THE UNDEAD BONES OF DENMARK VESEY: 
THE COMPLICATIONS OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Denmark Vesey was a charismatic black leader who was tried and executed in 1822 along side thirty-four conspirators in Charleston, South Carolina for attempting to incite an armed slave rebellion. Denmark Vesey’s planned revolt holds a unique place in both southern history and American history. “More than Nat Turner’s rebellion, more than any rumor of a country uprising, it embodied the fullest range of terror, raised the more awesome possibilities, and disturbed even the most complacent residents” (Wade 1964, 228). John Lofton and William Freehling both mark the revolt as a turning point in history. It set South Carolina on a collision course with destiny, culminating in the Civil War.

Generations have seen the allegations against Denmark Vesey, his trial and resulting execution through the prism of their own conceptions about slavery, rebellion, manhood, and heroism. There were two immediate perspectives on Vesey. On one side, slave owners responded to the plot as a call for vigilance and armed accordingly, establishing the Citadel. Vesey embodied all that whites had to fear. Vesey’s revolt marked the point where slaves transitioned from “family friends” into a violent threat that needed to be armed against. On the other, Denmark Vesey was embraced as a tragic hero, unselfish leader of a just but
unsuccessful cause. Antebellum abolitions used Vesey as a rallying cry, later heralding his name to recruit slaves as Union Soldiers under his banner.

In 1964, historian Richard Wade offered a third interpretation positing that the rebellion was probably “little more than loose talk among aggrieved slaves.” Wade's theory was largely ignored until 2001 when Michael Johnson breathed new life into it. Johnson asserted that the charges were politically motivated and that Vesey was the victim of a “legal lynching.”

This paper seeks to examine how this single alleged incident revealed the impact the legacy of slavery and race has had on our interpretation of historic events; how deeply it as affected our collective memory by employing aspects of History, African American Studies and Political Science. It challenges the ethics of how we use the historic record and concludes we will probably never know exactly what happened because any event involving slavery comes to us through filtered documents: documents that record the African American experience only through the actions of whites. History is thus a tentative craft.
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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv
INTRODUCTION 1
CHAPTER 1. SOUTH CAROLINA IN 1822: REASON TO FEAR 10
CHAPTER 2. TRADITIONAL VIEW: THE FIRST AND SECOND PERSEPCTIVES 32
CHAPTER 3. QUESTIONING THE TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE: A THIRD PERSPECTIVE 55
CHAPTER 4. CLASH OF PERSPECTIVES: EVALUATING EVIDENCE AND ETHICS 81
CONCLUSIONS. HUMAN VALUES- JUSTICE VS. SELF-PRESERVATION 108
REFERENCE LIST 113
INTRODUCTION

In 2002 John Weiner authored a short article in The Nation, which begged the ultimate question regarding Denmark Vesey. Weiner reported about the black community of Charleston, South Carolina’s campaign to place a memorial to Denmark Vesey in the town square. The immediate fury ignited by the proposed monument pitted African Americans against whites. The monument divided the respective communities according to their unique perspectives on the 1822 slave revolt for which Vesey was famous. Charleston whites did not think it appropriate to celebrate a man who planned genocide on white slave holders. Blacks responded to the Vesey as a hero who was willing to mount a suicidal revolt in response to blatant despotism (Weiner 2002). All South Carolinians knew Denmark Vesey as the leader of a thwarted but ever-feared, would-be slave insurrection; it is their reaction to Vesey that reveals much about the human experience.

This paper seeks to examine how this single alleged incident revealed the impact the legacy of slavery and race has had on our interpretation of historic events, how deeply it as affected our collective memory. As historian Richard Wade put it, Denmark Vesey’s planned revolt holds a unique place in both southern history and American history. “More than Nat Turner’s rebellion, more than any rumor of a country uprising, it embodied the fullest range of terror, raised the more awesome possibilities, and disturbed even the most complacent residents” (Wade 1964, 228). John Lofton and William Freehling both mark the revolt as a turning point in history. It set South Carolina on a collision course with destiny, culminating in the Civil War.
Generations have seen the allegations against Denmark Vesey, his trial, and resulting mass executions through the prism of their own experiences and conceptions about slavery, rebellion, manhood, and heroism. In a word, Vesey is an image. There were two immediate perspectives on Vesey. On one side, slave owners responded to the plot as a call for vigilance and armed accordingly, arming against rebellion by establishing a state sponsored military academy known as the Citadel. Vesey, the man, embodied all that whites had to fear living in a slave holding society. Vesey was accused of mounting a planned insurrection where slaves would rise in the middle of the night, murder their masters by slitting their throats, burn the city, and then mount their escape by sailing from the harbor in Charleston to the black republic of Haiti. Facing the specific accusations of their murder followed by the rape of their wives and daughters was simply too much to handle. Vesey’s planned revolt marked the point where slaves transitioned from “family friends” into a violent threat that needed to be armed against. On the other side, Denmark Vesey was embraced as a tragic hero, the unselfish leader of a just but unsuccessful cause. Vesey was embraced for his boldness and bravery. Antebellum abolitionists used Vesey as a rallying cry, later abolitionists used his name to recruit and arm slaves as Union Soldiers under the banner of his heroic legacy.

The unchallenged view among historians throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries held that the published version of events of 1822 Charleston were accurate, that charges were necessary and justified to prevent an imminent slave rebellion. There was a complex plot involving thousands of slaves, an acquired
cache of weapons, and fully formulated plans of wholesale slaughter. According to
the magistrates, this plot was only barely averted. For slave owners Vesey
embodied everything they had to fear; Vesey was educated, free, successful, and
rebellious. He was a natural leader who established separate institutions where
slaves and free blacks alike could gather and discuss revolutionary schemes. These
separate institutions threatened the established social order. For abolitionists,
future revolutionaries like Marx, and leaders in the civil rights movement, Vesey
embodied every man’s natural desire for freedom and justice. Black communities
into the 20th century embraced Vesey as a model for black manhood, one who
resisted injustice through all means necessary. His reach extended into separatists
in the Black Panthers who saw in Vesey, the ideal strong man leader.

Recent renewed academic interest in the case has uncovered evidence to
support a new-third-interpretation of the 1822 plot. In 1999, three new books
dealing with the Vesey revolt were published, including a transcription of the trial
record edited by Edward Pearson, Chairman of the History Department at Franklin
and Marshall College. Michael P. Johnson, a Johns Hopkins University Historian
who had written about free blacks in antebellum South Carolina, was asked by The
William and Mary Quarterly to review these works. Johnson found error after error
in Pearson’s work, which inspired him to dig deeper into an old and widely ignored
Wade, Johnson leveled new charges against the long held consensus view of the
insurrection. He suggested that the Charleston Mayor James Hamilton Jr. invented
the plot and tortured defendants to secure their confessions. Johnson held that in
antebellum South Carolina, members of both white and black Charleston communities had a vested interest in maintaining the pretext of the plot’s existence. Johnson contends that northern abolitionists needed to define Vesey as a hero so they uncharacteristically accepted the magistrates’ version of the event at face value. Plantation owners and political leaders interested in maintaining the institution of slavery needed a verifiable internal threat to justify diligence in defense against not only revolt but also external, i.e. federal, interference. Whites were fearful of revolt because of their own guilt. Because no one challenged the accuracy of the magistrate’s accusations, Vesey became simultaneously a villain and a martyr and was embraced as such by subsequent generations. Johnson challenged the existing view by critically examining the published accounts of the trial from this new third perspective: Vesey was the victim of a “legal lynching.”

It is hard to picture a single figure that could act as such a lightening rod nine generations after reaching the grave. What can our response to this man, Denmark Vesey, tell us about our perspectives on race and oppression, violence and heroism, and finally the ethics of how we evaluate the historical record?

**Denmark Vesey in History**

Denmark Vesey’s role in history has always been clouded with controversy, tending to fall into one of two ideological camps: those who see in him qualities of a villain or that of a hero of nearly biblical proportions. For whites in Charleston before the Civil War, Vesey represented the physical embodiment off all they had to fear. You can see their fears in their questioning of defendants in the trial. In the period leading up to emancipation, the treat of armed slave rebellion was ever
present. The threat was magnified because blacks held a numerical superiority in the South and their numbers were increasing. John Lofton sums up white Charleston’s immediate response to Vesey, defending the “peculiar institution”.

“Both sides of any revolution blame the other for violence but claim god is on their side. Charleston authorities accused Vesey of planning “to riot in blood, outrage, rapine…. And conflagration.” Whites “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” (Lofton 1983, vi). Post emancipation, the example of Vesey was still a threat to racial order and the status quo of white dominance because Vesey was articulate, educated, successful and did not accept an inferior role in society. Nearly one hundred years after emancipation, Vesey was still controversial. In 1976 the city of Charleston was to hang a portrait of Vesey in a public space. A letter addressed to the mayor read, “If Vesey qualifies for such an honor, we should also hang the portraits of Hitler, Attila the Hun, Herod the murders of babies” (Lofton 1983, viii-ix). Ashley Cooper wrote in a New and Courier column; “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” (Ibid.). For whites, Vesey is an image of menace and terror.

For the black community in the south, Vesey represented a man whose unselfish, yet violent actions personified heroism. Vesey was a courageous leader in the struggle for freedom. Any slave revolt in the United States would have been a suicide mission; this goes for Vesey and his army because unlike the successful slave revolt in the Caribbean, slaves in South Carolina did not have the absolute numerical
superiority. Eventually, even if the rebellion met initial success, whites from surrounding areas would arm and regain dominance and physical control. But resistance to slavery was a just cause, worthy of self-sacrifice. Denmark Vesey was not enslaved, but was willing to sacrifice his “privileged” position as a free black in society to benefit current and future generations of black brethren. As Weiner noted, the Vesey trial resulted in more executions than any other case in American history, yet for the most part the accused stood together with bravery and solidarity in the face of certain death. White Charleston was frightened; slaves and free-blacks were brave. Both the leadership of Vesey and the solidarity of the accused was reason to celebrate the revolt.

The commemoration of Denmark Vesey is not merely a modern phenomenon. The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiments used his name as a rallying cry during the Civil War. Black abolitionist and fellow freed slave Fredrick Douglas instructed African American Regiments to “Remember Denmark Vesey.” Starting in the 1960's, Vesey was celebrated as hero in the black struggle for freedom. Countering white response to the Vesey portrait, the black community maintains the memory of Denmark Vesey as hero, remembered for bravery. John Lofton notes that even as late as 1976, the black community was circling the wagons around their version of the Vesey story; Vesey as martyred hero. Bishop Frank M. Reid, Jr. of the Seventh District of the AME church addressed 250 black Charleston citizens in attendance of the 1976 event.

We know who Denmark Vesey was, 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. (Lofton 1983, vi)

The third perspective slipped virtually unnoticed into the academic dialog in 1964 when urban historian Richard Wade offered a new interpretation of the trial. Writing in 1964, Wade’s *Slavery in the Cities* contended that the allegations against Vesey were inflated and that the plot was probably little more than loose talk among aggrieved slaves. Wade asserts that in an environment as tense as 1820's South Carolina, any talk of revolt would have been taken seriously by whites. The executions that resulted from the trial were a result of an over vigilant court seeking to prevent the planned attack.

Wade’s theory was largely ignored by most southern historians who read his work as that of an outsider who didn’t understand the complexities of slavery. Maria Wikramanayake Fernando, when writing *World in Shadow* in 1973 about free blacks in South Carolina, stood alone among Wade supporters. Wikramanayake Fernando asserted it was “highly questionable that the Denmark Vesey conspiracy amounted to an organized plot to overthrow slavery; that it probably never existed as a conspiracy in the form that either those who put it down savagely, and those who used it as an example to black resistance to slavery claimed” (Gregg 2003, 1). Gregg described the response Fernando received: she faced such resistance to her theory that she “ended up needing to seek another line of work” (Ibid.).

In 1999, when he began reviewing the three new books on the Vesey plot for *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Michael Johnson returned to Wade’s long ignored interpretation and found new merit in his claims. Further, Johnson built a credible case indicting the 1822 court as being politically motivated; it was a “judicial
murder.” The few confessions from the accused were the result of torture and intimidation and would not hold up in a modern court. Further, Johnson saw Vesey as a threat to white Charleston not because he planned a revolt, but because he resisted the status quo more subtly by establishing separate institutions and a fostering a resistant black community through churches, meeting in his home, and existing as an autonomous black man. The politically ambitious mayor James Hamilton Jr. saw an opportunity to save white Charleston from such a man, and his “murderous slave conspiracy.” Johnson says this was Hamilton’s “path to power” (Weiner 2004, 128).

Wade and Johnson see Vesey as a successful black leader who excited the fears of slave holding whites in Charleston. Johnson asserts that the white elites were “sufficiently anxious to resort to this judicial mass murder” (Gregg 2003, 4). He became a victim of their hysteria and as a result was the victim of a “legal lynching”. The defenders of the traditional interpretation include historians Pearson, Robertson, and Egerton. Pearson’s reputation was nearly destroyed based on Johnson’s critique of his work, to the point that his publishers withdrew support for his Designs against Charleston. Roberston and Egerton simply won’t hear of Johnson and Wade’s interpretation. They are too married to the battle between the first and second perspective on Vesey. He was either a hero or a threat; there was no room for subtle resistance to slavery.

Vesey’s legacy is still open to interpretation. Because the historic record has been filtered for years through either the prism of white fears or black pride, it has
been tough to get at what really happened. Vesey has become an image affected by our tainted collective memory.

**Four Perspectives:**

The traditional view of Denmark Vesey, embraced by those who celebrated him and those who feared him, held that he was indeed plotting a massive slave revolt. The recent controversy has been about whether Vesey was in fact an insurrectionist or whether, as a strong black leader, he became the victim of white fears and paranoia. Was he the victim of a legal lynching at the hands of a political opportunist acting to stir up white fears for political gain against the governor? If so, does he serve as the militant anti-slavery leader that abolitionists and civil rights leaders have long celebrated?

After 188 years have passed, there is room for another perspective on Denmark Vesey: one that takes into account the human complications in finding historic truth. The matter of race necessarily taints our interpretation of heroism and history. This paper will examine the three known perspectives on Denmark Vesey, a man to fear, a man to consider a martyr, and finally a strong black leader victimized by white fear, in hopes of revealing a fourth perspective—truth.
CHAPTER 1

SOUTH CAROLINA IN 1822: REASON TO FEAR

But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him, not safely let him go.

Thomas Jefferson in letter to John Holmes

Denmark Vesey lived in a time of political and social redefinition for the country. Politically, the matter of slavery was reemerging as an issue of regional conflict. The demographics of the south were changing as northern states emancipated through slave auction leading to an increased concentration of black belt communities in the Deep South. There had been a successful slave rebellion in St. Dominque, which established a black republic in the northern hemisphere. Socially, separate black institutions threatened the established racial order. Vesey, who was a successful black man and a charismatic leader, was a threatening figure in a challenging time.

Political Situation in South Carolina in 1822:

For blacks and whites alike in America, the era of Vesey's life, trial, and execution was one of flux and redefinition. For whites, this redefinition threatened their way of living. Slavery was emerging as a matter of political conflict on the national scene with the Missouri crisis, the racial mix of southern states was “blackening”, and a successful and bloody slave rebellion had occurred replacing a dominant white society with a black government in Haiti.

The nation had won the war of Independence, formed a union, framed a Constitution, and fought the war of 1812 solidifying that independence. The generation of Americans who came of age in this time had never known despotism.
Eighty-five percent of the population was younger than 40 years old in 1815: King George III was not part of their collective memory (Woods 2009). This second generation existed in a period of both territorial and population growth; and with it, redefinition of American identity. The country was evolving from a Jeffersonian Republic into Jacksonian Democracy.

The nation, including the South, was also coming to terms with the tricky matter of slavery. Slavery was left as a ticking time bomb at the moment of the nation’s creation. During the summer of 1787, South Carolina had threatened to not participate in the Union should the rights of slaveholders have been impinged upon. At the time of ratification, slavery left a “trio of legacies” according to William Freehling. He contends that the founders, even abolitionists, arrived at three conclusions regarding slavery: “slavery was a problem, its solution required the right conditions, the right solution was a low ratio of blacks to whites” (Freehling 1990, 2309). This matter would be left for a later, riper time to be resolved.

America’s second generation of leaders was left to address the inconvenient truth that only part of the county was free. The ensuing political and social conflict was a result of the contradiction between the nation’s stated principles and her actions. As the republican principle of elite rule transitioned into egalitarian rule, questions arose about the virtue of maintaining an institution of hereditary, indefinite servitude as well as the contaminating three-fifths clause in allocating Congressional representation. Slave states had negotiated increased representation in the House of Representatives by counting slaves in the census as three fifths of a person. This results in a skewed vote distribution in the House of Representation,
and thereby in the Electoral College. Despite the weighted voting margin the House, the international slave trade was abolished in 1808. This harkened the emergence of increasing political pressure against slavery, edging toward a policy of gradual emancipation.

Even in Southern states, tensions regarding the institution of slavery were high between plantation owners and independent yeoman farmers. Non-slave holders began arguing that the slave owning influence was dominating state legislatures because of the weighted allocation of seats, like in the federal Congress, favoring property rights of plantation owners. This skewed representation of slave owners violated the newly embraced egalitarian principal of one-man-one-vote.

Charleston, like other large cities in the South contained a volatile mix of slaves, slave owners, free blacks, and white non-slave owners. Charleston was seeking to strike a comfortable balance between these competing interests. South Carolina, with the nation, was at a crossroads.

The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy superbly illustrates domestic slavery’s dual tendency. The Vesey Conspiracy, the most widespread and cogent insurrection plot uncovered in the nineteenth-century South, occurred in the rich place to compel attention: Charleston, South Carolina, the southern city in the blackest black belt. It transpired at the right moment: 1822, a period when Char Estonians experimented with the loosest paternalistic control they would ever deploy. (Freehling 1990, 1141)

The treat and concern of slave insurrection was ever present in the South. The numerical superiority of blacks in the South only increased this fear. Consummate republican Thomas Jefferson wrote anomalously of his fear of insurrection in his Notes on the State of Virginia: “Considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is
among possible events.” Further expressing the internal dilemma of a slave owner attempting to defend an inherent moral contradiction: “The Almighty, has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest” (Jefferson 1975, 181).

The climate in 1820’s South Carolina was wrought with both fear and tensions. It was in this environment that the notion of a planned slave insurrection appeared not only possible, but also rather likely: particularly given well-documented and interrelated social and political factors. Chief among these tensions was the fear of slave insurrection.

**Demographics:**

According to the 1820 United States census, Charleston, South Carolina was made up of “25,781 inhabitants: 11,654 of them free whites; 12,652 of them slaves, and 1,475 of them free colored persons” (Lofton 1983, 145). Slaves outnumbered free whites; free blacks and slaves combined formed an even larger majority. Robert Starobin enumerates the role of slaves in South Carolina culture. Statewide, the slave population totaled 260,000 in 1822. They worked in “cotton fields and malarial swamps” and comprised an absolute majority of the population (Starobin 1970, 1). John Lofton’s 1948 work describes 1820 Charleston “had a population of 24,780. At this time it was the six largest city in the United States” (Lofton 1948, 410).

**Blackening of the South, Whitening of the North:**

The matter of black numerical superiority was not new to South Carolinians, but it was becoming of increasing concern as northern states began adopting their own individual emancipation schemes after declaring independence from Britain.
Northern emancipation sent increasing numbers of slaves in the South. Northern slave owners, wishing to protect their financial assets as their states eliminated their human property rights, sold their property south at auction. Northern states avoided the social complications of emancipation through auction, which caused a “blackening” of the South with the relative “whitening” of the North.

Sales of slaves into the South increased the occurrence of “black belt” communities. Some local populations achieved hugely skewed concentrations of blacks, with blacks making up majorities nearly ninety percent of the populace. Freehling notes that these conditions were ripe for revolution. South American rebellions occurred in areas with similar concentrated ratios of blacks to whites. At the same time the North was abolishing slavery, border-states such as Virginia, Maryland and Delaware began grappling with their own unique version of slavery. Economic changes in border-states made slavery less profitable than it had been historically; slave owners responded to tightening financial conditions by selling off some of their chattel, also into the deeper south furthering the “blacking” phenomenon.

Slave owners and non-slave owning whites alike were concerned with their safety constantly. Freehling notes: “a national institution had been contained in a peculiar section. But whites trapped with blacks were more susceptible to racial anxiety and thus more opposed to a still narrower containment” (Freehling 1990, 2105). As northern states abolished, sold, and consolidated slaves in further blackening black belts, southern whites felt squeezed by a rapidly changing situation. United States Senator from Virginia and future President John Tyler wrote
euphemistically about the “blackening” of the South and with it, the fear of insurrection. “Would you suffer the dark cloud of slavery to “increase in darkness over a particular portion of this land until its horrors shall burst? Or would it be well to disperse the blackness and reduce it to a summer’s cloud?” (Freehling 1990, 2204).

**Fear of Violence:**

Thomas Jefferson expected that blacks and whites, living together indefinitely, would one day explode in violence. Freehling describes the tension in society regarding slavery. Democratic Despots ruled the South. Thomas Jefferson expressed it this way: “If something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children.” Freehling continues that Nature’s God was too surely just. Slaves deprived of nature’s rights would too surely seize arms after their own Declaration of Independence. Jefferson continued: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free” (Freehling 1990, 1825).

Other southerners shared Jefferson’s fears. Freehling expressed the fear: “Slaves, ever angry, because deprived of natural rights, would rise up. Aristocrats, ever fearful of slave revolts, would violently counterattack. The white government, its balance ever precarious because of unnatural black enslavement, would be torn apart by angry recriminations and awful reprisals” (Freehling 1990, 1837).

Wade attempts to explain the fear of insurrection. “Officially Negroes outnumbered whites 14,127 to 10,653.48.” Further complicating the racial mix, “during the summer when many families left the city to escape the heat, the colored
majority was even larger. Thomas Pinckney, in an extended post-mortem on the grim event, expressed the consequent anxiety. He called the imbalance "the principal encouragement to the late attempt, for without it, mad and wild as they appear to have been, they would not have dared to venture on a contest of force." In a word, numerical superiority was the "sine qua non of insurrection" (Wade 1964, 156).

John Lofton also made much of the fear of insurrection.

During the summer of 1812 a Charleston resident had put the matter in stark terms: “Consider, I beseech you, that the coast of S. Carolina and Georgia is principally inhabited by a black population, which it is not to be denied, that whites are not to control…. A regiment of militia has been sent us from the interior for our protection, but that have mutinied…. Tho’ the mutiny arrested for the moment, the spirit of it is by no means quelled. (Lofton 1983, 116)

**Other Insurrections:**

William Freehling described in “Road to Disunion” the many ways that the South was sensitive to the very idea of slave insurrection. He discussed the ways that “slavery maximized human panic” (Freehling 1990, 1240). Freehling notes that “blacks never came close to overturning whites in the prewar period” but that the “trouble was that Massa’s partially false postures in domestic charades invited Cuffee to dissimulate in distressing—sometimes dangerous ways” (Freehling 1990, 1112). Despite a Plantation owner’s stated position that the master/slave relationship was natural and paternal, masters feared the undeniable reality of despotism. The tension in society was the result of the tension between the pledged egalitarian ideals and the despotic means.

Insurrection wasn’t uncommon in South American plantations. The conditions
on South American plantations were strikingly similar to that in the American South. Freehling describes North American plantations has “possessing many similar preconditions for revolution.” Southern climate and terrain, slave belts and jungle conditions all encouraged insurrection.

Slave insurrections weren’t unheard of. Lofton discussed the abortive Gabriel’s plot in 1800 Richmond, Virginia. Although the plot was not successful it served as warning to whites in the south. Two slaves had betrayed Gabriel’s plot, like Vesey’s. Frighteningly for whites, more than 1000 did act in this plot.

About a thousand slaves who did assemble disbanded in the face of the massive preparations that had been made by the forewarned whites. Governor James Monroe had posted cannon at the state capitol, had called more than 650 well-armed men into service and notified every militia commander in the states. In the ensuing days score of Negroes were arrested and some thirty-five hanged. (Lofton 1983, 116)

Lofton notes that in Gabriel’s plot, the insurrectionist “were well aware of the difficulties between France and the United States at the time and hoped for French assistance.” Charleston papers published, “a vague report which mentioned the execution of several of the rebels” (Lofton 1990, 116). With literate slaves and free blacks living in Charleston, the knowledge of other insurrections in the black community was a real threat to the social order and security.

Lofton contends that knowledge of Gabriel’s rebellion would have circulated in slave circles.

More details could eventually have reached Charleston via the slave grapevine after the Virginia press finally broke its silence to report that the rebellion had been crushed and its leaders punished.” Whites might have intended to dissuade other rebellions with the publication of executions “Undoubtedly intended to serve as a deterrent, it could not fail at the same time to inform Negro readers that the
Lofton continued: “Because of the secrecy and the censorship commonly associated with Negro revolts, it is hard to tell how many there were or how many became known to slave in other localities. But one authority has estimated that between 1800, the year of Denmark Vesey’s liberation, and 1821, there were at least fifty-three uprisings plotted in the United States, six of them in South Carolina” (Ibid.). It does seem likely that among literate blacks in Charleston knowledge of these uprisings was more than possible.

**St. Domingue:***

There was no more terrifying example of slave insurrection than the insurrection which resulted in the creation of the Haitian republic. It is important to note two things about Haiti: slave holding whites were horrified at its example and slaves knew of the insurrection. The slaves of St. Domingue were inspired to action by the French Revolution. Despite the French outlaw of slavery in 1793, this violent revolt lasted a bloody ten years. During the 10-year rebellion, many white slave owners fled north into the United States bringing with them their “infected” chattel property. Southern whites were rightly concerned that these slaves would bring with them knowledge of the newly formed black nation-state (Edwards 1990, 52). Importantly, Captain Joseph Vesey was in Charleston acting as the treasurer in a mutual aid society assisting French refugees from St. Domingue.

For whites in South Carolina the parallels between their climate and populations were apparent. William Freehling describes the situation: “South Carolina’s rice swamps, had the same ratio of massive black to white populations
that invited a coup d'état in Saint Domingue. At moments of southern history, especially the final Civil War year, southern black belts were especially vulnerable (Freehling 1990, 1125). Freehling goes on to report that slave conditions in South America closely mirrored the climate and slave density conditions in South Carolina. Attempted insurrection in Brazil was much more common. He describes the conditions as “preconditions for revolution” (Freehling 1990, 1126). Revolution through slave rebellion was not impossible: recent history predicted one.

Blacks were inspired by the events in Saint Domingue. “They undoubtedly had heard of the successful slave revolt in Saint Domingue, since South Carolinians had long traded with the Caribbean islanders and since some Haitian émigrés had settled in the state with their slaves. Blacks also seemed aware of the significance of the debates in Congress during 1819-20 over the admission of Missouri as a slave state” (Starobin 1970, 3). Lofton notes that because of censorship of publications relating to slave rebellions it is difficult to estimate the common knowledge in slave communities of other rebellions. But, he cites an expert’s (idid) estimate that “between 1800-1821 there were at least fifty-three uprisings plotted in the United States, six of them in South Carolina” (Lofton 1983, 116).

**Missouri Crisis:**

But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night awakened and filled me with terror....

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 1820

The Missouri Crisis of 1819 only further agitated an already tense situation. As the Missouri Territory petitioned to join the Union as a full-fledged state, sectional differences resurfaced in the United States Congress regarding slavery. James
Tallmadge Jr. of New York offered on February 13th, 1819, two mild sounding amendments to the Missouri petition. Missouri, which was a slave holding territory, would be allowed to “write a constitution and then be admitted to the Union. The first amendment would bar future slaves from entering the admitted states. The second amendment would free Missouri slaves born after admissions at age 25” (Freehling 1990, 2114). This gradual emancipation plan was modeled after what had worked fairly well in New York. Under Tallmadge’s plan, no slave would be emancipated in Missouri before 1844. This allowed 25 years for slave owners to prepare slaves for freedom or conversely sell them “down the river” into the Deep South. The Tallmadge amendments caused an absolute and complete seizure of business in the House and Senate.

Northern states had long been upset about the numerical superiority in the House of Representatives that resulted from the three-fifths compromise in the Constitution. During the writing of the Constitution, slave owners in the South had insisted on adding representation in the House to protect their property. At the time, the federal government expected to collect taxes directly on that states based on population. The South was willing to pay increased taxes to protect their unique property rights. But, as the taxation scheme shifted, northern states started to question the arrangement. More import for the North, was the benefit this weighted formula gave the South in the Electoral College.

In the first thirty-six years of the republic, America had a Virginian, and thus a southerner, as the chief executive for thirty-two. Control of the Presidency lead to control of Supreme Court nominations, which in turn meant control of the Judiciary.
Northern states, New York among them, saw this advantage as unjust and undemocratic. Missouri became a battleground on this front. Tallmadge’s amendments would have limited seat apportionment in the House of Representatives to only reflect the white population of the state rather than a skewed “whites plus slaves” formula.

For whites in the South, the political panic came from the fact that the votes for the Tallmadge amendments in the Senate broke along sectional lines. Freehling describes congressional support this way “the Tallmadge Amendments initially received bipartisan support from the North and bipartisan condemnation from the South. Tallmadge’s least radical motion, to forbid entrance of future slaves into Missouri, passed the House 87-76. The North voted 86-10 aye, the South 66-1 against.” The second amendment proposing emancipation to slaves born thereafter once reaching the age of 25 barely passed, the margin was even narrower. That vote was 82 ayes to 78 against. This vote still broke regionally with northern members voting 80-14 and southern members voting 64-2 (Freehling 1990, 2169).

Slaveholders found it very alarming that two southern members behaved as “traitors” to the South by voting yes on the planned post-nati emancipation amendment. The measure would have been defeated 80-80 if those two southern members had voted differently. This was the first roll call vote of the “first great nineteenth-century slavery crisis” (Freehling 1990, 2170). This was the first time the federal government had acted to regulate slavery. For slavery perpetualists, including those in South Carolina, this was the opening shot is a soon to be long fought battle to protect their way of life.
Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Congressman John Holmes marks the moment in American History. William Fehling describes Johns Holmes as a “New England Jeffersonian Republican.” He was “one of only five northern congressman who had always voted with the South on the Tallmadge Amendments” (Freehling 1990, 2265). Freehling suggests that Jefferson trusted this “helpful Yankee” and therefore he could be candid with Holmes. It was in this letter that he first expressed his anxieties about slavery by “likening slavery to the wolf held by the ears and called the northern assault” (on slaveholding interests) “like a fire bell in the night, Hushed only for the moment” (Freehling 1990, 2269). Jefferson goes on to fully describe the nature of the crisis; it was a crisis of conscious.

A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me in a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. (Peterson 1975, 568)

Jefferson, as always, reflects the sentiment of the hour eloquently. He captured the fear and the revelation that the Missouri Crisis illuminated. The South, as a community, and as an idea was at a crossroads. Control of Congress, states rights, property rights, race relations were all suddenly at play. This letter didn’t break new ground but it did move in a new direction. Latter day critics of Jefferson say, “when the chips were down, as in the Missouri crisis, Jefferson threw his weight behind slavery’s expansion and bequeathed to the South the image of antislavery as
a Federal mask for political and economic exploitation” (Freehling 1990, 2280). Calhoun however, would expand slavery to perpetuate it, whereas Jefferson argued that only through expansion would you diffuse slavery enough to make it possible to end it.

Jefferson goes on to say “I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my consolation is to be, that I live not to weep over it” (Freehling 1990, 2272).

Jefferson became openly critical of Congress; he challenged their authority to regulate slavery in the territories. As always Jefferson supported the Union, but after the Missouri crisis he shifted to the more radical interpretation of his comments in the Kentucky Resolutions. In 1790 Jefferson proposed nullification to soothe the concerns of slave owners in Kentucky. “Where powers are assumed which have not been delegated, a nullification of the act is the rightful remedy: that every State has a natural right in cases not within the compact, to nullify of their own authority all assumptions of power by others within their limits” (Peterson 1975, 282). Now, nullification was evolving from a potential response to future concerns into a necessary ideological position for the South.

After the Missouri crisis, Jefferson wrote about decisions regarding slavery’s future were the “exclusive right of every state, which nothing in the Constitution has taken from them” (Freehling 1990, 2275). Freehling concludes that it was at this point Jefferson became Calhoun, forming the ideological foundation for nullification.
The transition from revolutionary republican into egalitarian democrat was complete: for both Jefferson and the South. Even Jefferson had come to believe that slaves must be freed: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people [blacks] are to be free. Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them” (Jefferson 1821).

**Social Changes:**

South Carolina in 1822 was a state and a community facing threats from all directions. They faced concerns about their property rights, a decrease in their political influence in the Congress, a demographic shift in the racial makeup of the state, and the ever-present fear of insurrection.

**Free Blacks:**

White Charleston became increasingly fearful of their slaves; but they were even more scared of free blacks like Denmark Vesey. Free blacks could legally be literate, gaining them access to information through newspaper and propaganda publications. Unlike slaves, they had the freedom to move with relative ease. The concern was that free blacks could become knowledgeable of these insurrections and spread information and inspiration among the larger black community. Free blacks had casual access to slaves through marketplaces but whites could supervise these interactions. Separate institutions such as the African Methodist Church and home meetings limited white supervision.

There was good reason for whites to fear a free black/slave alliance. Free blacks had more in common with slaves that whites. It was for that reason that the
free black community began attracting increased scrutiny.

Among the quantifiable numerical black superiority in Charleston and South Carolina in general, there existed an active free black community. “For such a slave society, where 12,652 bondsmen outnumbered 10,653 whites in Charleston alone, the presence of an active free-black community was both paradoxical and dangerous. Concentrated in Charleston County, the number of freedmen had rapidly increased from 1,161 in 1800 to 3,615 in 1820” (Starobin 1970, 1). This free black community was threatening to white Charleston because socially a free black man blurred racial and social lines within the community. Despotism within a Republic required a bright line between the races, and free blacks fully functioning without the necessary “paternal” master challenged these lines.

Concerns about free blacks spreading insurrectionary messages made it all the way to the state legislature. South Carolina went so far as to ban manumission of slaves in 1820. Michael Johnson notes the penalties adopted as part of that law.

South Carolina legislators understood the dangers of subversive readings in a slave society. The 1820 law prohibiting manumission provided severe penalties for any white person or free person of color "convicted of having, directly or indirectly, circulated or brought within this state, any written or printed paper, with intent to disturb the peace or security of the same, in relation to the slaves of the people of this State. (Johnson 2001, 122)

Johnson continues, noting that the state legislature did not fully consider their actions when publishing their concerns: “the legislators failed to imagine that their own "written or printed" words could invite disturbing heresies by circulating among black readers and listeners in Charleston” (Johnson 2001, 122). Starobin also noted that the fear of free blacks living in society caused great concern. Not
only did South Carolina ban the manumission of slaves, they restricted the entry of free blacks into the state.

Whites passed even more protectionist acts in 1820. One act banned any new free blacks from entering the state; it also blocked a freeman from returning to South Carolina if they left. They also levied a heavy fifty-dollar a year tax “on any freeman not born in South Carolina or residents of less than five years.” They also required licenses for free blacks working in occupations that would not require licenses for whites. I see this as an effort to limit the influence of freemen upon the slave population. Fear was evident among white as blacks were organizing in churches. (Starobin 1970, 2)

**African Methodist Church:**

In the way of separate social institutions, none were as significant as the African Methodist Church. It became suspect to whites as a location where blacks could gather without their supervision. The establishment of a separate black church was important socially to the collective black community around the country, to include both free blacks and slaves. The church was a place to develop a sense of community; express emotions openly, develop leaders, and meet outside of strict white supervision. Denmark Vesey was active in the establishment of a separate black church in Charleston.

The trend towards separate houses of worship actually began in the north. Robert Starobin recorded how slaves and free-blacks worked together to establish their own separate church beginning in 1815. The white Methodist Church “canceled certain privileges for blacks within its congregations, the blacks communicated with the newly organized African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. They sent two representatives to be ordained as ministers, and finally established their own separate church” (Starobin 1970, 2). The African Methodist
Church became not just a house of worship for the blacks in the community; it evolved into the center of Negro social life. As such, it could be used to plot not only the path to heaven, but also a path to insurrection.

Robert Starobin describes how white Charleston was increasingly threatened by the existence of the independent AME church. “This blow for independence (the establishment of the AME church) outraged white officials, and they began to harass the black religious community. In 1817, 469 black Methodists were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct. The following year, 140 more were apprehended for violating laws against educating slaves without whites being present” (Starobin 1970, 2).

John Lofton echoed Starobin’s point. “The South’s apprehensiveness about word-of-mouth infection was signified by its strictures against certain kinds of travel by free Negroes and slaves and by its often expressed concern lest some knowing Negro traveler talk too much. John Randolph of Virginia once warned that free Negros “acted as channels of communication, not only between different slaves but between slaves of different districts” (Lofton 1983, 115). Lofton goes on to note: “potential insurgents were given a chance to find out about several of the South Carolina events by the publication of items about them in the press. And at least of the two conspiracies in the state (At Camden and Columbia) evoked enough public reaction to become generally known in the communities where they occurred” (Lofton 1983, 116).

Whites were necessarily frightened of the Church; they had their fears realized about the African Church after hearing the testimony of one of those tried in
the second court. "Religious heresies promulgated by the African church, white Charlestonians believed, justified the suspicion that, as William Paul testified Mingo Harth told him, "all those belonging to the African Church are engaged in the insurrection from the Country to the town" (Johnson 2001, 122). Magistrates spent a great deal of time questioning the accused about the church, revealing their long held paranoia.

**Slave Concerns:**

Racial tensions in 1820’s South Carolina absolutely cut both directions. Franklin and Marshall historian Edward Pearson describes how the economic conditions around 1820 led to tensions lead to fears among the black community, extending pressures that affected both free and enslaved blacks.

The Panic of 1819 had inflicted severe damage on the region’s economy, resulting in the price of rice and cotton plummeting, throwing planters into debt, and causing the supply of money to contract dramatically. For enslaved South Carolinians, this crisis had profound implications. While planters auctioned off gangs of field hands to meet their financial obligations, urban slaves, particularly those who hired out their labor, found their economic opportunities increasingly constrained as work and money grew ever more scarce. City leaders continued a campaign of harassment against the African Methodist Episcopal Church that brought about several disturbances and the imprisonment of several members. In addition, as Johnson discusses at some length, the assembly was engaged in discussions about the requirements for manumission that ultimately resulted in slaves finding it significantly harder to obtain freedom. All these factors provided the immediate context, a specific set of grievances against which to rebel. (Pearson 2002, 7)

William Freehling has long studied the social structure and behavior controls slave owners developed to support a climate of submission among their slaves while simultaneously maintaining the appearances of paternalistic domestic façade. The constant threat of selling a disobedient slave “down the river” was used to control
the behavior of bondsmen. “Down the river” suggested sale to a plantation owner in
the Deep South. Plantations in the Deep South and newly settled Southwest were
known for using more coercive, violent methods with slaves to gain submission.
Further south, the climate was even more tropical and plantations produced cotton
and sugar. For a slave to be “sold down the river” meant separation from family and
established friendships, but also an increased likelihood of corporal measures
(Freeling 1990). It is natural then to assume the amount of stress and strain the
prospect of sale would put on the collective black community. Freehling described
heart-wrenching sales of children and spouses at auction. Entire families could be
separated at the whim of an uncaring plantation owner.

Richard Wade described how the change in manumission laws heightened
tensions within the slave community. There was no longer hope for freedom
through traditional means. “New state legislation had made more difficult, nearly
closing the door on those who hoped to get their freedom either by purchase or the
generosity of their Masters. Such uncivilized laws, a Colored American recalled,
were a great and intolerable hindrance to the slaves’ peace and happiness, since
some had already made arrangements to buy their liberty” (Wade 1964,159).

Slaves and free blacks alike responded to the breakup of the African Methodist
Churches. The Church had been a place of refuge for the black community in the
south. The church was an environment where blacks could gather without the
supervision of masters or overseers. Those slaves and blacks could celebrate
African traditions without criticism, nor an imposed Christian faith. The church also
allowed blacks to assume positions of leadership. The challenge to this established
source of pride and community was greeted as an unwelcome advance or intrusion. Richard Wade discussed how the closing of African Methodist church heightened tensions. The church was a place of separation and independence for slave and free blacks alike.

In this sanctuary many blacks had found both spiritual consolation and brief relief from servitude. When it was closed down in 1821, the Negro community became embittered. Bible-class leaders especially felt aggrieved because it deprived them of one of the few positions of modest status open to bondsmen. The resentment of this articulate group was scarcely a secret. In fact, the city later charged that almost all the ringleaders were connected with this church”. Wade posits that these things combined into a climate “charged with fears and grievances. (Wade 1964, 159)

The Stage is Set:

Denmark Vesey emerged in an era of great political, social and economic strife. The nation was going through a period of redefinition and growth, each of which threatened to affect the Southern way of life. Denmark Vesey took the stage as the embodiment of everything the south had to fear. He was an educated free black man; he became a threat that couldn’t be tolerated. He was literate, informed of the Haitian revolt, the Missouri Crisis, and had access to the unsettled slave community.

It was in this context of heightened tensions as Denmark Vesey took the stage. The allegations leveled against him and his crew of would-be insurgents shook the South to the very core. As Robert Starobin says “black Charlestonians had many grievances, sufficient knowledge of the tradition of insurrection, and adequate understanding of antislavery thinking to begin to plan of a revolt of their own. Only leadership seemed to be lacking: Denmark Vesey changed that” (Starobin 1970, 3). Denmark Vesey stood out as a threat because he was openly working to establish
separate institutions for blacks. These institutions, and Denmark Vesey the man, threatened to undermine the racial order.
CHAPTER 2: TRADITIONAL VIEW: THE FIRST AND SECOND PERSPECTIVES

Denmark Vesey is a symbol of a spirit too violent to be acceptable to the White community.

Charles Johnson

The traditional understanding of Denmark Vesey and his insurrectionist comes to us through the Official Record published by the magistrates. Both interpretations from the first and second perspectives are derived from this single account of the events related to his trial. In Vesey, whites found what they had to fear. For abolitionists and 20th century civil rights leaders, Vesey was a man to be celebrated.

The first known perspective on Denmark Vesey is the “reality” of those who found in him both an individual and an idea to fear. Denmark Vesey was a remarkable man living in a remarkable time. Vesey was a charismatic leader driven to end slavery. For whites in Charleston he represented everything there was to fear about the tenuousness of living as a privileged racial minority in a slave owning society. We can see evidence of their fears in the questions they posed of witnesses.

The second perspective on Denmark Vesey is wrapped up in his example of massive resistance, as a rallying cry for freedom. Martin Luther King’s widow, Coretta Scott King wrote the introduction to the children’s book titled Denmark Vesey. In it Mrs. King offers Denmark Vesey as an example of a black man of exemplary character. In him, she saw the definition of black manhood to be
embraced by oppressed blacks of any generation spanning the divide between nonviolent resisters and panthers. Mrs. King, like other Vesey supporters, saw in Denmark Vesey the ideal of a man worthy of celebration and emulation. Vesey was a remarkable man who stood up against oppression, to his own detriment.

This book is about black American who served society through the excellence of their achievements... It is critical for us to know the heroes and heroines of our history and to realize that the price we paid in our struggle for equality in America was dear. But we must also understand that we have gotten as far as we have partly because America’s democratic system and ideal made it possible. (Edwards 1990, 8)

A slave revolt was a suicide mission. As Kolchin describes it, a rebellion in North America, unlike in the Caribbean or Brazil, had no chance of success. “The South had a balance of forces that was profoundly inhospitable to massive collective resistance. The waves of repression that followed each insurrection, conspiracy, and rumored conspiracy, simply reinforced what was obvious to most slaves: under existing conditions, armed revolt was folly” (Kolchin 2004, 156).

Despite the odds against success, Charleston’s accused stood together. Like other revolutionaries, they would hang together or they would surely hang separately. “The bravery of the conspiracies leadership contrasts sharply with the treachery of its traitors. All of the leaders, with the exception of Monday Gell and Rolla Bennett, who confessed under coercion, met their death with calm and dignity” (Starobin 1970, 5). “Witness No. 5 in trial of Peter. Peter said, “that any of the coloured people who said a word about this matter would be killed by the others” (Starobin 1970, 26). Richard Wade, who later expressed doubts about the accusations, still made much of this.
Most of the condemned died without admitting guilt, and some with almost defiant contempt. Bacchus Hammett, who had confessed, "went to the gallows laughing and bidding his acquaintances in the streets 'good bye;' on being hung, owing to some mismanagement in the fall of the trap, he was not thrown off, but the board canted, he slipped; yet he was so hardened that he threw himself forward, and as he swung back he lifted his feet, so that he might not touch the board!" Others were dispatched more expertly, and the bodies left to dangle for hours to make certain that no colored resident could mistake the point of the punishment. (Wade 1964, 147)

The modern black community still finds pride in the solidarity of the accused in their pursuit of freedom. Even those not accused supported those who met their deaths in the gallows. “In the awful uncertainty the Negroes found an uneasy unity. Most of those questioned by municipal officials professed no knowledge of any plot; others wore armbands of crepe in mourning for the dead until officials forbade demonstrations of sympathy” (Wade 1964, 146). The community found strength through unity in the face of oppression. Michael Johnson concurs with those who see Denmark Vesey and his Army as courageous.

The palpable menace of the court's power underscores the courage of the forty-five men who pleaded not guilty during the July trials. Just as remarkable, 83 percent of the men arrested did not succumb to the court's desire to hear incriminating testimony. Only twenty-three of the 131 men arrested cooperated with the court by testifying against other defendants. All the rest said nothing, at least nothing recorded in the court transcript. The silence of the men executed by the court is particularly striking. Of the thirty-five men eventually hanged, twenty-four remained mute. Two of the condemned men gave lengthy confessions to their masters and then briefly testified against other defendants. Four men who went to the gallows gave statements in court implicating others. Only six hanged men spoke a few words in self-defense. No testimony appears in the transcript from all the other men who shared Denmark Vesey's fate. Since only two of the executed men had confessed and just six testified to any knowledge of the plot, the court's case against the executed men necessarily rested principally on the testimony of other witnesses. Historians' judgments of Denmark Vesey and the insurrection conspiracy rest there as well. (Johnson 2001, 57)
Michael Johnson will argue that this camp needed a black hero and were thus motivated to ignore inconsistencies in the trial record and accept the magistrates’ version of events. Abolitionists, who would naturally challenge anything else written by the slave holding south, blindly accepted the slaveholder’s account uncritically. Later Vesey supporters followed the lead of abolitionists. In these events, those who formed the second perspective on Vesey found a Hero.

**Denmark Vesey Biography:**

Unfortunately for historians looking to understand this event and this historic character, Denmark Vesey as a man is difficult capture. The particulars of his life come to us indirectly through the *Official Record*, thereby, most of the details of his life have percolated through the biased filter of his accusers. Beyond this filter, the other known details of his life come to us only through the documentation that resulted from his contact with whites. Thus, Vesey becomes what others either fear him to be or wanted him to be.

Vesey was born around 1767. Contemporary accounts reveal Captain Joseph Vesey was amused by young Denmark’s intelligence and natural charm. In 1781 the Captain purchased Vesey while working on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas. The captain was known to have treated Vesey like a prized pet. In 1770 Joseph Vesey visited Charleston, South Carolina for the first time and eventually relocated there. It is believed that as a youth Denmark traveled widely with the Captain; he served Joseph Vesey as a domestic servant.

Denmark Vesey, originally named Telemaque, (which evolved into Denmark) labored for sometime in the French colony of St Dominque, where he was exposed
to multiple languages and cultures, before coming to Charleston around 1783 with his master (Edwards 1990, 15). After relocating to the United States, Captain Vesey had the then teenaged Denmark trained as carpenter. Eventually Vesey was hired out for wages, benefitting both the Captain and Denmark, who was allowed to keep part of his wages. Denmark used these wages to enter a lottery and in 1799 won a city lottery prize of $1500. After 18 years as the Captain’s slave, Denmark purchased his freedom for $600, an amount well below his market value. With the remainder of his winnings he established a carpentry shop.

Vesey existed in a strange middle ground in Charleston Society. As a free black, self-employed carpenter, Vesey straddled a racial and social fence. Like all free blacks, Vesey was subject to the black codes adopted in 1680, which defined and restricted all interactions between the races. As a mulatto, (contemporary accounts described him having mixed blood) he would have physically embodied the very sensitive topic of racial miscegenation.

William Freehling describes the South’s fear of racial mixing in this way: slavery in a democratic society needed a complex racial justification and racial mixing confused that which required absolutes. “Antithetical governing systems as egalitarian republicanism and perpetual slavery theoretically needed total separation to exist, which helps explain why the southern color line was so sacred and miscegenation such a horror” (Freehling 1990, 1738).

John Lofton described Vesey’s place in nineteenth century Charleston. Writing in the 1940’s, Lofton characterized Vesey’s life as an “easy” existence. Vesey’s experience as free black was complicated, it did not match his own idealize vision of
freedom. As Lofton puts it, he had been:

Schooled by long experience as a slave himself and acquainted through his reading with many expressed aspirations for freedom, Vesey had his own opinions as to what the liberties and the rights and privileges of Negroes should be. His notions did not conform to the white views that mere liberation from bondage was the ultimate reward for a black man and that freed slaves should be grateful for small blessings. (Lofton 1983, 132)

Privately Denmark Vesey existed in an uncomfortable middle ground. He was free but faced important personal and business restrictions. He was no longer enslaved but not free. Further, Vesey was married to enslaved women and fathered slaves. Unlike a white father to white children, he was unable to pass along the privilege of his freedom and personal success. Vesey had traveled and had been exposed to revolutionary ideas as a slave in St. Dominique and must have been frustrated to have his truncated version of freedom.

Established History:

For the most part, historians of both perspectives had accepted the contemporary accounts of the case published by interested, rather than dispassionate whites in Charleston. Most of our knowledge of the allegations, trial, and subsequent executions come from those directly involved in the prosecution of the alleged insurrectionists. There are three primary source documents drawn upon to develop a narrative account of the plot details, the revelation of the planned insurrection, and ensuing trial of the accused. In these accounts, Denmark Vesey the insurrectionist is defined.

James Hamilton published the first detailed account at the request of the city council. It took the form of a forty-eight paged report titled “Negro Plot: An account
of the late intended insurrection among a portion of the Blacks of the city of
Charleston, South Carolina.” It was released during the summer of 1822 as the trials
were occurring. In October of the same year, magistrates Lionel H. Kennedy and
Thomas Parker published a much longer, two hundred plus paged volume covering
the first court’s proceedings entitled *Official Report of the Trials of sundry Negroes,
Charged with an attempt to raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina*
(Starobin 1970, 13). These two accounts comprise the “pro-plot” contemporary
account of the Denmark Vesey Insurrection.

The third contemporary account came in the form of a gubernatorial address
from Governor Bennett to the state legislature in late fall of 1822. The governor
directly expressed his concerns about the lack of transparency in the courts’
proceedings. A letter dated August 10, 1822 was twice published, first in
Washington in *The National Intelligencer* on August 24th and again on September 7th
in *The Niles Weekly Register.* Governor Thomas Bennett authored the letter. This
was the single dissenting voice known in Charleston at the time of the court
proceedings.

The Governor’s perception of the events is particularly useful because
Governor Bennett was directly involved in the case; two of his slaves were accused
lieutenants. He immediately offered up Ned Bennett to the city council for
interrogation when accusations first surfaced. He was known to have maintained
his personal confidence in Ned despite the charges revealed in the *Official Record.*
According to trial testimony Governor Bennett was to have his throat slashed in the
initial phases of the attack. Bennett also had a unique role in Charleston as the
political adversary of the mayor who oversaw every phase of the first court. Later, historian Michael Johnson will draw much inference from the relationship between Charleston’s Mayor James Hamilton and the South Carolina Governor.

Historians and Charleston’s society built their understanding of the plot and all its immediate aftermath from these three contemporary accounts. These three publications form the only official account of the trial and have necessarily been used as the foundational building block for all later scholarship regarding this case. According to the primary source documents the following is known of the plot’s details:

**Accepted Facts- Plot Details:**

The following is a summary of the events that lead to the trial and execution of Vesey and his followers. Community members and scholars alike have accepted these details at face value for generations, including those coming from both ideological perspectives regarding Vesey.

Peter, a slave of Colonel John C. Prioleau, went to the fish market on May 25th, 1822. A dialog occurred between two men regarding the schooner anchored in the harbor. An unknown man, Peter believed to be “one of the bondmen of Messyrs J. and D. Paul” approached Peter and engaged him in conversation about the flag waving on the masthead bearing the number 96 (Lofton 1983,146). According to Peter, the “unknown man” inquired, “Whether Peter knew something serious was about to happen.” The number 96 was meant to signal revolution. The unknown man then attempted to recruit Peter (or Devany as the name appears in some of the literature) to join the cause of insurrection (Ibid.).
The plan, as it was revealed to Peter (Devany), was for a group of slaves to rise up on the night of July 14th, kill their masters, raid their weapons depots and flee through the port at Charleston to the Caribbean. Peter was alarmed by the information he had received at the wharf and sought the advice of a free black named George (referred to as William in some literature) Pencil. Peter speaks to his master Colonel Prioleau upon his return from the country on May 30th. Colonel Prioleau immediately reported the information about a planned slave insurrection to the intendant (modern day equivalent of mayor) of Charleston. Intendant James Hamilton met with Colonel Prioleau at three p.m. on May 30th, 1822.

Within two hours, Hamilton called an extraordinary session for the city council and the Governor. Peter addressed the council and Governor at five p.m., where he shared details of the plot with the assembled members. Police picked up and held William Pencil (or Paul as he is sometimes referred to in the literature) at Denmark Vesey’s residence. The council then interrogated William. William revealed no information and was ordered held: “in solitary confinement in the black hole of the workhouse, interrogating him daily” (Wade 1964, 143). As John Lofton describes it:

William (Paul), as soon as Peter was dismissed, was brought before the authorities to be interrogated. Without giving him a hint of what information they had about him, his examiners sought to get him to relate the events of the previous Saturday afternoon. After a great deal of verbal sparring, William acknowledged that he had spoken to Peter about the singular flag flying from the schooner. But when confronted with the incriminating question, he flatly denied having referred to an intended uprising of slaves. The authorities nevertheless considered his manner guilty and ordered him remanded to the guardhouse for the night and to solitary confinement in the black hole of the workhouse beginning the following morning. (Lofton 1983, 147)
After a week in solitary confinement William gave up the names of Mingo Harth and Peter Poyas as well as plot details.

Ned Bennett, who was later implicated in the plot, presented himself for questioning before the council at the encouragement of the Governor, his master. Ned disavowed knowledge of a plot and appeared to be calm and collected during his interrogation by the members of the council. Finally, there was a break in the investigation when a week later another slave finally corroborated William Paul’s detailed information. June 16th had indeed been set as the date for a slave uprising; the long feared insurrection was brewing. Ten slaves were arrested on June 16th, 1822. The “Court of Five Freeholders” began hearing secret testimony on June 18th. Denmark Vesey was arrested on June 21st and was hanging from the gallows along with five others on July 2nd, 1822. “Denmark Vesey, who stood at the head of this conspiracy according to the court’s report, was a successful carpenter who had bought his freedom with money won in a lottery in 1801. Since he was the only free Negro executed (six other were questioned and dismissed), officials assumed the idea undoubtedly originated with him and that he concocted the plot” (Wade 1964, 157).

The Court of Five Freeholders sat for five weeks and three days. Their proceedings were concluded by July 26th, 1822. But that time 34 men had been executed. According to Egerton, On July 26th, 22 men were hanged “in one ghastly morning, along a low wall called The Lines. Some were shot while slowly strangling, and white Charleston’s collective wrath finally began to dissipate” (Egerton 2002, 242). After the first court’s conclusion, a second court assembled to handle lesser
plot participants. Egerton noted that the second court executed far fewer of the accused suggesting that the perceived crisis was receding. The first court 63% of the accused, whereas the second court hanged 8.7%. “Of the forty-seven men tried between July 2-26th, 1822: 30 were hanged, 10 acquitted, two whipped, four transported, and one died in jail” (Egerton 2002, 242). This second court was sat on August 1st and was comprised of new magistrates and freeholders. This court presided over fourteen trials in two days (Johnson 2001, 49).

William Garner was the last man to hang on Friday August 9th.

The famous abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson summarized the details of the plot in his 1861 piece published in the Atlantic Monthly. Wentworth gathers his information from the *Official Record* published by the magistrates in 1822. These were the deadly details, plans of wholesale slaughter and massive collective resistance.

The details of the plan, however, were not rashly committed to the mass of the confederates; they were known only to a few, and were finally to have been announced after the evening prayer meetings on the appointed Sunday. But each leader had his own company enlisted, and his own work marked out. When the clock struck twelve, all were to move. Peter Poyas was to lead a party ordered to assemble at South Bay, and to be joined by a force from James Island; he was then to march up and seize the arsenal and guard-house opposite St. Michael’s Church, and detach a sufficient number to cut off all white citizens who should appear at the alarm-posts.

A second body of negroes, from the country and the Neck, headed by Ned Bennett, was to assemble on the Neck and seize the arsenal there. A third was to meet at Governor Bennett’s Mills, under command of Rolla, and, after putting the Governor and Intendant to death, to march through the city, or be posted at Cannon’s Bridge, thus preventing the inhabitants of Cannonsborough from entering the city. A fourth, partly from the country and partly from the neighboring localities in the city, was to rendezvous on Gadsden’s Wharf and attack the upper guard-house. A fifth, composed of country and Neck
negroes, was to assemble at Bulkley’s Farm, two miles and a half from the city, seize the upper powder-magazine and then march down; and a sixth was to assemble at Denmark Vesey’s and obey his orders. A seventh detachment, under Gullah Jack, was to assemble in Boundary Street, at the head of King Street, to capture the arms of the Neck company of militia, and to take an additional supply from Mr. Duquercron’s shop. The naval stores on Mey’s Wharf were also to be attacked. Meanwhile a horse-company, consisting of many draymen, hostlers, and butcher-boys, was to meet at Lightwood’s Alley and then scour the streets to prevent the whites from assembling. Every white man coming out of his own door was to be killed, and, if necessary, the city was to be fired in several places, -- slow-match for this purpose having been purloined from the public arsenal and placed in an accessible position. (Higginson, 1861)

John Lofton, writing in 1948, summarized the plot and the development of the case in great detail using these three primary accounts. Two generations later, historians Michael Johnson, David Robertson, Douglas Egerton, and Edward Pearson, have different interpretations of many particulars of the plot but they do agree on Lofton’s version of events lifted from the Official Report.

The date of the assault was set for July 14th. This date was chosen for a number of reasons. First, the city would have a reduced number of white residents for the summer. Lofton notes that many would have already departed to “spend the summer on Sullivan’s Island, in upper parts of the state, or in the North.” Secondly. The date fell on a Sunday. Many Negroes gathering in the city of Charleston would not warrant attention. Finally, “mid-July would be when the Charleston heavens would be darkest, the moon’s last quarter having occurred on the 11th and the new moon not due until the 18th” (Lofton 1983, 140).

“The conspirators were, according to the Official Report of the Trials, Negros hired or working out, such as Carters, Draymen, Sawyers, Porters, Labourers, Stevidores, Mechanics, [and] those employed in lumber yards.” Others joined from
waterfront rice mills while slaves from rice and cotton plantations surrounding the city were involved” (Starobin 1970, 3).

There were to be seven separate forces each with distinct and important tasks. All would rise at the hour of midnight. “Peter Poyas would march up Meeting Street, seize the Arsenal and Guardhouse across from St. Michael’s Church, and secure its arms. Meanwhile, a body detached from this force would be on the alert to prevent citizens from assembling at the alarm points” (Lofton 1983, 140-1). Ned Bennett was to lead a second group consisting of country slaves as well as from the Neck, to “assemble on the Neck... and take control of the Unites States Arsenal there” (Lofton 1983, 141).

Another contingent of insurgents under Rolla Bennett were to “gather at Bennett’s Mills, kill the governor and the intendant, and march through the city leaving a guard at Canon’s Bridge to prevent the inhabitants of Cannonsborough from entering the town” (Lofton 1983, 141). A fourth group made up of a group of city and country Negros would “rendezvous at Gadsden’s Wharf and proceed from there to attack the upper Guardhouse.” The fifth group of country and Neck area Negros were to gather at Bulkey’s Farm, “Seize the powder magazine three-and-a-half miles from town, and then march into the city” (Lofton 1983, 142).

Gullah Jack was to lead the sixth company meeting at Boundary Street with the aim of seizing the arms housed in Duquercron’s store as well as “those belonging to the Neck militia company in another nearby store.” Lofton continues: “A seventh and final force would gather at Vesey’s and, under his command, march down to the main Guardhouse ready to meet any eventuality on the way. Meanwhile, scattered
unites would be riding through the streets killing all white persons they met and preventing them from giving an alarm or reaching a rendezvous” (Lofton 1983, 141).

The plot was revealed to Peter Prioleau on a beautiful spring day, marking the beginning of a long process that resulted in the rounding up of alleged plot participants.

Peter, slave of Colonel John C. Prioleau went to the fish market. He engaged in conversation with an unknown man he believed to be one of the bondmen of Messrs. J. and D. Paul. The unknown man remarked about a small schooner “the Sally from Cap Haitien, anchored in the harbor. At her masthead fluttered a flag with the number 96 on it.” The unknown man asked whether Peter knew something serious was about to happen. He proceeded to attempt the recruitment of Peter. (Lofton 1983, 146)

Lofton believes that this conversation at the wharf broke Peter Poyas’s “cardinal rule: take care you don’t mention it to those waiting men who receive presents of old coats, etc., from their masters, or they'll betray us; I will speak to them.” The unknown man approached a loyal slave who betrayed the plot (Lofton 1983, 147).

“On Tuesday, the 18th of June, the Intendant of Charleston, informed the authors, that there were several colored persons, in confinement, charged with an attempt “to excite an insurrection among the blacks against the whites,’ and requested them to take the necessary steps to organize a Court for the trial of those criminals.” Five respected community members were summoned and assembled the next day (Starobin 1970, 1).

**Court Proceedings and Interrogation Methods:**

The court was interested in convictions rather than justice. “Members of the court organized on the 17th were Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker,
magistrates, and Nathaniel Heyward, J. R. Pringle, James Legare, R. J. Turnbull and Colonel William Drayton, freeholders” (Lofton 1948, 413). These magistrates were charged with enforcing the law, which called for capitol punishment for insurrection leaders. The law read: “The revolutionaries were to be tried under the following section of the Act of 1740: Every slave who shall raise, or attempt to raise an insurrection, in this providence, ... and his and their accomplices, aiders and abettors, shall on conviction thereof, as aforesaid, suffer death” (Lofton 1948, 413).

This court was not a traditional court with the commensurate presumption of innocence. Defendants weren’t "read their rights." The court sought to preserve a sense of security for white Charleston through convictions, even sacrificing the slaver owner’s property. Robert Starobin and Richard Wade come down on different sides with their interpretation of the case, but they do agree that according to the Official Record, “members of the community were not allowed to witness the proceedings. Only “the owners of all the slaves tried, and their counsel, as well the owners of those, who were used as witnesses, should be admitted, if they desired it” (Starobin 1970, 15). Further, the rules for evidence indicate that conviction, rather than justice, was the aim of the court. Starobin and Wade quote the same passage describing courtroom rules from the Official Record.

That the testimony of one witness, unsupported by additional evidence, or by circumstances, should lead to no conviction of a capital nature...That the witness should be confronted when the accused, and with each other, in every case, except where testimony was given under a solemn pledge that that the names of the witness should not be divulged, as they declared in some instances, that they apprehended being murdered by blacks, if it was known that they had volunteered their evidence. (Starobin 1970, 15) (Wade 1964, 146)
Starobin believes the court was just, given its time: “As the court had been organized under a statute of a peculiar and local character, and intended for the government of a distinct class of persons in the community; they were bound to conform their proceedings to its provisions, which depart in many essential features, from the principles of the common laws, and some of the settled rules of evidence” (Starobin 1970, 15). The court was forced to deal with age-old common law traditions, which guaranteed the rights of slave owners to be present during a slave trial. Part of the common law tradition was intended to protect the property rights of the owner, not ensure justice. Thus, more than one witness was required to testify in any capitol case against a slave.

Even if the court was just for its time, its methods of interrogation raise eyebrows in the modern observer. “Little evidence bears on the extent of the torture, but even Governor Bennett admitted publically no means which experience or ingenuity could devise were left unessayed, to eviscerate the plot” (Starobin 1970, 7). Robert Starobin asserts that much of the evidence against the plot’s participants was derived through questionable means. The Official Record reports that the interrogation of William Paul was followed immediately by nine days of captivity in solitary confinement. “William Paul, for example, was kept in solitary confinement for nine days until he incriminated other slaves” (Starobin 1970, 7).

Michael Johnson understood the implication of sending William Paul to “the workhouse” after his initial interrogation. The workhouse was the established place where slaves were to be sent for corrective beatings. The Official Record recorded Paul was sent to the workhouse after his initial denial of the city’s accusations. “Not
satisfied when Paul flatly denied knowledge of a slave uprising, city officials placed him in "solitary confinement in the black-hole of the Work-House" (Johnson 2001, 53). Hamilton reported later that he appointed a committee "to examine [Paul] from time to time, with the hope of obtaining further intelligence." Michael Johnson concluded that the interrogations likely involved torture.

Since white Charlestonians routinely sent their slaves to the workhouse for beatings, Paul's examinations probably included physical stimuli considered likely to improve his memory. According to Hamilton, after Paul spent "a week in solitary confinement, and beginning to fear that he would soon be led forth to the scaffold, for a summary execution," he recalled in graphic detail the plans for insurrection, plans he repeated in his court testimony. (Johnson 2001, 54)

Later historians will raise further questions about the use of executions to extract confessions. Robert Starobin, who believed the charges, still expressed a great deal of concern about the use of executions to motivate corroborating testimony from the accused. “Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig confessed only after being sentenced to death, but were then promised clemency for cooperation. The court simply delayed their execution so that they had more time to implicated other rebels and testify against them. As a reward, the court commuted their sentences from death to deportation” (Starobin 1970, 7).

The accused exhibited surprising strength and solidarity in the face of both torture and execution. Those who defined Denmark Vesey as a hero found comfort in the actions of the accused. The Official Record shows evidence that the accused faced extreme conditions and like other heroic revolutionaries, resisted the urge to implicate others. Starobin remarked:
The bravery of the conspiracies leadership contrasts sharply with the treachery of its traitors. All of the leaders, with the exception of Monday Gell and Rolla Bennett, who confessed under coercion, met their death with calm and dignity. Starobin quotes from the "Official Record" Peter Poyas strengthened a fellow prisoner who was being tortured by urging him to "Die like a man". Then, Poyas responded to the court’s interrogation with only a "cryptic smile," and from the gallows stated to the other blacks: “Do not open your lips; die silent, as you shall see me do.” (Starobin 1970, 5)

Michael Johnson explained how torture, threat of execution, and loyalty formed a dangerous and personally trying situation for the court’s “pet witnesses”.

By testifying, these unarrested witnesses tiptoed through a dangerous minefield. Their testimony was valuable to the degree that it revealed their knowledge of a conspiracy, but knowing about a plot could easily implicate them in the eyes of the court. To excuse themselves while incriminating others, these men gave testimony in the general form "it's not me; it's them." Such testimony succeeded: the court granted these unarrested witnesses immunity from prosecution. Their immunity is notable since their self-incriminating statements-- ignored by the court--were similar to testimony that led the court to convict many defendants. In effect, these men were the court’s pet witnesses. (Johnson 2001, 59)

The Official Record reports that the executioner was kept quite busy as the court convicted one defendant after another. “Constable Belknap, the executioner, later complained that the frequency of the hangings had caused him great personal inconvenience and had deranged his private business (Wade 1964, 148). Richard Wade continues: “At the height of the crisis he had spent all his time and services in the call of the public, both by night and by day, in assisting at the preparation of the Gallows, the digging of the graves and various other offices connected with the executions (Wade 1964, 148).
Contemporary Critics:

The court and its proceedings were not without contemporary critics. Governor Bennett was especially outspoken in his concern for the way both the trial and the interrogations were conducted. As previously mentioned, the Governor was not a dispassionate observer. The Governor had four highly trusted house slaves arrested. He had been in state politics for 20 years and had considerable authority to indict the verdict and the court’s proceedings. “In a report to the legislature, the Governor criticized the court for an usurpation of authority, and a violation of Law (Weiner 2002). He objected to the secrecy of the trial and in particular to the conviction of defendants on the basis of secret testimony and a refusal to allow the accused to face their accusers. He suggested that the testimony was "the offspring of treachery or revenge, and the hope of immunity" (Ibid.).

The Governor publicly spoke of both Rolla and Ned’s (two defendants) character. Lofton quotes the Official Record: “Rolla, according to the governor, was entrusted with the protection of the latter’s family when he (the master) was away from home. He was said to be bold, convincing in demeanor, and a man of uncommon self-possession. Ned, also a trusted slave of the governor, was looked upon as a man of firm nerves and general good conduct” (Lofton 1983, 135).

Governor Bennett addressed the state House of Representative and the Senate on November 28th, 1822. He was highly critical of the trial proceedings. “The court should not have "closed its doors upon the community" in its secret proceedings. Moreover, he found the testimony gathered by the judges "equivocal, the offspring of treachery or revenge, and the hope of immunity" (Wade 1964, 152).
The Governor held nothing back in his address; he was outraged at the executions that resulted from these extralegal proceedings. "Nor should it be less a source of embarrassment and concern," he continued, contesting the official version of the city, "that the testimony should be received under pledges of inviolable secrecy" and "that the accused should be convicted, and sentenced to death, without seeing the persons, or hearing the voices of those who testified to their guilt" (Ibid.).

The Governor was especially outraged at the secrecy of the procedures claiming they violated "rules which universally obtain among civilized nations, in the judicial investigation of crime." Secret testimony "shut out those accidental rays, which [in open court proceedings] occasionally illuminate the obscurity, in which innocence and guilt are indistinguishable." The Governor continued that this was "a matter of great consequence since a slave conspiracy trial necessarily "admitted no testimony, but such as was equivocal, the offspring of treachery or revenge, and the hope of immunity." By refusing to allow the accused to face their accusers, the court lost the opportunity to separate truth from fiction. "The presence of the innocent [accused], will sometimes fetter the [accuser's] tongue of guilt, and dissolve the best concerted scheme of falsehood, Bennett declared" (Johnson 2001, 41).

Governor Bennett was unequivocal in his indictment of the "court." In his address he called the court assembled by the Charleston City Council “in every sense... an usurpation of authority and a violation of the Law.” He noted his objections to nearly every detail in the method the court operated. Justice required sunshine and this court did not allow the accused to confront their accusers in open court. The Governor repeated the theme the court instead chose to “close its doors
upon the community” and accepted testimony from witnesses “under pledges of inviolable secrecy” and “convicted [the accused], and sentenced [them] to death, without [their] seeing the persons, or hearing the voices of those, who testified of their guilt” (Johnson 2001, 41).

**Secondary Sources Pre-Wade:**

After 1822, there are three works published between the 1822 trial and executions and Richard Wade’s 1964 bombshell. Written nearly 40 years after the incident, an 1861 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* included an article Thomas Wentworth Higginson. At the dawn of the Civil War, Wentworth held that Vesey’s revolt “was the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves, and came the nearest to a terrible success. In boldness of conception and thoroughness of organization there has been nothing to compare with it” (Johnson 2001, 3). This became the consensus view, the only question left for interpretation was the heroism or evil contained in Vesey’s plans.

A less referenced piece was a short, 100 paged writing authored in 1901 by Archibald Grinke. This work titled *Right on the Scaffold, or The Martyrs of 1822* looked to establish Denmark Vesey as a character leader in the black community. It is telling that this work was published by the American Negro Academy. Grinke’s work supports the notion that the plot existed, Vesey was the leader, and Vesey was a hero and a revolutionary worthy of celebration.

John Lofton published an article in *The Journal of Negro History*, as well as a book in 1948, both explored details of Vesey’s life and the plot. Lofton’s work did not critically examine the trial evidence but rather focused on filling in some gaps in
Vesey’s biography. Lofton examined public records and other publications not yet examined by historians to bring further understanding of Vesey the man, and the plot. Lofton accepts the existence of the plot and posits: “the slave plot lit a fuse to Fort Sumter.” Lofton, like historians before him, accepted the magistrates’ version of events but traced the impact of the revolt.

Immediately following the crisis, South Carolina adopted new port rules, which required sea captains employing free black sailors to turn them over to Charleston authorities while in port. Most captains responded to these restrictions with outrage. Captains were then expected to pay for the “detention of their crew while when in port; should they refuse to pay the fines these free blacks were to be deemed absolute slaves and sold” (Lofton 1948, 397). Tensions ignited a constitutional feud pitting the South against the Constitution.

According to Lofton, nullification of federal acts became the first shots in the Civil War. Nullification began in South Carolina with the writings of Vice President John C. Calhoun. Calhoun simultaneously supported a policy of majority rule by publically supporting President Jackson’s positions while writing about minority veto power. Calhoun first raised the question of armed southern rebellion if the matter of northern aggression weren’t resolved. The nullification crisis of 1832 originated in South Carolina, which had already explored and developed their unique notions of states rights. As far back as 1787, South Carolina had threatened to withdraw from participation in the union if the “national majority put an end to the African slave trade... Throughout the 1820’s, Carolinians warned the nation that they would depart the nation” should the majority decide to colonize Afro-
Americans (Freehling 1990, 2340). Thus, much of the scholarship, pre-Wade regarded the political impact of the trial. But, for abolitionists and civil rights leaders for generations to come, Vesey was a personal hero.

**The Vesey Plot, Two Perspectives:**

The consensus view of history seemed to have accepted the magistrate’s version of events. The “reality” of the case came down to the interpretation of Vesey and his motivations. The first perspective held that Vesey was to be a mass murderer, a violent revolutionary. The second interpretation also held that Vesey planned a revolt, but that the revolt was justified and therefore heroic.
CHAPTER 3

QUESTIONING THE TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE: A THIRD PERSPECTIVE

The most important bombshell, short of the allegations themselves, was the controversy stoked by Richard C. Wade’s work published under the titles *Slavery in the Cities- in the South 1820-1860* and the journal article “The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration” in 1964. In both, Wade defined a new, third perspective of the 1822 accusations and trial. He asserts that the Denmark Vesey plot was “probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men” (Wade 1964, 241). Wade contends that the case was accepted as a legitimate plot by both sides, because “both sides of the controversy believed insurrections to be essential to their broader arguments” (Wade 1964, 241). Wade’s version did not directly counter those who saw heroism in revolt. But, Wade hypothesized that the plot was probably little more than “loose talk” among unhappy slaves. Wade believed that urban slaves had little reason to challenge the existing system since they were treated well. Wade’s theory was largely ignored as the work of an outsider until 2002 when he found an alley in Michael P. Johnson.

Wade was the first to challenge the *Official Record*. His most significant contribution to our understanding of the Vesey case was to compare the “Official Record” to “manuscript depositions that those slaves gave outside of court and that happen to have survived in the private papers of white planters” (Johnson 2001, 10). Wade rejects the very existence of the plot and counts the unreliability of the *Official Record*, as well as the doubts expressed by the Governor Thomas Bennett.
and the Supreme Court Justice William Johnson as reasons to discount the charges (Johnson 2001, 10). Richard Wade’s groundbreaking hypothesis is as follows:

The "plot" was probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men. Curiously, its reputation as a full-scale revolt has endured, in part, because both sides in the slavery controversy believed insurrections to be essential to their broader argument. Apologists for the "peculiar institution" contended that the stringent laws against Negroes in the South were needed to protect whites from violence; opponents of slavery asserted that the urge for freedom was so embedded in human nature that none would passively remain enchained. In either event the Denmark Vesey uprising became a convenient illustration of a larger view of bondage. No closer examination seemed necessary. What both Aptheker and Phillips could accept as fact, it was assumed, must necessarily be true. (Wade 1964,160)

Wade explained why later historians didn’t challenge the status quo.

All accepted the official version: that a widespread conspiracy existed and only a last-minute betrayal rescued the city from insurrection and civil war. Whether the author was Negro or white, Northerner or Southerner, opponent of or apologist for Slavery, there was no quarrel on this point. Historians who otherwise disagreed on many issues did not question the conventional story. Hence there was little incentive for reappraisal. (Wade 1964, 150)

Wade’s Bombshell: The theory ignored around the South

Richard Wade notes that the situation was tense in South Carolina. Wade theorized: “There is persuasive evidence that no conspiracy in fact existed, or at most that it was a vague and unformulated plan in the minds or on the tongues of a few colored townsmen” (Wade 1964, 150). He continues: “under these circumstances anything specific-names, places, target dates-seemed to give substance to the rumor, suggesting that a plot not only existed but was ripe. Prudence dictated preventive action and a withering show of force by the city. Not only the ringleaders but even those remotely connected had to be swiftly seized,
tried, and punished” (Ibid.). Wade concluded that the entire trial and ensuing panic were fueled simply by a misunderstanding of “the chance encounter of Devany Prioleau with William Paul on the wharf on May 25, 1822, with its garbled but ominous portent, set off a chain of events that did not end until thirty-five had been executed, still more deported, and a town frozen in terror for almost a summer” (Wade 1964, 160).

Wade based his theory on three elements. First, urban slaves had little reason to revolt. Secondly, Wade thinks there were contemporary doubters of the allegations against Vesey; he finds support for his theory in form of Governor Bennett’s criticism of the court. Wade describes the Governor as a contemporary doubter of the plot with a unique position to understand the trial proceedings. Finally, the court failed to uncover any physical evidence to support their accusations.

No elaborate network had been established in the countryside; no cache of arms lay hidden about the city; no date for an uprising had been set; no underground apparatus, carefully organized and secretly maintained, awaited a signal to fire Charleston and murder the whites. What did exist were strong grievances on one side and deep fears on the other. Combined with a number of somewhat unrelated circumstances, they made it possible for many people, both white and Negro, to believe in the existence of a widespread scheme to overturn the institution of slavery. (Wade 1964, 150)

**Contemporary Doubters:**

Wade attributes a letter of warning, published in June of 1822 to Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, the brother in law of Governor Bennett. The letter warns Charleston to avoid panic and a rush to judgment against the "melancholy effect of popular excitement." In an oblique parable Judge Johnson recounted an
episode "within the recollection of thousands" when a freeholders' court had hastily
hanged a slave, Billy, for sounding a false alarm to the patrols by blowing a horn" (Wade 1964, 151).

Judge Johnson “published a story in the Charleston Courier about a wave a
hysteria over a nonexistent slave rebellion a decade earlier that had resulted in the
hanging of an innocent slave. The members of the Vesey court were outraged by the
jurist's implicit criticism and demanded that he retract the suggestions that they
were capable of committing perjury and murder” (Weiner 2004).

Judge William Johnson’s unsigned letter was published during the newspaper
blackout and attributed to a “commanding authority.” His allegory contended:

No evidence was given whatever as to a motive for sounding the horn,
and the horn was actually found covered and even filled with
cobwebs, they condemned that man to die the next day! "The only
testimony had been provided by another slave who "was first
whipped severely to extort a confession, and then, with his eyes
bound, commanded to prepare for instant death from a sabre" if he
would not divulge the needed information. Many of the worthiest men
in the area protested and asked for "a more deliberate hearing." It did
no good, however. "Billy was hung amidst crowds of execrating
spectators," the "popular demand for a victim" being so great that it
was doubtful whether even a Governor's pardon could have saved
him. (Wade 1964, 151)

Governor Bennett was also critical of the trial procedures. He pointed out
three principle witnesses had been promised to have their lives spared in exchange
for their testimony and cooperation. Their testimony not only facilitated “the
detection of the general plan of conspiracy, but enabled the court to convict a
number of the principal offenders” (Wade 1964, 152).

Though the Governor probably believed in a plot of some kind, he
could not take the one described by the city very seriously. "It is
scarcely possible to imagine one, more crude or imperfect," he said.
"They were unprovided with arms," and except for a few pennies that had been subscribed, "no effort was used to procure them." The leaders showed "no confidence in each other"; in fact, they were "in many instances unknown to each other." They had "no definite plans of attack concerted; nor place of rendezvous fixed." Yet the city represented the danger as "mature and within a few hours of consummation. (Wade 1964, 153)

**Wade on other Historians:**

Wade contended that historians’ interpretation of Denmark Vesey fell into the pattern of how they saw other insurrection leaders. Wade criticized both abolitionists and apologists for slanting their view of Vesey to fit their views about slavery. Abolitionists saw Vesey, Nat Turner, Gabriel, and Dan Brown as heroes. These historians assign to Vesey, Turner, and Gabriel an inherent and unquenchable desire for freedom.

Most authors viewed it in the context of the resistance of Negroes to the institution of slavery. Along with Nat Turner, they placed Denmark Vesey at the head of the list of colored rebels. For some his plot demonstrated the latent urge for freedom that lay beneath the regime of bondage; for others it revealed an ugly layer of hatred and revenge contained only by stringent laws and alert policemen. (Wade 1964, 162)

Historians tainted their view of the official record with their modern views of slavery as the institution.

Wade contends that earlier historians Carter Woodson, Dwight Dumond, Herbert Apekether, and John Hope Franklin, contributed to subsequent generations’ misunderstanding of the case. These historians failed in their responsibility to critically examine the evidence.

Dwight Dumond found Denmark Vesey a "brilliant man, familiar with the Bible, and acquainted with the debates in Congress over the admission of Missouri to the Union". He concluded that; “few men were better informed . . . in the history of race relations.”
John Hope Franklin characterized Vesey as "a sensitive, liberty-loving person" who "believed in equality for everyone and resolved to do something for his slave brothers."

Still others were impressed with the unity of the Negroes which made the plot possible. Herbert Aptheker, for example, quoted the report of two Negroes who said they "never spoke to any person of color on the subject, or knew of any who had been spoken to by the other leaders, who had withheld his assent. (Wade 1964, 161)

**Wade on Interrogation Methods:**

Wade examined the *Official Record* and saw much to critique in the interrogation methods used against the accused and the implied threat of execution. Wade contends a slave charged with insurrection and facing execution, would be motivated to give testimony pleasing to the court. Because these slaves were housed together, there would be opportunity for these slaves to develop a coherent story and coordinate corroboration with other defendants.

While questioned two of them were sometimes closeted together, achieving a uniformity of evidence. In one case William, the slave of Mr. Palmer, was convicted exclusively on the testimony of two of the persons under sentence of death." He protested his innocence, claimed he had attended no meetings and had never talked about a plot, and demonstrated his high reputation in many ways. Worse still, Charles Drayton predicated his claim of escape [from the gallows] on the number of convictions he could make with his story. "Nothing," Governor Bennett asserted, "could exceed the chilling depravity of this man. (Wade 1964, 151)

**Historian's Response:**

Most southern historians ignored Wade's allegation that the plot was largely "talk." The value of his work focused on his scholarship about slaves in an urban environment. Douglas Egerton sums up Wade's contributions.

For all scholars of nonagricultural slavery in the Old South, the pioneering account remains Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities,*
1820-1860 (1964). His now-famous thesis suggested the fundamental incompatibility between enslaved labor and the relative liberty of coastal towns. "City air makes free," Medieval peasants once said, and Africans in America rarely disagreed. In most of the ten cities Wade studied, young bondmen were increasingly sold into the countryside by nervous masters, leaving behind a disproportionate number of enslaved female domestics. (Egerton 2000)

Historian John Lofton responded to Wade’s theory in his 1983 republication of an earlier work. Lofton summarizes Wade’s position: “Wade’s central thesis was that no conspiracy existed “or at most it was never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered me on both sides, with whites needing an insurrectionary plot to justify their suppression of blacks, and blacks needing one to prove their urge to freedom” (Lofton 1983, x). Both blacks and whites had a motivation to leave the record unexamined.

Lofton dismisses Wade’s contention that urban slaves lacked the incentive and opportunity to revolt because they were treated well and the city was well patrolled. Lofton responds to this in two ways: Lofton contends that the policing of slaves in Charleston often became lax which provided opportunity to organize. Secondly,

Revolutionary movements have usually been led by those 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. (Lofton 1983, x)

John Lofton sees the significance of the Vesey plot in terms of its impact on history. Lofton cites William Freehling’s Prelude to the Civil War and its conclusions. “Freehling, 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” (Lofton 1983, xi).

Until Michael Johnson emerged in 2002, there was only one historian who saw merit in Wade’s theory. Marina Wikramanayake Fernando also came to the conclusion that no plot existed. She too, as Sri Lankan woman, was an outsider, whose work was largely ignored at the time because she was writing from a colonial perspective on slavery (Gregg 2004, 2).

Historians had reached consensus regarding Denmark Vesey and Richard Wade’s hypothesis was outside of the norm. Below, Lofton cites historians Stuckey and Starobin on three main points. These arguments directly counter Wade’s thesis:

- 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 manuscript testimony were irrelevant to the existence of a believable conspiracy.

Lofton conclusion matches the consensus position that the plot existed and it was significant: “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” (Lofton 1983, xi).

Noted historian William W. Freehling expressed the accepted conclusion regarding Wade’s theory. Freehling termed Wade’s analysis "a step backward," accusing Wade of failing to even “consult the manuscript trial record before concluding that the Official Report had tampered with trial testimony. Freehling
announced that his comparison of the entire Vesey trial record in both the unpublished manuscript and the *Official Report* exonerates the judges from ever falsifying a quote. . . . The verbal evidence of conspiracy was not falsified in the slightest" (Johnson 2001, 11).

Michael Johnson, writing in 2002, defended Wade by criticized William Freehling’s analysis as well as the consensus interpretation of Vesey’s Revolt. “Freehling proclaimed, and, within the limits of the inherently despotic regime of slavery, they (the magistrates) succeeded: In the end, these uneasily despotic judges, in a time of extreme hysteria acquitted almost half their defendants” (Johnson 2001, 12). Although Johnson rejects Freehling conclusions, he does acknowledge that Freehling speaks for the consensus view. Freehling contends that rather than Wade’s contention that it was probably “little more than loose talk,” the plot was "probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men,” it was actually an "unusually credible conspiracy." Thus, the case seemed closed: historians accepted Freehling’s rather than Wade’s conclusions.

**Modern Debate: The Undead Discussion**

If Denmark Vesey is at the absolute epicenter of this debate, Michael Johnson and Richard Wade are in close orbit. Michael Johnson became Richard Wade’s sole modern defender among the academic community, but only after being asked to review three newly published books about Denmark Vesey for *The William and Mary Quarterly* in 1999. After conducting research for two years, Johnson came to the conclusion that Wade’s (and thereby Wikramanayake’s) widely ignored interpretation of the rebellion indeed had merit.
Johnson theorized that not only was the plot no more than loose talk among slaves, but that the accusations, trial and executions were all politically motivated. Johnson contends that the trial’s magistrates tortured the accused and used the treat of execution to secure confessions. As such, the Official Record, as a political tool of the magistrates, is a flawed document. Modern interpretations of the event derived solely from the document are equally flawed. Thus modern historians who accepted the Official Record as fact have furthered the conspiracy against both Denmark Vesey and his legacy. Johnson accused Egerton, Robertson, and Pearson of taking many “interpretive improvisations” (Johnson 2001) with the Official Record thereby becoming co-conspirators with the Mayor and other magistrates, and accessories after the fact with those who were originally, maliciously, wrong.

**Consensus Conclusion:**

John Lofton, writing in 1983, asserted that even after Wade’s theory had been raised, the appropriate conclusion was the evidence supported the magistrate’s version of events. “Wade based much of his theory on Governor Bennett’s doubt about the existence of a plot” (Lofton 1983, x). Lofton indicted Wade’s analysis of the Governor’s position. He sights Freehling’s earlier conclusion. “Bennett’s position, but not Wades, is consistent with all the evidence” (Ibid.).

**The 21st Century Debate:**

*The William and Mary Quarterly* published a fresh and feisty academic dialog regarding the accusations against Denmark Vesey in 2002. The debate began when Michael Johnson was asked to review three new publications about Vesey and the revolt in 1999. Johnson reexamined not only these new accounts, but also dug up
Richard Wade’s widely ignored 1964 work. After revisiting Wade’s theory, Johnson rejected the consensus view and breathed new life into the third interpretation of the 1822 events. His 2001 article titled “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators” is so noteworthy because this piece ignited a vicious academic fight about the Denmark Vesey case; a debate that includes complicated and charged human issues such as race, slavery, justice, and academic responsibility.

Johnson argued that three modern historians, Egerton, Pearson, and Robertson, each neglected their duty to critically examine the historical record and instead accepted the Official Record in their 1999 works. This extends to the minute details of the testimony provided during the trial. “Most scholars have uncritically accepted the court’s judgment and the witnesses’ testimony about Vesey and his co-conspirators.” Johnson asserts that by accepting the magistrates’ version of events, (and later Pearson’s Design on Charleston) historians have failed in their academic responsibility to challenge the record by considering the political context and motivations of the authors, the magistrates.

**Johnson’s Case:**

Michael Johnson’s 2001 work achieved two things. It supported Wade’s original and widely ignored hypothesis and built a viable case for a politically motivated show trial, and found flaws in the work of modern historians’ narrative accounts of Denmark Vesey’s planned revolt. Michael Johnson’s work offered a credible third interpretation built on the foundation of Richard Wade’s rejection of the Official Record. Johnson described Wade’s work, which “challenged the reliability of The Official Report by comparing its rendition of the confessions of two
slaves with manuscript depositions that those slaves gave outside of court and that happen to have survived in the private papers of white planters”. Wade explained the discrepancies “indicate that little confidence can be placed in the authenticity of the official account.” Wade examined what he interpreted as conflicting testimony about the conspiracy in the Official Record. Wade combined these inconsistencies with contemporary doubts about the plot expressed by Governor Thomas Bennett and United States Supreme Court justice William Johnson and concluded that "there is persuasive evidence that no conspiracy in fact existed, or at most that it was a vague and unformulated plan in the minds or on the tongues of a few colored townsmen” (Johnson 2001, 11).

Michael Johnson also reached the conclusion that no plot existed but for slightly more corrupt reasons: Vesey and the other accused were instead victims of a politically motivated plot, a legal lynching, and the confessions were the result of torture rather than facts. Johnson stated:

Vesey and the other condemned black men were victims of an insurrection conspiracy conjured into being in 1822 by the court, its cooperative black witnesses, and its numerous white supporters and kept alive ever since by Historians eager to accept the court’s judgments while rejecting its morality. Surely it is time to pay attention to the "not guilty" pleas of almost all the men who went to the gallows, to their near silence in the court records, to their refusal to name names in order to save themselves. These men were heroes not because they were about to launch an insurrection but because they risked and accepted death rather than collaborate with the conspiratorial court and its cooperative witnesses. Surely it is time to read the court’s Official Report and the witnesses' testimony with the skepticism they richly deserve and to respect the integrity of a past that sometimes confounds the reassuring expectations generated by our present-day convictions about the evil of slavery and the legitimacy of blacks' claims to freedom and justice. Surely it is time to bring the court’s conspiracy against Denmark Vesey and other black Charlestonians to an end. (Johnson 2001, 126)
Johnson was particularly outraged by the acceptance of witness testimony offered by tortured defendants facing execution. Defendants faced an unimaginable choice of offering testimony in support of the allegations, which would result in the certain execution of others, or resisting and facing execution themselves. Johnson finds the solidarity expressed by these defendants telling. But, Johnson is highly critical of historians who accept these witness statements for two reasons. First, the statements themselves were recorded and published by the very court that conspired against them. Secondly, the statements were given under extreme duress. “This chilling view that coerced and tortured witnesses tell the truth was wholeheartedly shared by the Charleston court, but few other American jurists then or since concur. Although Robertson, Pearson, and other scholars do not explicitly echo Egerton’s endorsement of coerced testimony, they practice it by simply accepting the statements of both the witnesses and the court” (Johnson 2001, 10).

Johnson suggested that the court responded to both Judge Johnson and Governor Bennett’s public critique by increasing their convictions in order justify their actions. The more they convicted, the more substantial the plot must have been.

The court clearly altered its procedures during July, presumably in response to the criticisms of Bennett and Johnson. But rather than exculpating defendants, as Bennett and Johnson expected, the formalities of trials greatly expanded the scope of the alleged conspiracy, leading to the conviction and punishment of one black man after another who—like the slave Billy in Johnson’s account in the *Courier*—admitted no conspiratorial activity. The trials resulted in forty-four convictions: twenty-six men went to the gallows, and eighteen were sentenced to exile outside the United States. Just two of the forty-nine men the court tried in July were found unambiguously
not guilty. It exaggerates only slightly to say that the July trials were held by a hanging court. (Johnson 2001, 48)

Michael Johnson echoed Richard Wade’s assertion that Governor Bennett had huge concerns about the court and its proceedings. Johnson takes Wade’s view further and contends that the Governor was concerned to the point that he inquired of the state’s attorney general Robert Y. Hayne about the legality of the proceedings. Governor Bennett requested his official opinion about the Court of Magistrates and Freeholders.

If I had been asked whether a free white man could be lawfully tried by a Court sitting with closed doors and without being confronted with his witnesses I should have had little difficulty in giving the answer. . . . But nothing can be clearer than that slaves are not entitled to these rights. Magna Charta & Habeas Corpus and indeed all the provisions of our Constitution in favour of Liberty, are intended for freemen only.” The Charleston court was complying with South Carolina law, Hayne said, and in any case the governor “is certainly not bound to examine into Judicial errors, nor is it his duty to correct them. (Johnson 2001, 42)

Johnson also follows Wades lead with regards to physical evidence. “Despite the zealous efforts of court authorities, no physical evidence was found that corroborated testimony about such preparations for insurrection as stockpiled weapons, lists of conspirators, or communication with allies in St. Domingue. The only evidence of the conspiracy came from witnesses' words, some version of which a clerk recorded in the court transcript” (Johnson 2001, 70).

Michael Johnson adds to the debate by raising the matter of society’s taint on the court proceedings. There is no way to separate the moral matter of slavery from the prosecution of these alleged crimes.

The court's procedures re-enacted hierarchies of race and status familiar to all masters and slaves. Black witnesses knew that their
words, heard by an imposing group of white men, could send them to the gallows. They also knew that the right words might save them from the executioner's slipknots. The court's power over life or death—superseding even the power of a slave's master—gave black witnesses a powerful incentive to try to say what the white court wanted to hear. (Johnson 2001, 53)

This taint extends beyond the proceedings of the court; it extends for generations into modern interpretation. The heart of Johnson's argument is that society, as well as historians had based their understanding of the plot on flawed, politically motivated documents. “By drawing mostly on sources used to convict the insurrectionists, historians have followed the lead of the court and of nineteenth-century abolitionists who accepted the court's conclusions about Vesey's leadership while rejecting the court's defense of slavery and white supremacy” (Johnson 2001, 3).

The cultural and political bias extends to abolitionists who accepted the magistrates' version of events. Johnson noted that even in 1861 the famous abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson accepted the still-prevailing consensus that the Vesey conspiracy "was the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves, and came the nearest to a terrible success. In boldness of conception and thoroughness of organization there has been nothing to compare with it” (Johnson 2001, 3).

**Johnson on the Establishment:**

The modern debate begins with Michael Johnson's attack on William Freehling and the establishment view of the revolt shared in later works by Egerton, Roberson, and Pearson. Johnson begins with his defense of Wade's conclusion. Johnson counters Freehling's attacks by pointing out that although Freehling
accepted the magistrates’ official version of events, Freehling qualified his support by ending his remarks with the phrase “no one who values democratic justice can be altogether sure” (Johnson 2001, 11). Freehling had “mounted a spirited defense of the court, declaring: "the Vesey judges unusually responsible." The judges "struggled to live up to their democratic conscience," Freehling proclaimed, and, within the limits of the inherently despotic regime of slavery, they succeeded” (Ibid.). Freehling based his conclusion on the fact that these judges, working in a climate of nearly absolute hysteria, still managed to acquit nearly half of the defendants. In sum, the Vesey plot that Wade concluded was "probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men" was instead, according to Freehling, an "unusually credible conspiracy," although "no one who values democratic justice can be altogether sure" (Ibid.). Johnson accepts this statement as an acknowledgement that there are inherent challenges in interpreting documents from slave trials.

**Johnson on Pearson:**

Johnson begins his attack on modern historians first by criticizing the consensus view broadly, the view embraced by Douglas Egerton and David Robertson and then performing a surgical dissection of Edward Pearson's transcription of court documents. Johnson’s attacks result in a severe blight on Pearson's academic reputation, to the point that Pearson's *Designs Against Charleston* was removed from publication. Johnson claims that Pearson, like Egerton and Robertson, blindly accepted hearsay as directly quoted materiel. “They routinely put in Vesey's mouth words that the court recorded as witnesses'
testimony about what Vesey said. They fail to consider that what Vesey actually said might have been different from what witnesses testified and the court recorded” (Johnson 2001, 7). These historians accepted the magistrate’s hearsay as fact and therefore assumed the accusations about the plot; that the plot indeed existed and was well developed.

Pearson’s *Designs against Charleston* was an attempted contribution to the academic dialog regarding Denmark Vesey. In it, Pearson conducted a side-by-side comparison of two original manuscripts. He considered the manuscripts to be the magistrates’ direct and contemporary transcription of the trials, one written as the trial was occurring and one immediately after the trial’s conclusion. His aim was to form a more complete recording of events directly from primary source documents.

Pearson labeled the two 1822 manuscripts “House” and “Evidence:” “House” being the copy and “Evidence” was the original. Johnson contended that Pearson’s flawed decision to base *Designs against Charleston* on “House,” rather than on “Evidence,” “would not matter if the contents of House and Evidence were truly replicates, as Pearson asserts. After all, the fundamental question is whether the transcript published in *Designs against Charleston* is faithful to the original manuscript, “Evidence”. But they are not replicates” (Johnson 2001, 21). Johnson contends that “House” is actually a copy of “Evidence” citing inconsistencies in dates of testimony and other minor details. Johnson remarks that Pearson missed these extremely important details further flawing his transcription (Ibid.).

The manuscript court transcript makes it possible to determine the extent to which these rules governed the proceedings against Vesey. Two of the witnesses against Vesey listed in the *Official Report*, William Paul and Joe LaRoche, testified on June 19 and June 20, before
Vesey was even in custody. Since Vesey was not arrested until June 22, he could not possibly have heard their testimony or questioned them. The other three witnesses against Vesey--Frank Ferguson, Adam Ferguson, and Benjamin Ford--all testified on June 27, although approximately a third of Frank Ferguson’s testimony that appears in the *Official Report* was actually given after the June court sessions adjourned. In all, half the testimony the *Official Report* published against Vesey was given when he could not possibly have been present to hear or question it. (Johnson 2001, 26)

Johnson concluded his critique of Pearson’s work with “a word-by-word comparison of Evidence and *Designs against Charleston* reveals that there are 5,000–6,000 discrepancies between the Evidence manuscript and the published transcript in *Designs against Charleston*” (Johnson 2001, 21). Johnson asserts that Pearson’s transcription is fatally flawed, not only by using the wrong manuscript but also by careless errors. Taken in sum these errors corrupt the work significantly.

*Designs against Charleston* does not reliably transcribe passages that are the same in both Evidence and House. In the first twenty-nine words of the court proceedings published in *Designs against Charleston*, there are ten differences between the published version and both Evidence and House. Consider some of more than 550 instances in which *Designs against Charleston* adds words not present in either Evidence or House, omits words that are present in both manuscripts, or changes clearly legible words present in both manuscripts. Although such word additions, omissions, and changes are not the most damaging flaws in *Designs against Charleston*, they fatally corrupt the published transcript and render it an unreliable guide to the manuscript court record. All these discrepancies between *Designs against Charleston* and the manuscript transcript appear to be the result of nothing more systematic than unrelenting carelessness. *Designs against Charleston*, however, also compromises the unique chronological integrity of the manuscript court record with ill-advised editorial interventions. (Johnson 2001, 23)

Johnson acknowledges that these transcription errors in Pearson’s work are small. He regards them as “tempting to disregard.” But, in Johnson’s analysis, small changes in punctuation could ultimately alter the meaning of the passages of
testimony. “It becomes impossible for a reader of the published text to judge such essential qualities of the original as the care with which it was transcribed or its peculiarities of diction and syntax, which may be revealing. The introduction of thousands of changes of punctuation and capitalization conveys a false sense of the original manuscript” (Johnson 2001, 22). Johnson concludes essentially that Pearson’s work should be disregarded; the document is fatally corrupt. “To promise a faithful transcript and not deliver it violates the authenticity of the manuscript and the trust of the reader” (Ibid.).

Further, in switching the original for the copy, Pearson missed an important detail. Johnson contends that the second manuscript was actually a defense of the court’s proceedings. Johnson believes that the court’s chief magistrate, Mayor Hamilton, was responding to the criticism of his political rival Governor Bennett. Hamilton needed to justify his actions so in the second manuscript, he includes more witness testimony to support the charges. Johnson contends that there was never even a trial of Denmark Vesey. Vesey was never a defendant given the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses. But, in the second manuscript, the magistrates quote heated exchanges between Vesey the defendant and his accusers.

Taken in sum, Johnson’s attacks on Pearson’s work were devastating. Jon Weiner reported in 2005, that Pearson’s publishers “withdrew it from publication” (Weiner 2005).

Establishment Response:

The 2002 debate ensued as historians Edward Pearson, Douglas Egerton, and David Robertson responded both to Michael Johnson’s criticism of each of their
works, and Johnson’s conclusions. Egerton and Robertson don’t’ grant even an inch of ground towards Johnson’s interpretation. Robertson’s response is by far the most heated.

**Robertson on Johnson:**

David Robertson responded in an article titled “Inconsistent Contextualism: The Hermeneutics of Michael Johnson.” Robertson summarizes Johnson’s critique this way “Johnson avers that, by our having accepted uncritically the *Official Report,* we have reconstructed Vesey as the leader of a slave conspiracy that in fact never existed; by having exercised empiricism’s "will to truth," we have falsely emplotted Vesey’s life and unwittingly perpetuated the Charleston city judges’ fictive version of the facts” (Robertson 2002, 2). Robertson responds by calling Johnson a “contextualist” who completely ignored documents that did not support his own theory of events.

Robertson sees Johnson as a “terrible simplifier.” “Nowhere in his sixty-two-page article does Johnson find space to make even quotidian mention of my appraisal of the sources.” Robertson continues: “Instead, he (Johnson) writes, Although Robertson, Pearson, and other scholars do not explicitly echo Egerton’s endorsement of coerced testimony, they practice it by simply accepting the statements of both the witnesses and the court. The "simply" is dismissive.

Revisionists are terrible simplifiers” (Robertson 2002, 10). Robertson goes further, firing at Johnson:

I certainly do not begrudge Professor Johnson his hermeneutics. Nor do I begrudge his literary techniques by which European and American histories are collapsed into one, internal contradictions are discounted or simply ignored, and "facts" are not evidence but pieces
of myth in service to the author’s historical vision. I myself have attempted much the same in my published poems and novel. I also certainly have no doubt that Michael Johnson is a popular professor among his mentors and colleagues, and I have no doubt that, to a degree, wisdom shall die with him. But to have characterized the three recent authors as "simply accepting" the *Official Report*, Professor Johnson has written neither accurately nor wisely. (Robertson 2002, 2)

After criticizing Johnson’s conclusions, Robertson vividly attacks Johnson’s logic and methods. “Johnson's critical observations, carried to their logical and rhetorical conclusions, present Denmark Vesey in our accounts as having been perceived by us as a type of black Orpheus and dismiss our scholarship as no more than irrational belief.” He continues: “After the execution of Vesey and the textual dismemberment of his historical existence, Johnson suggests, we three narrative historians have retrieved Vesey's head from the stream of time, and we have projected upon it our own voices, deluding ourselves that we hear him sing of liberty” (Robertson 2002, 2).

Robertson contends that Michael Johnson intentionally ignored important primary source documents that support the existence of a plot.

Unfortunately for Johnson’s thesis, there exist documents contemporaneous to the trials of 1822 corroborating events in the report, such as the minister's visit and the prisoners’ confessions. They are the letters of Mary Lamboll Beach of Charleston, written to her sister in Philadelphia throughout the summer of 1822 and available for public reading at the Charleston Historical Society. "I heard that Vesey said in jail that it was a glorious cause he was to die for," Mary Beach wrote on July 5, 1822, reporting on the visit of her minister, Dr. Benjamin Palmer, to the Charleston Workhouse, where the accused rebels were kept. Vesey does not appear from this remark to have been an innocent and unwitting fall guy. Why would the "local minister" fabricate confessions serviceable for the *Official Report* but then pass along Vesey's triumphal self-justification? Perhaps because Palmer in fact reported accurately what he had heard in the prison
cells, and these reports were then privately communicated to and by Mary Beach. (Robertson 2002, 6)

Robertson goes on to complain that Johnson ignored Mary Beach’s letters entirely. Further, Johnson ignored other primary source documents that would have threatened his conclusions.

Nor does he mention the detailed records of the Charleston physician who attended to the sick and abused prisoners during their incarcerations (among whose number were included the witnesses whom Johnson characterizes as the court’s "pets"). The unhappy conclusion is that Johnson is a contextualist when such a practice supports his thesis and not a contextualist when the historical documents might compromise his authority. *He do the police in different voices.* (Robertson 2002, 7)

His review-essay frequently elides primary and secondary sources and depends for its conclusions upon a trope. Unquestionably, the intent of the Charleston authors of the *Official Report* was to present Vesey as metaphor—the black man as a beast; plainly, my intent, as evinced in the above paragraph and in my published biography, is to present Vesey as metonymy, representing in his person the larger conspiracy. Implicit in Johnson's account is a different trope: the synecdoche of Vesey as "fall guy" for a white Charleston intolerant of political and religious heretics. To this end, Johnson writes that "it is absurd to suppose that witnesses told the unvarnished truth.

I agree, although I am not in the habit of calling absurd those who happen not to agree totally with my conclusions. (Robertson 2002, 2)

Finally, Robertson blasts Johnson for misquoting him. "Johnson's citation to my book in this relevant passage reads, with his original ellipsis: "Robertson ... is more guarded, observing that 'Wade's categorical finding that the Vesey plot never existed was disproved in part by both white and black historians of the 1960s and 1970s. ... Yet, his interpretation is not wholly disproved". Johnson cites page 95 of my book as his source. Here is the unexpurgated passage:

Wade's categorical finding that the Vesey plot never existed was disproved in part by both white and black historians of the 1960s and 1970s, who
demonstrated that Wade had, inadvertently, misidentified some manuscript confessions by the conspirators and discounted any threat by armed slaves. Yet, his interpretation is not wholly disproved. If we set aside for the moment questions of common law and rule of evidence, an economic and demographic agenda also was undeniably working against Denmark Vesey during his trial. (Robertson 2002, 10)

Pearson on Johnson:

Edward Pearson also responded to Michael Johnson’s criticism of his work. Pearson’s response was two-fold. He readily accepted Johnson’s critique of his manuscript Designs on Charleston, while countering Johnson’s conclusions. Pearson rejects Johnson’s theory that Vesey was "the victim of a conspiracy of collusion between the white court and its cooperative black witnesses" as they sought "for their own reasons to pay homage to the enduring power of white supremacy" (Pearson 2002, 8). Pearson absolutely rejects Johnson’s hypothesis, citing the complexity of the information contained in the testimony as ample support for his own conclusions. “Even though my transcription of the trial document is inaccurate, the accompanying analysis based on my reading and consideration of the evidence stands, I believe, as a sound piece of scholarship that contributes not just to our understanding of the plot itself, but also to the historiography on the antebellum South and urban slavery” (Pearson 2002, 5).

Pearson responds directly to Johnson’s assertion that the entire academic community should disregard his manuscript. “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, . . . . Although I openly admit to these mistakes for which I take sole responsibility and for which I unreservedly apologize” (Pearson 2002, 4). Pearson continues to describe the error that resulted
in the blending of his “Copy A” and “Copy B” of the original manuscripts which
Johnson called “House” and “Evidence.”

I should note that they were made not with malice aforethought, in
some misguided and devious effort to load and distort the record in a
way that makes my own interpretation of the plot unimpeachable, but
through, as Johnson notes, “unrelenting carelessness.”

Returning to the microfilm and my notes, it appears that I unwittingly
combined elements of the testimony recorded in document A with
elements of testimony in document B as I prepared the material for
publication, creating the series of problems that Johnson has
catalogued. Every single piece of testimony from each prisoner and
witness had been transcribed, but in a document that unites
document A with document B in ways that severely violate the
integrity of the original. (Pearson 2002, 4)

Pearson carries on his indictment of Johnson, this time cutting to the heart of
the matter; the matter of interpretation of the evidence and analysis. “He (Johnson)
has yet to offer, in my opinion, sufficient proof to persuade me that the analysis
presented in my lengthy opening essay is wrong.” Pearson continues, not holding
back: “Although Johnson has ingeniously reconstructed the ways in which Lionel
Kennedy, Thomas Parker, and other members of the court went about their
business, he never explicitly states why these men should have devoted such time,
energy, and subterfuge to this particularly ugly task” (Pearson 2002, 3). Pearson
continues expressing fully his doubts of Johnson’s conclusions. Johnson never
explained the motivations of the white actors “this sordid drama nor does he offer
any decisive evidence to support this claim. Likewise, the reasons behind the
division among the state’s political leaders--Governor Thomas Bennett and William
Johnson, who openly questioned the existence of a conspiracy, on the one hand, and
the court and its supporters on the other--are never fully explained" (Pearson 2002, 8).

Pearson defends his conclusion by noting the complexities of the plot revealed in defendant testimony as evidence of a complex and well planned plot. He speaks to Johnson’s claim that those who were executed were executed only based on the testimony of those spared execution in exchange for cooperation. Pearson asserts that testimony contained significant and corroborating details; “including, for example, information about shops that sold arms and ammunition, or the efforts to poison the city’s water supply by "Gullah" Jack Pritchard, or the clandestine gatherings at Bulkley's Farm--to indicate the presence of a conspiracy orchestrated not by the court in its efforts to bolster white supremacy, but by a group of black Charlestonians in an effort to obtain their freedom” (Pearson 2002, 5).

Finally Pearson addresses the social and political tensions in South Carolina that contributed to both the fear of insurrection, and the slave’s desire to revolt. He quotes Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward: "People experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting . . . . and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets." In Charleston in 1822, as I discuss at length in my book, there was a confluence of events that prompted Vesey to conspire against slavery and Charleston’s slaveholders.” Pearson continues:

The court generated this text in the social and cultural context of a nation and a city undergoing considerable economic and cultural stresses and strains during the late 1810s and early 1820s. In Washington, the political waters were growing increasingly turbulent as debates over the fate of Missouri began to dominate the national political agenda while small groups of men and women in towns and
cities across the North were gradually organizing themselves to fight for the abolition of slavery. This contributed to a broad, general climate in which dissent and resistance could and did flourish, not just in Charleston but elsewhere in the nation. (Pearson 2002, 6)

**The Third Way:**

Richard Wade and Michael Johnson offer a third perspective on the Vesey trial. Johnson’s work is credible. His interpretation is fresh and plausible given what we now know about the subtleties of slave resistance. An armed revolt would have been suicidal for Vesey and his followers. But, Vesey was still a threat to the status quo because of how he existed in society. Johnson contends that Vesey became the victim of a legal lynching because of what he represented. Establishment historians Egerton and Roberson completely disregard Johnson’s premise, but it is not without merit. The next chapter will evaluate the evidence in the clash of perspectives.
CHAPTER 4
CLASH OF PERSPECTIVES: EVALUATING EVIDENCE AND ETHICS

Virtually every document pertaining to enslaved labor in the Americas is problematical in some way or another. . . .

(Egerton, 2002, 7)

The debate between these three perspectives on Denmark Vesey involves the human complication in interpreting historic events. A careful examination must take into account our bias with regards to race, slavery and justice.

Egerton notes the important and challenging issue for historians trying to make sense of records originated in the time of slavery. “Plantation records tend to reveal only the perspective of the master class, slave autobiographies often reflect the editorial hand of a white publisher, and the interviews conducted with former slaves eighty years after the Civil War indicate failing memories of stolen childhoods. Yet each of these documents may be used if proper care is exercised, and the same is true for the 1822 trial documents” (Egerton 2002, 7). None-the-less, we are left to examine the historic record and draw conclusions, despite this relative handicap.

The Denmark Vesey case offers an even greater challenge given the fact that the accused were individually tortured and collectively facing execution. Additionally their words were recorded by, and published by, their accusers. Starobin captures the problems unique to this case.

Given the savagery of white retaliation against the blacks, serious methodological problems arise in assessing the evidence left from the plot, for all of the surviving sources derive either from terrorized
blacks or fearful whites. The trial testimony came largely from witnesses who desired to escape death or to direct attention away from them. Though two leaders confessed, they did so under extreme duress; the rest of the leadership denied complicity or remained silent. The original court minutes survive, but the whole trial record was edited by the magistrates before publication. In sum, the evidence is inherently biased against the conspirators and must therefore be used with skepticism and caution. (Starobin 1970, 7)

So how do we evaluate the testimony of tortured slaves, or a slave in whose interest it was to cooperate with the court's magistrates? It is clear that slaves were aware of executions. Richard Wade quotes an article published on September 12, 1822 in the *Charleston Southern Patriot and Commercial Advisor*. A member of white Charleston described the fear Negroes expressed during and after trial proceeding.

"There was a wonderful degree of politeness shown to us," a white recalled, "bows and politeness, and-give way for the gentlemen and ladies, met you at every turn and corner." This white observer clearly believed the allegations but concluded: “the first six executions seemed to have ripped the heart out of the rebellion" (Wade 1964, 146). Self Preservation and freedom act as intense motivators.

Wikramanayake notes that cooperative slaves were granted manumission. “In 1822 two slaves whose evidence had led to the arrests made in the Vesey affair were awarded their freedom and an annuity by the South Carolina legislature” (Wikramanayake 1973, 10). Wade asserts there was a constant state of uncertainty about informers, accusations, and “irregular” white vigilante justice. Blacks were terrorized both by the trial and concern about being accused themselves. These considerations must be taken into account when considering witness testimony.

The threat against slaves was real, as was the incentive for cooperation.

Egerton, who supports the magistrates’ published version of the trial,
concluded: "testimony obtained from bond defendants under emotional duress---sometimes even under torture---is not by definition spurious; it is merely coerced" (Egerton 2002, 237). Michael Johnson criticizes Egerton in many ways but is particularly concerned about Egerton's acceptance of witness testimony as untainted. “Egerton affirms that witnesses' testimony "must be used with great care," but only once does he express skepticism about the testimony. Egerton, like other historians, treats the testimony of witnesses as a faithful rendition of what Vesey and other conspirators said and did” (Johnson 2001, 7). Johnson continues: “This chilling view that coerced and tortured witnesses tell the truth was wholeheartedly shared by the Charleston court, but few other American jurists then or since concur. Although Robertson, Pearson, and other scholars do not explicitly echo Egerton’s endorsement of coerced testimony, they practice it by simply accepting the statements of both the witnesses and the court” (Johnson 2001, 7).

For the sake of argument, witness testimony will cautiously be accepted at face value and examined as fact in order to determine both the feasibility and level of development of the alleged pot.

For generations, the consensus view held that the Magistrate's version of events was accurate. In 1964, Richard Wade proposed a conflicting hypothesis that the plot was probably “little more than loose talk” among aggrieved slaves. He based his theory on two details. Urban slaves weren’t unhappy enough to revolt, and on two contemporary accounts which expressed doubt about the existence of the plot. In 2001, Michael Johnson’s advanced Wade’s theory adding that the charges against Denmark Vesey were politically motivated. Wade and Johnson drew
conclusions that fly in the face of conventional thinking. Are their conclusions accurate?

This chapter will examine both Wade and Johnson’s theories and then examine three fundamental questions. Were tortured slaves fearful of execution enough to provide false witness? Was the plot more than “loose talk” among aggrieved slaves? Was the plot well developed and feasible?

**Slave Class and Revolt:**

Richard Wade’s central thesis contends that urban slaves and free blacks lacked incentive to revolt. Wade contends that urban slaves had no reason to risk rebellion; their standard of living and relative freedom would encourage them to support the status quo rather than risk punishment, re-enslavement through capture, or execution. But, the *Official Record* shows that a good portion of the plot participants worked in the urban Charleston environment. “Since a special effort was made to exclude servants as untrustworthy and to enlist those who were hired out or worked to and thus had certain hours at their own disposal, Vesey’s men tended to fall into certain occupational categories: caterers, draymen, sawyers, porters, laborers, stevedores, mechanics, lumber workers and field workers” (Lofton 1948, 138). There are several mentions in the record of Vesey’s men avoiding house slaves in their recruitment efforts. House slaves of privilege were deemed by the revolting slaves to be too close to plantation-owners; their loyalties lied with whites. It was the slaves with relative freedom in the city that drew Vesey’s attention. This draws into question Wade’s hypothesis.
Robert Starobin rejects Wade’s slave class argument. The leaders of the plot were relatively educated and had more access to communication than country slaves, which also suggests the execution of an insurrection was quite feasible.

In contrast to the manual-laborer participants stood the rebel leadership, which consisted mainly of skilled slave artisans and religious leaders. Vesey himself was a free black carpenter, and his lieutenants were all slave craftsmen and preachers, Peter Poyas a “first-rate” ship carpenter, Mingo Harth was a ‘mechanic’, Tom Russell was a blacksmith, and Monday Gell was a harness maker who hired out his own labor and kept a workshop in the center of the city. Gullah Jack was a “conjurer” who kept alive African religious traditions, while other leaders were deacons in the black church. (Starobin 1970, 3)

Robert Starobin, unlike Wade, drew the same conclusion as the Magistrates with regards to urban slaves; urban slaves and privileged house slaves, were indeed unhappy enough to revolt. “The evidence suggests that urban slaves were, despite their supposedly greater privileges and higher standard of living, at least as discontented as rural slaves. No wonder whites were mystified and horrified when even their most trusted servants and apparently contented bondsmen were implicated in the plot” (Starobin 1970, 3). What is more revealing is white Charleston’s response to the accusations that their trusted house slaves were planning to slaughter them in their sleep.

Slavery “perpetualists” had long contended slavery was the “natural order” and described slaves as “family friends.” The Master/slave relationship had been compared to that of a father and a child. Masters, like fathers, had responsibilities to their slaves and slaves were treated well given their inferior status. Among their slaves, masters set aside house servants as a distinct class. Slaves working as personal servants versus field hands experienced an easier style of life. They had
constant and intimate contact with masters that required a great deal of trust.

Governor Bennett described one of the accused plot leaders as the man he trusted to protect the family in the Governor’s absence. Given the rumors associated with the alleged revolt, the citizens of Charleston were forced to confront their true relationship with their slaves given the accusations of violence, poison, rape, and murder leveled against these “trusted family friends.”

The letters of Ana Hayes Johnson, daughter of a respected judge and a niece of the Governor, describe the fear unleashed by the very rumor of insurrection. "Their plans were simply these," she wrote late in June: "They were to set fire to the town and while the whites were endeavoring to put it out they were to commence their horrid depredations" (Wade 1964, 144).

Ana Hayes Johnson was in a unique situation to have knowledge of the plot. Her diaries reveal that white Charleston was fully aware of the details of the plot and had every reason to fear. The plot was surprisingly simple. Perhaps it was the simplicity of the plot that shook the foundation of the master/cuffee relationship. Slaves had easy access to their masters; the slaves’ recently revealed enemy.

It seems that the Governor, Intendant [i.e. Mayor], and my poor father were to have been the first victims—the men and Black women were to have been indiscriminately murdered—and we poor devils were to have been removed to fill their-Harams-horrible—I have a very beautiful cousin who was set apart for the wife or more properly, the 'light of the Haram’ of one of their chiefs, were to have been removed to fill their-Harams-horrible—I have a very beautiful cousin who was set apart for the wife or more properly, the 'light of the Haram's of one of their chiefs. (Wade 1964, 144)

William Freehling argued that in such a paternalistic system, slaves could achieve trust and privilege in the home by playing the part of a sambo. A sambo
accepted the paternal care of the Master because of his self-acknowledged inferiority. Whites had to question this relationship after hearing of slave plans to slaughter them in their sleep. Could Cuffee (a submissive, childlike slave) be offering false comfort through his “act” of submission? The violent details of the accusations illuminated the crumbling façade of the paternalistic relationship between master and slave.

White Charleston took the plot so seriously that they immediately armed against the rebellion. Starobin notes: “the hysterical reaction to the conspiracy by virtually all white Charlestonians indicated the pathological dimensions of the “mind of the Old South.” Officials disagreed over the extent of the plot and the best means of repressing it, but no one at the time doubted that blacks actually intended to rebel” (Starobin 1970, 6). It is true that “troops guarded the prison and court day and night to prevent blacks from freeing the captives and continuing the conspiracy” (Starobin 1970, 8). Whites in Charleston immediately responded with vigilance.

The notion of house slaves being part of the plot challenged the picture of domestic tranquility and peaceful servitude. Some whites in Charleston blamed paternalistic masters for the revolt, claiming that house slaves had been "so pampered" by "indulgencies," even "being taught to read and write," that the "considerable control" embodied in ordinances and state laws had been frustrated the "weakness of many proprietors" (Wade 1964, 156). Slave owners had rationalized slavery as the natural order, necessary because of the relative inferiority of blacks, but beneficial to blacks because of the kind treatment they received from their master/ fathers. Paternal masters educated and “spoiled” their
trusted house servants. As a result of the Vesey plot, it seems that even “family friends” couldn’t be trusted.

Even the domestics who comprised the bulk of urban bonds- men in Charleston afforded slight comfort, though they were popularly believed to be loyally attached to the families of their owners. In fact, Pinckney thought them "certainly the most dangerous" because they had an "intimate acquaintance with all circumstances relating to the interior of the dwellings," because of "the confidence reposed in them," and because of "information they unavoidably obtain, from hearing the conversation, and observing the habitual transactions of their owners. (Wade 1964, 157)

Contemporary Doubters:

Richard Wade’s theory of the revolt is supported by only two details: a lack of corroborating contemporary accounts and physical evidence, and the inherent flaw in accepting the word of only the magistrates. In support of his assertions, Wade claims: “Charleston newspapers imposed a nearly perfect blackout on the details of the episode throughout the summer, confining themselves to a simple recording of sentences and executions. And contemporaries left only a few scattered items to help fill out the slight skeleton provided by the council’s publication” (Wade 1964, 149).

Richard Wade posits that the court was motivated to achieve order, even at the expense of justice; the magistrate’s version of events should be read from this slanted perspective. The first court heard the cases of 130 defendants. “It divided the conspirators into two groups. The first comprised those "who exhibited energy and activity;" they were executed. The other included those "who did little (if any more) than yield their acquiescence to the proposal to enter the plot;" they were deported.” After making the distinction, “the judges later confided to the Governor
that the distinction did not wholly meet the facts, but "the terror of example we thought would be sufficiently operative by the number of criminals sentenced to death" that "without any injury to the community a measure might be adopted, . . . which would save the necessity of more numerous executions than policy required" (Wade 1964, 146).

Wade notes that the court was not without its critics. Governor Bennett and Judge William Johnson criticized the court and their proceedings. The relationship between Wade’s two contemporary doubters Judge Johnson and Governor Bennett is of note; it was complex and full of overlapping layers. It helps to define the two camps in South Carolina.

Johnson’s ilk included the governor of South Carolina, Thomas Bennett, Jr. The two men were brothers-in-law and close friends. In 1794, Johnson had married Bennett’s sister Sarah, and the couple later named one of their sons Thomas Bennett. Like Johnson, Bennett was a Charleston native and a Jeffersonian—he named one of his sons Washington Jefferson. The proprietor of a thriving lumber and rice mill on the outskirts of the city, Bennett had served in the state legislature almost continuously since 1804, including four years (1814–1817) as Speaker of the House. In the summer of 1822, he was in the last months of his term as governor. (Johnson 2001, 39)

The following is quoted from Michael Johnson’s 2001 work, but Wade also noted the Judge’s public expression of doubt about the actual existence of the plot.

Only two days after the court launched its June sessions, William Johnson, Jr., published in the Charleston Courier a seemingly innocuous account of an insurrection scare a decade or so earlier near the Georgia-South Carolina border. South Carolina’s most eminent jurist of the era, Johnson had been a United States Supreme Court justice since 1804, when Thomas Jefferson tapped him as his first appointee. Johnson’s familiarity with cases and courts from the lowest to the highest levels of jurisprudence gave his remarks a certain gravity. Under the title "Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement," Johnson described political leaders’ overreaction to a hoax that hinted of an impending slave insurrection in 1810 or 1811. (Johnson 2001,
Richard Wade interprets the pamphlet mentioned above, published by Judge William Johnson, as supporting his assertion that there were many contemporary doubters. "Johnson responded with a pamphlet, which his daughter characterized as asserting the "entire innocence of the slaves" and in which he pointed out that the charge against Billy had been "an attempt to raise an insurrection." The moral (Wade’s words) could hardly be clearer: he feared the court would bend to the popular hysteria and find guilt where there was none" (Wade 1964, 151). These words suggest not that Judge Johnson doubted the guilt of the accused as Wade suggests, but rather that Judge Johnson feared the white hysteria would cause mass executions, and a witch hunt like response.

Richard Wade saw the contemporary criticism of the court proceedings as evidence that no plot existed. That isn’t necessarily true. John Weiner notes: “Within a few weeks of the end of the court proceedings that resulted in Vesey’s execution, the members of the court had been criticized in public by a justice of the United States Supreme Court for committing legalized murder and in private by the governor of South Carolina for sending black men to the gallows in proceedings that could not withstand public scrutiny” (Wade 1964, 153). But, unlike Wade and Johnson’s conclusion, the contemporary critics weren’t attacking the charges, but rather the lack of transparency in the courtroom proceedings.

Further, Wade finds evidence in a slanted reading of the very few contemporary letters he uncovered; he concludes that their authors doubted the existence of the plot. But, these letters may be interpreted multiple ways. Consider
Wade’s analysis of an Ana Hayes Johnson (daughter of Judge Johnson). Wade writes of Miss Johnson’s letters: “Her final letter mentions no plot at all and is obsessed with "the most awful tragedy in this . . . . city that comes within the recollection of man"-the mass executions. "Certainly," she added, the whole affair "will throw our city back at least ten years.” Wade concludes: “By the end, Miss Johnson, if she believed a conspiracy existed at all, thought it surely had not extended far enough to justify the massive retaliation of the courts” (Wade 1964, 151).

At the beginning of the trouble she wrote that the conspirators spoke of "rapine and murder" with "the coolness of demons" and that "the plot is computed to be about 30,000-the children were to have been spiked and murdered &c." Later she expressed doubt. “The leading characteristic of our state is our impetuosity and ardency of feeling which unavoidably lays them [the people] open to deception and consequently leads them on to error in action.” Not much, however, could be done about it: "you might as well attempt to 'fetter tides with silken bands' as to make them listen to reason when under this excitement." Yet she concluded that in a few days "the unfortunate creatures are to be hung-it is most horrible it makes my blood curdle when I think of it, but they are guilty most certainly. (Wade 1964, 151)

What Ana Hayes Johnson is expressing could equally be regret about the feeling of hysteria she observed; which does not necessarily mean she doubted the existence of a plot. The second letter Wade cites as evidence of doubt also seems to express regret for the loss of life rather than the lack of justice and propriety of the trial.

A later letter reported morbid details: "22 unfortunate wretches were at one fatal moment sent to render their account, 29 had been sentenced but 7 had their sentences commuted to perpetual banishment-but on Tuesday 6 more are to be executed . . . . gracious heavens to what will all this lead . . . . and I am told that there are an awful number yet to be tried." Miss Johnson had more knowledge than most, but she could observe on the street that "there is a look of horror in every countenance.” (Ana Hayes Johnson letter to Elizabeth
E. W. Haywood) (June 23, 1822)(Wade 1964, 153)

Political Motivations:

Michael Johnson asserts that the entire 1822 case was politically motivated. But what could be gained by launching false accusations? According to Johnson, the mayor of Charleston saw an opportunity to criticize the Governor, and thereby score political points. The mayor was frustrated by the Missouri Crisis and Congress’s assertion of legal authority to regulate slavery. The mayor believed the Governor was an apologist for slavery, who was not standing firm enough to protect slavery. This more than suggests that the mayor sensed fear among white members of Charleston’s voting society.

It is also true that the Governor and the Mayor had differing views on slavery. Jon Wiener describes the political situation in South Carolina as divided. “Slavery was a hot political issue.” Weiner continues: “The trial and executions deepened a growing sense of crisis for the slaveholding elite of the city and the state. The elite were already divided between a more paternalistic group, of which the governor was a prime example, and others seeking a more militant defense of the system from its enemies in the North” (Weiner 2005, 128). The Missouri Crisis worried slave-owners in South Carolina. The federal government asserted its right to regulate slavery in the states for the first time. This reflected a growing antislavery movement, which threatened the property rights of the “militant defenders.” The Mayor was of this camp. The situation was so tense that there was talk of secession as early as 1823, after the hangings in the Vesey affair. Judge William Johnson wrote to Thomas Jefferson “I fear nothing so much as the Effects of the persecuting Spirit
that is abroad in this Place [Charleston]. Shout it spread thro’ the State and produce a systemic Policy founded on the ridiculous but prevalent notion—that it is a struggle for Life and Death. [Then] there are no Excesses that we may not look for—whatever be the Effect upon the Union (Weiner 2005, 129). Weiner also notes that the Mayor did run for Congress after the Vesey affair, winning and going on to serve eight terms.

John Weiner responded to the notion that the court was sensitive to public criticism. “The court responded to this criticism of its methods and its sentences by arresting an additional eighty-two suspects, taking more testimony about a planned slave rebellion, and then ordering the execution of twenty-nine more slaves, bringing the total of executions to thirty-five. The message was clear: The court was defending white Charleston against a massive and terrifying conspiracy” (Weiner, 2002). Even Michael Johnson notes that white Charleston supported the magistrates, signaling that they were quite fearful and thankful for the protection. “White Charlestonians spoke out in defense of the court, not Johnson. A. S. Willington, editor of the Courier, expressed the perfect respect which I feel, in common with the community, for the character and conduct of the gentlemen who compose the Court” (Johnson 2001, 36). Johnson continues with the public praise offered to members of the court facing scrutiny.

When the members of the court, in a huff, proposed to quit now that Vesey and the five convicted slaves were scheduled to hang, a statement appeared in the Courier that claimed to speak for "the whole of our citizens" who "cannot refrain from expressing an anxious wish that the gentlemen who compose the present Court, would continue their services until the causes and extent of the excitement which now pervades our community, shall be thoroughly explored." The statement praised the members of the court for the "arduous and
painful duty” they had performed, for their "sacrifice of time, of feeling, and of personal consideration," for the "unbounded and unequivocal confidence" their decisions had earned, and for their "integrity, talents, firmness, humanity, and all of those qualities which are calculated equally to ensure justice to the accused, and security to the public. (Johnson 2001, 36)

Egerton responded to Johnson’s interpretation of these events. Egerton asserts that Johnson, and thus Wade, falsify the amount of criticism faced by magistrates. Egerton points out that rather than widespread criticism, it was limited to exactly two critics.

Johnson repeatedly insists that the court began to act more like a court during its July deliberations, "presumably in response to the criticisms of Bennett and [Justice William] Johnson.” Elsewhere he states that the judges "responded to [their] critics by cloaking [their] summary procedures in false claims of rudimentary due process". Unsuspecting readers might take that to mean that the judges faced numerous critics. They faced exactly two, not counting the city's black majority.

For weeks after Justice Johnson publicly voiced his criticisms of the court's methods, Charleston society discussed almost nothing but his "foolish ill-timed publications." One writer dismissed his essay as being as "weak a piece" as "ever a man in his sober senses could write." Genteel ladies entered the fray as well. Aged widow Martha Proctor Richardson criticized Johnson's "very unreasonable & unnecessary admonition" as "very lame." So great was the outcry against Johnson that the editor of the Courier printed a public apology in which he insisted he had run Johnson's objections only after "read[ing them] over in a very hasty manner. (Egerton 2002, 14)

It appears that Michael Johnson has equated political tension with corrupt political motivation. It is natural for a Supreme Court Justice to defend the rule of law and public testimony. This does not necessarily corroborate the charge that the chief magistrate created a false plot to advance his political career. It is true however, that the magistrate benefited from his position defending Charleston. The contrast between the Mayor who served the Chief Magistrate and the Governor
couldn’t be starker. The Mayor protected citizens from a potentially deadly plot; the Governor was so blind to the threat of insurrection that he housed four of the alleged masterminds in his home.

**Feasibility of Plot:**

**Weapons:**

The final question is the question of plot feasibility. The viability of a revolt would have hinged upon the ability of slaves to acquire weapons. Slave revolutionaries needed arms enough to pull off a rebellion by way of immediate slaughter and protected flight all the way to the Caribbean. Lofton claims that the conspirators were making plans to produce and acquire weapons.

Some arms would be needed at the outset; others could be seized in the initial assault. Tom Russell and Jim Bennett, slave blacksmiths, could fashion weapons. Robert Robertson, another Negro blacksmith, was assigned specifically to make pike heads and bayonets with sockets ready to be mounted on poles. Vesey reported at one meeting of his men that 100 pikes were ready. Two or three hundred bayonets were said eventually to be on hand. A bundle of ten-foot poles suitable for pike heads and bayonets was concealed under the house at Buckley’s farm by Polydore Faber. (Lofton 1983, 138)

Richard Wade also quotes evidence from the *Official Record* about weapons gathering. It is of note that Monday Gell, like many other of the accused, was trusted with a great deal of freedom. That speaks to the matter of opportunity; urban slaves had opportunity to organize and revolt which undermines Wade’s theory. “Monday Gell not only hired his own time but kept a shop on Meeting Street where he made harnesses; his owner entrusted arms as well as money to him. Governor Bennett once called him "the projector of the plot" and its "most active partisan." Peter Poyas was a "first rate ship carpenter" who had an excellent reputation and the implicit
confidence of his master” (Wade 1964, 157). The discussion continues, “Two others belonged to the Governor of the state, and one of them tended the family's business when his owner was at the capital. Only Gullah Jack, who claimed to be a sorcerer with mysterious powers, seemed irregular” (Wade 1964, 157). The trial record provides evidence that the plot participants had ready access to both the city and weapons.

The Official Record supports that the process of weapons gathering was both well planned was well coordinated. John Lofton quotes Official Record testimony, which directly discusses weapons gathering. “Vesey got possession of a pistol, and Peter Poyas and Monday Gell acquired swords and Rolla Bennett, a crude dagger. Pharo Thompson had a scythe converted into a sword. Adam Yates became the owner of a long knife, and John Horry, Bacchus Hammet, and Charles Drayton got possession of swords” (Lofton 1983, 139). Starobin also notes that munitions were being acquired.

Witness No. 5 testified in the trial of Peter that Peter was counting resources among the slaves and asking for contributions for powder. Witness No. 5 expressed concerns. “The whites can fire three times to our once- he said "twill be such a dead time of night they won’t know what it’s the matter, and our horse companies will go about the streets and prevent the whites from assembling.” Peter said "there are many butcher boys with horses are the public Livery Stables, where we have several candidates and the waiting men belonging to the white people of the Horse Companies will be told to take away their master’s horses. (Starobin 1970, 25)

Johnson also quotes the Official Record about weapons gathering.

According to Blackwood, at 1 p. m. on Saturday, June 15, Vesey gave him two dollars to hire a horse to go into the country and alert two men on one plantation. Blackwood agreed to go but told Vesey, "I don’t know the way." Frank Ferguson, who had recruited the two plantation slaves, gave Blackwood directions and twenty-five cents.
Adam Ferguson tossed in another quarter. Armed with directions and $2.50 to rent a horse, Blackwood "promised to go that night" on a path he had never traveled to a plantation he had never visited to tell two men he had never met to call down the shock troops of insurrection from the countryside. On this weak link the insurrection depended for rural reinforcements, according to witnesses. Worse for the prospects of the uprising, Blackwood claimed he never went anyplace. On Sunday, June 16, Blackwood testified, "I told Vesey I had started, but that the Patrol turned me back--In fact I had not started and only told him so to deceive him. (Johnson 2001, 94)

Starobin directly counters Richard Wade's theory that urban slaves had no reason to revolt. Starobin believes that slaves with liberties were still likely to revolt. "Undoubtedly these slaves had through their work gained a greater sense of independence and more education than most common laborers. And artisans and preachers could articulate shared grievances more easily than most workers whose rage at oppression revealed itself mainly through action" (Starobin 1970, 8). Lofton also notes that free blacks were among the plot participants and disregards Wade's position. "A few free Negroes were numbered among the enlistees, indicating that Vesey was not the only member of his class who was willing to risk all on what white overlords might regard as a fool's goal" (Lofton 1983, 138).

**Coordination:**

Another important element of plot feasibility was the ability of slaves to gather without drawing scrutiny. Country slaves gathered in Charleston on Sundays for worship services, which would support the magistrates' assertion that slaves could gather on a weekend unnoticed. Further, Peter's testimony claimed that revolutionaries enjoyed widespread support in the outlying areas. "More than a thousand came, on ordinary occasions, and a far larger number might at any time make their appearance without exciting any suspicion" (Higginson, 1861).
Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote at the dawn of the civil war and interpreted the plot in heroic terms. He not only accepted the existence of the plot, but also even saw the plot as something to celebrate. His version of events supports Peter’s claim about essential element of country slave support. “They gathered in, especially by water, from the opposite sides of Ashley and Cooper Rivers, and from the neighboring islands; and they came in a great number of canoes of various sizes, -- many of which could carry a hundred men, -- which were ordinarily employed in bringing agricultural products to the Charleston market” (Higginson, 1861).

**Communication:**

If slaves could acquire weapons, and gather without drawing scrutiny, they still needed to be able to communicate with one another. This is the final matter of feasibility. The record shows that slaves did have access to information about the political situation as well as other revolts. The *Official Record* included testimony that Denmark Vesey was well aware of the Congressional Debate about Missouri. The record claimed that Vesey quoted Senator Rufus King’s passionate speeches. The African Methodist Church was being crushed in 1822 but the communication network had already been established. As referenced in Chapter 1, there were “at least fifty-three uprisings plotted in the United States, six of them in South Carolina” in the 21 years that passed between Vesey’s liberation from slavery and his execution (Lofton 1983, 116).

Wade theory is based on class, privilege and relative freedom for urban slaves living in Charleston. This matter cuts two directions. Urban slaves might very well have experienced more freedom than their field hand counterparts, but
that freedom also increased the likelihood that were exposed to information through the established communication networks. Their access to information supported the possibility that they would be familiar with other revolts. It also means that they would be able to pass information about their own uprising.

To the whites of Charleston, the character of the city's Negro population made an uprising seem possible, indeed, reasonable. The Negroes were, as a group of residents put it, the "most condensed and most intelligent." Moreover, the extent of literacy brought the "powerful operation of the Press" on "their uninformed and easily deluded minds" and, more precisely, made them privy to events outside the city and the South. The example of Santo Domingo, where the blacks had risen successfully against the whites, and the debate over the Missouri Compromise were thought to have "directly or indirectly" heightened the unrest and encouraged insurrectionary activity. In sum, both the quality and the quantity of Charleston slaves rendered the whites uneasy. (Wade 1964, 159)

Richard Wade's final argument makes much of the lack of physical evidence recovered by the magistrates. "To presume that the Insurgents had no arms because none were seized, the judges concluded, would be drawing an inference in direct opposition to the whole of the evidence." Since the city published the full text of the trial to allay suspicions both in Charleston and in the North that some injustice had been done, the inconclusiveness of the case at the crucial points is significant" (Wade 1964, 155). Even Wade notes, however, that there was extensive, coordinated and corroborated testimony regarding weapons.

Later the transcript mentions "one hundred (pike heads and bayonets) were said to have been made at an early day, and by the 16th June, as many as two or three hundred, and between three and four hundred daggers." And there was still more. "Besides the above mentioned, it was proved that Peter had a sword; that Charles Drayton had a gun & sword; that John Henry had a sword; that Pharo Thompson had a scythe converted into a sword; that Adam Yates had a knife . . . that Monday had a sword"; and that Bacchus Hammett gave a sword and a gun to others. Yet, except for these few individual
weapons, no arms cache was uncovered. (Wade 1964, 155)

Wade's point is fair that historians accepted the magistrates' version of witness testimony as fact, without physical evidence to corroborate the testimony. “A blacksmith was supposed to have made some long pikes, six of which a few witnesses claimed existed. But the pikes were never located, thereby forcing the court into a curious logic: as those six pike heads have not been found, there is no reason for disbelieving the testimony of there hav[ing] been many more made” (Wade 1964 155).

John Lofton’s analysis accepts the existence of a well-developed plot. He too quotes the Official Record with its consistence witness testimony as evidence of weapons gathering. “A quantity of slow match (fuse) was stolen from the Arsenal by Lot Forrester who often worked there for his employer; it was later hidden at Gibb’s and Harper’s Wharf. Bacchus Hammet was made responsible for securing power; after lifting a keg from his master’s store, he carried it to Vesey’s. Monday Gell’s shop was used for temporarily storing powder, and some was also secreted in a cache three miles outside of the city” (Lofton 1983, 139). Lofton also claims, according to witness testimony, “John Vincent, who had a mold, was set to work making musket balls. A quantity of these were concealed under water at one of the docks. Another conspirator offered to make cartridges. Lot Forrester said he had combustibles ready for setting fire” (Ibid.). It is true that none of these caches were ever discovered, to include the pistol Lofton claims Vesey had acquired.

Higginson, writing a century before Wade, answers that seeming weakness in the revolutionaries’ planning. He asserts that weapons weren’t necessary before the
night of the event. “The leaders of Charleston were so unprepared to defend themselves that the only thing standing in the way of the conspirators was weapons gathering. Conspirators seemed to have covered this base. “By their own contributions they had secured enough to strike the first blow, -- a few hundred pikes and daggers, together with swords and guns for the leaders.” He states further:

But they had carefully marked every place in the city where weapons were to be obtained. On King Street Road, beyond the municipal limits, in a common wooden shop, were left unguarded the arms of the Neck company of militia, to the number of several hundred stand; and these were to be secured by Bacchus Hammett, whose master kept the establishment. In Mr. Duquercron's shop there were deposited for sale as many more weapons; and they had noted Mr. Schirer's shop in Queen Street, and other gunsmiths' establishments. Finally, the State arsenal in Meeting Street, a building with no defences except ordinary wooden doors, was to be seized early in the outbreak. Provided, therefore, that the first moves proved successful, all the rest appeared sure. (Higginson, 1861)

Finally, it is true that despite the reported level of coordination, no rebellion ever occurred. “No black army of plantation slaves materialized in Charleston on the night of June 16 or any other night. According to Governor Bennett, the perfect tranquility which everywhere prevailed [in the surrounding countryside] was the strongest evidence of their having no participation, with the disaffected of the Metropolis” (Johnson 2001, 95). It should be noted that a lack of execution does not prove a lack of planning.

**Mutual Hysteria:**

The matter of hysteria is important to examine because fear acted as the combustible fuel ignited by the allegations of armed rebellion. The instant hysterical response described in the literature undermines the peaceful façade
claimed by slave owning whites, pre Denmark Vesey. Blacks and whites alike were had reason to be fearful in Charleston in 1822.

Blacks heard the whites were going to "thin out" the colored population, that a would bring out the militia and volunteers to butcher the slaves on the spot, that new restraints were under consideration in city hall and the state legislature. Circulating among the whites were equally hair-raising notions: a servile uprising, the seizure of the city, the carrying off of women after all males had been exterminated. (Wade 1964, 159)

Black Hysteria:

Michael Johnson is quoted at length here because his estimation of black tensions offers an explanation of why black rebellion seemed so plausible in 1822. Slaves had reason to believe that freedom would never come through legal means. “In 1820, the South Carolina legislature prohibited masters from manumitting their slaves, stating unambiguously "that no slave shall hereafter be emancipated but by act of the Legislature" (Johnson 2001, 101). Johnson makes much of the fact that slaves and free Negroes might have misinterpreted reports in Charleston’s Courier, interpreting an absolute ban on manumission ending the dream of eventual emancipation.

The Courier’s news reports from the 1821 legislature never made a clear distinction between the manumission of one or two slaves and the emancipation of all or most slaves. The brief reports assumed an audience of well-informed white people familiar with the provisions of the 1820 law and the narrowly limited meaning of news that an emancipation act was expected to pass. The news reports did not assume an audience of intensely curious black readers, although as William Colcock testified, "what was going on was printed in all the papers, so that every body black as well as white might read it. (Johnson 2001, 132)

John Lofton adds the closing of the African Methodist Church to the list of tensions and grievances felt by Charleston slaves. “Vesey seized upon suitable
events to voice dissatisfaction with the status of slaves in South Carolina. Once such event was the city's repressive action in 1818 against the independent African Church which had been formed by Negroes and conducted in their own building in Hampstead, a suburb of Charleston” (Lofton 1983, 132). Lofton reads Charleston whites as being “fearful of unsupervised meetings of Negroes, white authorities had arrested a large number of African Church members and punished their leaders. This incursion against one of the rare exercises of Negro autonomy inevitably created resentment” (Lofton 1983, 133).

Finally, and most urgent for slaves, rumors circulated about whites “thinning out” the slave population. Michael Johnson quotes the Official Record regarding these rumors.

Robert Harth testified that Peter Poyas said, "have you not heard that on the 4th July the Whites are going to create a false alarm of fire & every black that comes out will be killed in order to thin them--Do you think they would be so barbarous said I [Harth]--yes said he [Poyas] I do--I fear they have some knowledge of an army from St Domingo & they would be right to do it to prevent us from joining that army if it should march towards this land." This rumor inverted the court’s narrative of black insurrection: whites would give the fire alarm and kill blacks rather than vice versa. But how could such a rumor arise? Although Charleston’s slaves and free people of color understood white brutality all too well, why would they credit a rumor that the city’s whites would kill blacks indiscriminately? (Johnson 2001, 112)

The human response to a mortal threat is natural and it is unequivocal.

Mortal threats justify immoral acts.

White Hysteria:

Wade describes how hysteria could so easily spread among whites in Charleston after allegations surfaced of a planned insurrection.
As word of it spread in the city, public shock turned into hysteria. No master could be sure his bondsmen were not involved; whites who owned no slaves had little more assurance. Every Negro became a possible enemy, indeed assassin; every action by a black could be construed as a prelude to violence. Since slaves lived in the same yard with their masters, it was not even possible to lock out the intruder.” Wade goes further to say that “as the terror spread, so to did the perceived magnitude of the plot. (Wade 1964, 144)

Richard Wade quotes one of the Ana Johnson letters, which supports his assertion that Charleston fell into a state of mass hysteria. Her words reveal the extreme level of panic in white Charleston as word of the allegations circulated. "In all probability the executed will not end under 100," Miss Johnson estimated, and others asserted that "even should there be 500 executed there would still be enough" conspirators to pull off the scheme. "How far the mischief has extended heaven only knows," she lamented fearfully” (Wade 1964, 145).

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, writing a century earlier, observed the terror this incident incited in white Charlestonians. “The intense avidity which at first grasped at every incident of the great insurrectionary plot was succeeded by a distaste for the memory of the tale; and the official reports which told what slaves had once planned and dared have now come to be among the rarest of American historical documents” (Higginson, 1861). Higginson notes that whites conspired to conceal the details of this plot from literate slaves and free blacks alike revealing that the facade of peaceful, domestic tranquility had crumbled under the weight of insurrectionist’s scheming.

In 1841, a friend of the writer, then visiting South Carolina, heard from her hostess for the first time the events, which are recounted here. On asking to see the reports of the trials, she was cautiously told that the only copy in the house, after being carefully kept for years under lock and key, had been burnt at last, lest it should reach the
dangerous eyes of the slaves. The same thing had happened, it was added, in many other families. This partially accounts for the great difficulty now to be found in obtaining a single copy of either publication; and this is why, to the readers of American history, Denmark Vesey and Peter Poyas have been heretofore but the shadows of names. (Higginson, 1861)

Higginson wasn’t alone in noticing the secrecy of the court. Richard Wade also noted that the court worked in complete concealment; Wade concluded it was for the same reason. Quoting the *Official Record*: “The freeholders worked in complete secrecy because of the "peculiar nature of the investigations" and because "it was also morally certain that no coloured witness would have ventured to incur the resentment of his comrades, by voluntarily disclosing his testimony in a public court” (Wade 1964, 146). Wade also asserts that white Charleston was fearful of spreading any details to literate blacks, which might still be planning to mount an insurrection.

The court’s efforts at concealment didn’t necessarily prevent blacks from becoming aware of its proceedings. Wade notes: “Blacks were terrorized by the trial as well. There was a constant state of concern about informers, accusations, and “irregular” white vigilante justice. “In the awful uncertainty the Negroes found an uneasy unity. Most of those questioned by municipal officials professed no knowledge of any plot; others wore armbands of crepe in mourning for the dead until officials forbade demonstrations of sympathy” (Wade 1964, 146). Blacks, under the fear of execution, would necessarily be terrified.

This climate of hysteria was palpable. Robert Starobin records the extreme level of hysteria reached in Charleston. He notes: “even Governor Bennett and his brother-in-law, United States Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, both of whom
deplored the panic and criticized the procedures of the authorities, believed that the plot did in fact exist and became somewhat hysterical themselves” (Starobin 1970, 6).

Even more important than the hysterical response of greater society; was the state’s official response to the incident. Governor Bennett, Wade’s principal “doubter,” acting without public knowledge, requested federal military support. Starobin reports:

Bennett secretly communicated with Secretary of War John C. Calhoun to request federal reinforcements for local garrisons; Calhoun complied by shifting troops from Savannah and St. Augustine to the Charleston area. Thus, the military preparations, the number of arrests, deportations, and executions, the harsh punishments, and the fears expressed privately by many whites—all indicated the magnitude of the hysteria. (Starobin 1970, 6)

The threat was significant enough for the Governor to arm against rebellion.

Richard Wade claims Governor Bennett doubted the existence of a plot. A doubtful governor would not request troops from a barely trusted federal government in such a charged political atmosphere.

Conclusions:

The debate between historians over the details of this case is reflective of the debate in the greater society with regards to Vesey. There remain three distinct views on this case all of which are challenged with the complications of human shortcomings. There is an inherent problem evaluating the historic record of any event involving slavery. This problem is compacted when the event is a capital trial and the only record comes through the filter of the accusers. Historians have long acknowledged the evidence in the Denmark Vesey case has came to us through a
biased filter, but Michael Johnson brought to light the question of an even greater political bias, illuminating a third perspective.

In one camp there are historians and member of the community who still believe in the existence of the plot. There are still people who are married to the magistrates’ version of events because in it they find a hero, a villain, and a plausible slave rebellion in North America. Starobin writing 30 years ago, expressed doubts about witness testimony derived under duress still concluded that the plot existed. “The wealth of detail about the rebels’ plans, the coincidence of the names, and the correspondence of places contained in the printer record- all seem derived more from common knowledge by blacks about the plot than from testimony manufactured by the whites” (Starobin 1970, 7). Modern historians Robertson and Egerton, even in the face of Johnson’s criticism, defend their long held conclusions about the existence of a planned revolt. They, like those who want to maintain Vesey the Hero, have a stake in maintaining this version of the revolt.

The consensus view still holds Vesey as the leader of an insurrection, but this consensus also shows signs of evolution. Johnson’s more mature look at the revolt has found supporters in the academic community. Texts written after the 2002 dialog was published in The William and Mary Quarterly are beginning to mention that the details of the plot are not conclusive.
CONCLUSIONS

HUMAN VALUES- JUSTICE VS. SELF-PRESERVATION

Justice is on one scale, and self-preservation on the other.

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 1820

The fourth perspective is one that takes into account human values. Any matter involving slavery can be telling because slavery “encompasses so many essential ingredients of human relations—power, work, race, sex, identity, interest, cooperation, conflict, deceit, and rationalization—and because it highlights the tension between the ideal of freedom and the reality of unfreedom has been a central feature of American history (Kolchin 2004, xviii). The trial of Denmark Vesey is all the more important to our understanding of human nature, because the case occurred at the intersection of justice and self-preservation. This case challenges our notions about resistance, heroism, and violence; and raises the question of how those concepts interact with matters of race. Denmark Vesey has become an image; as such he shows how difficult it is to arrive at historic truth. Our understanding of the case and the events surrounding it demands an ethical treatment of the evidence in order to advance our understanding of human history. History is a tentative craft.

It is difficult to get to historic truth in any event related to slavery. We will probably never know exactly what happened in Charleston in the 1820’s. Like most incidents involving slaves, information comes to us through a biased filter. Peter Kolchin noted in his work *American Slavery*, most studies of slavery have focused on the acts of the master rather than that of the slave: “the vast majority of whom were illiterate and therefore left no written records, appeared in their (historian’s) works
primarily as objects of white action“ (Kolchin 2004, 134). Our knowledge of Denmark Vesey follows this model. The details of Vesey’s life come to us through the documentation provided only through his contact with white society, purchase records, travel logs and white diaries. We know when he was purchased as well when he bought his own freedom. We know about his business because he served white Charleston. We know about his death because it came at the hands of his white accusers. The details of his crime also come to us through this sift, as is the case of all the would-be insurrectionists. We can never know their stories through their eyes nor how they experienced the world.

The magistrates accused Denmark Vesey of abusing his position and privilege as a free black to incite an insurrection. He garnered their attention because he stood out; he moved and acted in the very separate institutions that threatened the racial order whites found most threatening. The accusers themselves wrote the only published record of the case. The witness testimony comes from slaves who faced possible manumission or execution in exchange for their cooperation or non-cooperation.

But some inherent truth speaks to us through this record. The questioning from the Magistrates is dripping with a grave sense of fear, long brewing among whites in Charleston. The swiftness of the trial and executions show there was no room for error where self-preservation was at play, as in the case of a slave revolt. Richard Wade sums up the panic incited by Vesey among whites in Charleston in 1822. “So incendiary did whites regard these individual acts of sabotage by house servants that references to poisoning well were deleted from printed records. In
any event, the evidence suggests that a revision of the traditional role assigned to house servants is in order” (Wade 1964, 144).

We know that resistance to slavery was a complicated matter, shaded with many more subtleties than had originally been seen. Slaves didn't fall into only two categories; they weren't simply either a violent threat or a sambo. It is true that massive resistance through violence was a near impossibility given the demographics in North America. Blacks never formed an absolute majority. They had virtually no chance of mounting a successful armed revolt that could succeed in overthrowing the institution; whites would always be plentiful enough to respond to the immediate attack. At best, there was an opportunity for small bands of slaves to escape into the marshes in the Deep South or in border-states to make their way to the North. But, the overthrow of the institution of slavery was an absolute impossibility. For Vesey's Army, success didn't require a redrawing the rules of the society in which they lived; it meant escaping America and setting sail for the Caribbean. That complicates our judgment of the Vesey case; it isn't cut and dried like other planned insurrections. The goal of Vesey's army was rebel only enough to make an escape, it might have been feasible.

Michael Johnson drew for us a different picture of white society in South Carolina, one that used legal means to enforce the social structure. According to Johnson, Vesey was chosen by Charleston's mayor as an example because he represented a different kind of threat. Vesey represented a subtle resistance to slavery. Rather than the violent leader he has been portrayed as, Vesey was actually a victim of a "legal lynching."
As early as 1861, Thomas Wentworth Higginson noted that the sentence handed down to Vesey was an expression of the confounding situation faced by Whites, who had long rationalized their treatment of blacks. “It is difficult to imagine,” said the sentence finally passed on Denmark Vesey, "what infatuation could have prompted you to attempt an enterprise so wild and visionary. You were a free man, comely, wealthy, and enjoyed every comfort compatible with your situation. You had, therefore, much to risk and little to gain" (Higginson 1861). For white Charleston, it was no longer possible to be neutral with regards to slaves, they were either sambos or insurrectionist- and the difference had to be flushed out.

Denmark Vesey triggered a powerful response among white society in Charleston. The very façade of South Carolina’s race based society collapsed in 1822. Justice is a near impossibility in a climate of hysteria. Slave owners and leaders of Charleston were willing to torture their “child-like, cherished, family friends” in order to secure details about a planned insurrection suggesting that the curtain of denial had been removed. Slave owners in Charleston were forced to confront the contradiction in their previously firmly held belief system. In the end, justice and self-preservation can be at odds. The case widened the already existing split between the Apologist camp and the Militant camp, thrusting South Carolina towards secession.

Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if Johnson and Wade were correct or incorrect in their interpretation of the revolt. The visceral response from each community, through history, to this insurrection is what reveals our human nature. Denmark Vesey's legacy is forever entangled with the legacy of slavery and race. He is still
either an image to vilify or celebrate, but also as an image to protect. The modern academic debate has illuminated another option, Vesey as victim and perhaps also a vessel into which our perceptions are poured and then reflected. Vesey is a mirror to our own perceptions about race, heroism, resistance and justice.
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