

Denmark Vesey - The Official Charleston Account (1822)

On Thursday, the 27th, DENMARK VESEY, a free black man, was brought before the court for trial,

Assisted by his counsel, G. W. CROSS, Esq.

It is perhaps somewhat remarkable, that at this stage of the investigation, although several witnesses had been examined, the atrocious guilt of Denmark Vesey had not been as yet fully unfolded. From the testimony of most of the witnesses, however, the court found enough, and amply enough, to warrant the sentence of death, which, on the 28th, they passed on him. But every subsequent step in the progress of the trials of others, lent new confirmation to his overwhelming guilt, and placed him beyond a doubt, on the criminal eminence of having been the individual, in whose bosom the nefarious scheme was first engendered. There is ample reason for believing, that this project was not, with him, of recent origin, for it was said, he had spoken of it for upwards of four years.

These facts of his guilt the journals of the court will disclose—that no man can be proved to have spoken of or urged the insurrection prior to himself. All the channels of communication and intelligence are traced back to him. His house was the place appointed for the secret meetings of the conspirators, at which he was invariably a leading and influential member; animating and encouraging the timid, by the hopes and prospects of success; removing the scruples of the religious, by the grossest prostitution and perversion of the sacred oracles, and inflaming and confirming the resolute, by all the savage fascinations of blood and booty.

The peculiar circumstances of guilt, which confer a distinction on his case, will be found narrated in the confession of Rolla, Monday Gell, Frank, and Jesse, in the appendix. He was sentenced for execution on the 2d July.*

* As Denmark Vesey has occupied so large a place in the conspiracy, a brief notice of him will, perhaps, be not devoid of interest. The following anecdote will show how near he was to the chance of being distinguished in the bloody events of San Domingo. During the revolutionary war, captain Vesey, now an old resident of this city, commanded a ship that traded between St. Thomas' and Cape François (San Domingo.) He was engaged in supplying the French of that island with slaves. In the year 1781, he took on board, at St. Thomas's, 390 slaves and sailed for the Cape; on the passage, he and his officers were struck with the beauty, alertness, and intelligence, of a boy about 14 years of age, whom they made a pet of, by taking him into the cabin, changing his apparel, and calling him, by way of distinction, Telemaque, (which appellation has since, by gradual corruption, among the negroes, been changed to Denmark, or

sometimes Telmak.) On the arrival, however, of the ship at the Cape, captain Vesey, having no use for the boy, sold him among his other slaves, and returned to St. Thomas's. On his next voyage to the Cape, he was surprised to learn from his consignee that Telemaque would be returned on his hands, as the planter, who had purchased him, represented him unsound, and subject to epileptick fits. According to the custom of trade in that place, the boy was placed in the hands of the king's physician, who decided that he was unsound, and captain Vesey was compelled to take him back, of which he had no occasion to repent, as Denmark proved, for 20 years, a most faithful slave. In 1800, Denmark drew a prize of \$1500 in the East Bay street lottery, with which he purchased his freedom from his master, at six hundred dollars, much less than his real value. From that period to the day of his apprehension, he has been working as a carpenter in this city, distinguished for great strength and activity. Among his colour he was always looked up to with awe and respect. His temper was impetuous and domineering in the extreme, qualifying him for the despotick rule, of which he was ambitious. All his passions were ungovernable and savage; and to his numerous wives and children, he displayed the haughty and capricious cruelty of an eastern bashaw. He had nearly effected his escape, after information had been lodged against him. For three days the town was searched for him without success. As early as Monday, the 17th, he had concealed himself. It was not until the night of the 22d of June, during a perfect tempest, that he was found secreted in the house of one of his wives. It is to the uncommon efforts and vigilance of Mr. Wesner, and capt. Dove, of the city guard, (the latter of whom seized him) that publick justice received its necessary tribute, in the execution of this man. If the party had been one moment later, he would, in all probability, have effected his escape the next day in some outward bound vessel.

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