave his life so that man may be free.”

Bishop Frank M. Reid, Jr. of the Seventh District of the AME Church responded in the same spirit as he addressed 250 black citizens and City of Charleston officials attending the unveiling. “We know who Denmark Vesey was,” he said, “and we know who we are. We know what he intended to do to them and we know what they did to him. . . . I say this is a creative moment for it recognizes that Vesey was no wild-eyed monster-minded racist. . . . He was not a black against white people. He was a liberator who God had sent to set the people free from oppression.”

Mayor Riley’s conciliatory words may have been prompted more by a desire to bring the black and white communities together—a not unlaudable objective—than by a true reading of history. Bishop Reid subtly affirmed Vesey’s harsh revolutionary purpose without departing from the conciliatory spirit of the occasion. But many white Charleston commentators were not placative. Ashley Cooper, a News and Courier columnist, wrote: “If black leaders in Charleston had searched for a
thousand years, they could not have found a local black whose portrait would have been more offensive to many white people." Several writers of letters to the paper attacked the mayor—one of them (presumably white) declaring: "If Vesey qualifies for such an honor, we should also hang the portraits of Hitler, Attila the Hun, Herod the murderer of babies. . . . " Black letter writers—including black City Councilman Robert Ford, the legislative sponsor of the portrait—defended the project and the mayor.

But the person who perhaps put the occasion in the most understandable perspective was Bobby Isaac, a black reporter for the News and Courier. He wrote: "Blacks—and understanding whites—are not honoring Vesey to upset their white neighbors. Most of us are interested in giving long overdue recognition to a man who is a true black hero. Many whites cannot appreciate black sentiments in this regard because of their tunnelled vision of history, which to them has only white heroes. . . . [R]espect for other people's history, language, religion and customs is critical."

The unveiling of the portrait in Charleston was followed soon afterward by the designation of a house, believed to have been Denmark Vesey's, as a National Historic Landmark. The comparatively small house, located at what is now 56 Bull Street, was number 20 in Vesey's time. Its landmark status was achieved through the application of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation of Washington, D.C. But a proposal to name a public school after Denmark Vesey was never acted on.

On the national scene, a flurry of attention was focused on Vesey by historians and publishers after the initial publication of this book. The historian who perhaps aroused the most discussion was Richard Wade, whose book Slavery in the Cities—The South 1820–1860. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) was published a few months after this book. Wade's book devotes some fourteen pages to the Vesey affair. Wade had addressed the same subject a little earlier in a journal article (Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," Journal of Southern History, May 1964). Wade's main conclusion in
both publications was that no conspiracy existed or that at most it was never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men on both sides (Cities, pp. 237, 241), with whites needing an insurrectionary plot to justify their suppression of blacks, and blacks needing one to prove their urge to freedom. To buttress this thesis, Wade cited: the skepticism of some top officials; the failure to discover conspirators’ records and slave caches of weapons; discrepancies in the trial record; the comparative freedom from discontent of urban slaves, which would have given them less incentive to revolt; and, finally, better policing in the city than in the country and the more nearly equal numbers of urban whites and blacks, which would have made revolt in Charleston more difficult.

Several authors have challenged Wade’s interpretation. William W. Freehling (Prelude to the Civil War—The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836. New York: Harper & Row, 1965) observed that, while Governor Thomas Bennett, one of the skeptical officials, questioned the breadth of the conspiracy, he believed that a serious plot was afoot. Freehling concluded (p. 54) that “Bennett’s position, but not Wade’s, is consistent with all the evidence.” Sterling Stuckey (“Remembering Denmark Vesey—Agitator or Insurrectionist?” Negro Digest, XV, February 1966, 28–41) and Robert S. Starobin (Denmark Vesey—The Slave Conspiracy of 1822. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) also disagreed with Wade. Their major points were: that the top leaders died without disclosing any information; hence the shortage of confirming testimony was explainable; that the failure to find records and arms was not significant, since leading conspirators, including Vesey, were free after the investigation began and had time to dispose of arms and other evidence, and that, in any event, the insurrectionary plan envisaged the capture of arms; and, finally, that discrepancies between the published testimony and the manuscript testimony were irrelevant to the existence of a believable conspiracy (Starobin, pp. 178–80).

I agree with the interpretations of Freehling, Stuckey, and Starobin rather than Wade’s. But with regard to Wade’s sugges-
tion that urban slaves would have had less incentive to revolt because of their better condition, I would make two points that Wade's other critics did not—first, that policing of slaves in Charleston often became lax (*Insurrection*, pp. 187–88) and, second, that revolutionary movements have usually been led and widely supported, not by the most deprived class but by those who were better off, those who already enjoyed certain privileges and who wanted to remove remaining vestiges of tyranny precisely because they could visualize and appreciate the advantages of freedom. This phenomenon was repeatedly evident in revolutionary movements in Europe and America.

Ultimately the dispute over whether Vesey had an extensive plan for insurrection comes down to an intellectual exercise based largely on conjecture. Although I believe such a plan existed, the important point—which I made in a comment on the evidence (Chapter 10, note 18, p. 259), and still would emphasize—is that contemporary white leaders believed that insurrectionary activity was in progress and acted on this belief in a way that helped to shift the course of American history.

That shift in course, for which Denmark Vesey was the chief impetus, is one of the main themes of this book (one, incidentally, that few reviewers at the time noted). The point is made in Chapter 14, where I observe that South Carolina, frightened and provoked by the Vesey incident, adopted the Negro Seamen Act, enforced it in defiance of the federal government—in effect, nullifying a United States treaty—and then moved inexorably by stages to nullification of a federal tariff, secession, and civil war—all in defense of slavery. "Nullification, however camouflaged at first," I noted, "was devised as a political defense of slavery, as was the whole arsenal of so-called state rights" (p. 228; see also pp. 222, 229, 233–36).

Other authors were to advance this thesis later. Frehling, in his book, published in 1965, devotes considerable attention to the Vesey conspiracy and to the effect that slavery and the fear of servile insurrections had on South Carolina's shift to defiance of the federal government and eventual withdrawal from the union. (See especially pp. 64, 86, 109–15, 348.) Ste-
Phen A. Channing (Crisis of Fear—Secession in South Carolina. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) refers to Vesey and adopts the same thesis. (See especially pp. 21, 45, 50, 293.)

Of the material on Denmark Vesey that has been published since this book appeared, two books are particularly noteworthy—Robert Starobin’s, already mentioned, and The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), which has an introduction by John Oliver Killens, a black novelist. These books are valuable not so much because they provide new material on Vesey but because they make more widely available to researchers and to the general reader material that was previously available only in archives or scholarly journals. Starobin’s book, which he edited and for which he wrote an introduction and an afterword, contains, in part one, important excerpts from the Vesey trial record; in part two, reactions from contemporary observers to the 1822 plot; and, in part three, the analyses of later commentators, including Wade, on the Vesey conspiracy. The Beacon Press edition of The Trial Record represents the first complete republication of the record. Killens, author of the introduction, published a fictionalized account of the Vesey affair (Great Gittin’ up Morning. New York: Doubleday, 1972) that dramatizes Vesey as larger than life but provides a lively text for those who like a simplified approach to history.

Since 1964 other publications pertaining to slave insurrections in general and including segments on Vesey have also been reprinted and thus made more widely available. One such volume is Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Black Rebellion (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969). Along with other material written by Higginson, this book contains Higginson’s 1861 Atlantic Monthly article on Vesey. There is a new preface by James M. McPherson of Princeton. In 1968 Negro Universities Press, a division of Greenwood Publishing Corp., New York, reprinted Joseph Cephas Carroll’s pioneering study, Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865, originally published in 1938 by Chapman and Grimes, Inc. of Boston. And in 1969 International Publishers of New York re-
printed with a new preface Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts*, originally published in 1943 by Columbia University Press. All of these works were consulted in their original editions by this author, although Carroll’s was inadvertently omitted from the bibliography.

Besides the literature already mentioned, there have been since 1964 one book and several articles that dealt in part with Denmark Vesey. Among them are Nicholas Halasz’ book, *The Rattling Chains—Slave Unrest and Revolt in the Antebellum South* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966) and Max L. Kleinman’s article, “The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy: An Historiographical Study” (*Negro History Bulletin*, XVII, Feb./Mar. 1974, 225–28). But none of the studies that I know of has revealed significant new information or offered new insights on the Vesey plot.

The most unusual information touching on Denmark Vesey that has come to my attention since the 1964 publication of this book was communicated by Stephen C. Crane, a Dallas lawyer who is a descendant of Captain Joseph Vesey, the master of the ship that brought Denmark Vesey to Charleston after the Revolutionary War. In naval records, most of which were published after 1964, Mr. Crane discovered information about the captain’s activities during the Revolutionary War that was not available to me.

As related in a note in *The Trial Record*, I wrote in Chapter 1 that Captain Vesey was engaged during the war in supplying the French of St. Domingue with slaves. But the records called to my attention by Mr. Crane show that Joseph Vesey, although he may have made some voyages to St. Domingue to haul slaves, was also an active participant on the American side during much of the war. In the latter part of 1775 and early in 1776, he served in the South Carolina navy, commanding a pilot boat that cruised the east coast, warning American vessels of the presence of British warships, attacking British merchant vessels, and transporting emissaries to northern ports in search of recruits for the South Carolina navy (William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 8 vols., Wash-
In 1776 and 1777, Vesey served in the Continental Navy under John Paul Jones, in the positions of first lieutenant on the sloop Providence and master of the brig Cabot. He was assigned as acting master of several vessels taken as prizes and shared in prize money (Naval Documents, vol. 6, pp. 745, 1374–75; vol. 7, pp. 991, 993; vol. 8, pp. 46, 65–66, note 2; 98–99, 301, 372; Charles R. Smith, Marines in the Revolution—A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783, Washington: U.S. Marine Corps, 1975, pp. 412, 413 [Vesey’s name misspelled in Marines]).

Between 1778 and 1781, Captain Vesey was issued various letters of marque to become a privateersman on the American side. In 1778 Vesey was master and part owner, along with North and Trescot of Charleston, of the privateer Adriana, a sloop of fifteen guns with a crew of forty-seven. In 1781 he commanded the privateer Prospect, a brigantine of twelve guns with a crew of sixty (Naval Records of the American Revolution, 1775-1788, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906, pp. 220, 421). The Prospect may well have been the vessel that Vesey was sailing when he picked up Denmark Vesey at St. Thomas. Records of a 1781 voyage describe the captain as then a man of thirty-four years of age, 5 feet, 10 inches in height and having a light complexion. Mr. Crane says that Vesey family records indicate that Captain Vesey was versed in a number of languages, which would further explain Denmark Vesey’s facility in languages.

Besides the new material relating to Denmark Vesey and slave revolts that has appeared since the initial publication of this book, another development merits noting. Literature on black history and culture has assumed a new status since the mid-1960s, coinciding with the growing civil rights movement. Not only were there new studies, but, as a result of demands for fairer and fuller treatment of black contributions to history and culture, there were revisions and additions as new editions of
old textbooks appeared. Meanwhile, courses in black history and culture were introduced at a rapid pace in American colleges and universities. After the initial burst of activity, such courses and programs went through a settling down period in which greater discipline and sophistication were demanded by faculties and students alike. But black studies on campuses seem here to stay. Joseph J. Russell, the dean of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University and executive director of the National Council of Black Studies, said early in 1983 that his organization recognized 525 black studies programs, of which 150 were full-scale departments (New York Times, Jan. 13, 1983, p. 8).

At this point a word should be said about the present almost universal use of the term “black” instead of “Negro,” which formerly was in general use and which is used throughout this book. The change in usage came about in the 1960s through the influence of black leaders. But it should be noted that the term “Negro” had no invidious connotation. Most black scholars used it themselves, as is indicated by its inclusion in the name of well-known black publications like The Journal of Negro History. The new usage is merely one of preference.

When this book was first published, a New York Times reviewer called it “an exciting account of an almost forgotten chapter in American history.” But the chapter was apparently soon forgotten again. When Killens’ fictionalized treatment of Vesey appeared in 1972, a reviewer in the New York Times Book Review said Killens had “rescued Vesey from obscurity.” After the television drama, “Denmark Vesey’s Rebellion,” went on the air in 1982, a reviewer for the New York Times said the show had done “a remarkably good job of taking this little known revolt of black slaves in Charleston, S. C., in 1822 and elevating it from footnote to an important part of American history.” Perhaps the republication of this book—still probably the most comprehensive treatment of the Vesey affair, the Charleston social milieu of the time, and the plot’s impact on history—will revive again the forgotten chapter, rescue Vesey
again from obscurity, and elevate the Vesey conspiracy perma-
nently from a footnote to an important place in American
history.

In closing, I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Ste­
phen C. Crane for the valuable new information he supplied on
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John Lofton
January 30, 1983
PREFACE

The abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson assessed the plan of ex-slave Denmark Vesey for a revolt of Negroes in and around Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822 and called it "the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves." In "boldness of conception and thoroughness of organization," he asserted, "there has been nothing to compare with it." He concluded that it "came the nearest to a terrible success." The men at Charleston who sat in judgment over Vesey and his followers declared that "Carolina has been rescued from the most horrible catastrophe with which it has been threatened, since it has been an independent state."

Thus it is evident that the significance of the Vesey undertaking was conceded both by those who might have been expected to be sympathetic with its promoters and by those who were the targets of the design. Despite this concurrence of opinion on the part of those who lived with slavery, there has since been no definitive attempt to assess the significance of the Vesey project in the perspective of history.

Perhaps, as Charles Johnson has suggested, "Denmark Vesey is a symbol of a spirit too violent to be acceptable to the white community." There are no Negro schools named for him, and for Negroes to take any pride in his philosophy and courage might be considered "poor taste." And Gunnar Myrdal has observed: "American Negroes, in attempting to integrate themselves into American Society, have had to pay the price of forgetting their historical heroes and martyrs."

Though Denmark Vesey has not been given a recognizable role in history, his plan for insurrection has been accorded considerable repetitious attention in various narratives
of American slavery. Such treatment has been facilitated by records of the evidence collected and the trial procedures employed against Vesey and his fellow insurgents. Though the authorities at Charleston were among the intended victims, they saw a need to justify to society the means they used to thwart the revolt.

The official story of the abortive uprising of 1822 has been preserved in three contemporary accounts: (1) a 48-page report written by Charleston Intendant James Hamilton, Jr., at the request of the city council, and first published in the summer of 1822 while the trials of the insurrectionists were still in progress; (2) a 202-page volume, published in October of the same year under the authorship of Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, presiding magistrates of the court which tried the first “conspirators” to be discovered; (3) a letter by Governor Thomas Bennett of South Carolina, dated August 10, 1822, and published in Washington on August 24 in the National Intelligencer and in Baltimore on September 7 in Niles’ Weekly Register.

But while the contemporary accounts give fairly exhaustive treatment to the plan itself and to the trials of the accused slaves, none of them reveals very much on Denmark Vesey’s background. Nor have later researchers disclosed much additional information, since they have apparently not looked far beyond the three major primary sources.

In an attempt to shed light on those aspects of Denmark Vesey’s story not heretofore touched, this writer has examined the Charleston newspapers and public records of the period and has studied the historical literature of South Carolina and the West Indian Islands where Denmark Vesey and his owner, Captain Joseph Vesey, once lived or visited. This search has produced a substantial cache of specific new information bearing directly on the lives of Denmark Vesey and his owner and much general data that helps to put Vesey’s activity within the context of a chronicle of his times.

The objectives of this volume are: (1) to portray the thread of the captain’s life from the time it was first interwoven with that of the young slave, (2) to examine what effect
this inter-weaving may have had on the fabric of Denmark's* character and what effect the social milieu of man and slave may have had in producing a man of revolution, (3) to tell the story of the insurrection and its aftermath, (4) to suggest how all these events influenced the Negro's advance toward freedom, and (5) to indicate how South Carolina politicians were led to extremes of reaction by their commitment to slavery and their effort to police it.

For their helpful co-operation in putting research materials at my disposal and for making available the base maps used for the end papers of this book, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Miss Virginia Rugheimer, librarian, and Mrs. Beulah T. Sheetz, assistant librarian, of the Charleston Library Society. Research courtesies were also extended by the late Dr. J. Harold Easterby, director of the South Carolina Archives Department and the late Dr. Robert L. Meriwether, director of the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. Samuel Gaillard Stoney of Charleston was good humoredly obliging in suggesting sources of obscure information.

For reading and criticizing portions of the manuscript, I want to express thanks to Dr. J. Cutler Andrews, chairman of the History Department at Chatham College, Dr. Don E. Fehrenbacher, associate professor of history at Stanford University, Dr. Fletcher M. Green, professor of history at the University of North Carolina, and Professors Alfred P. James and James A. Kehl of the University of Pittsburgh—though none of them is responsible for any errors that may have crept into the final product.

J.L.

*On occasion in this work Denmark Vesey is referred to by his first name alone. This usage is followed to avoid confusing Denmark with his owner, Joseph, and to avoid the alternative stilted usage of the whole name, Denmark Vesey, whenever the man is mentioned.