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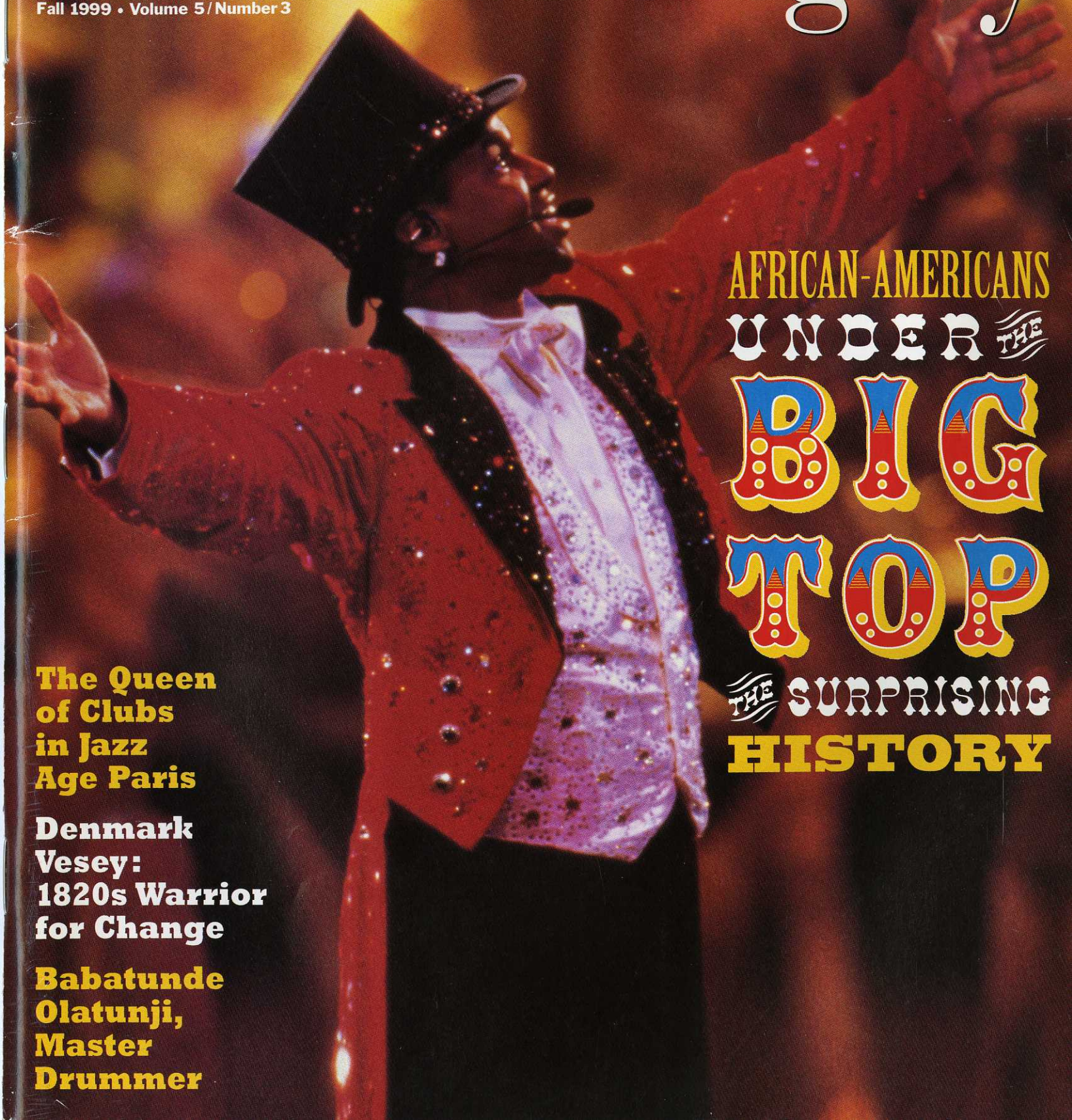
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CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# American Legacy

Fall 1999 • Volume 5/Number 3



AFRICAN-AMERICANS  
UNDER THE  
**BIG**  
**TOP**  
THE SURPRISING  
**HISTORY**

**The Queen  
of Clubs  
in Jazz  
Age Paris**

**Denmark  
Vesey:  
1820s Warrior  
for Change**

**Babatunde  
Olatunji,  
Master  
Drummer**



SHIPS CROWD  
CHARLESTON'S BUSY  
HARBOR NOT LONG  
BEFORE VESEY PLOTTED  
TO SEIZE VESSELS  
THERE TO CARRY HIS  
FOLLOWERS TO HAITI.

# The

*Enraged by the  
evils of slavery, the  
passionate, eloquent, and  
all-but-forgotten Denmark Vesey  
planned an uprising that  
would have destroyed  
1820's Charleston*



# ENIGMA of His Face

By DAVID ROBERTSON ■ No one thought to describe his face. For some five days, during his trial and sentencing, he was kept under constant guard at the workhouse, a frame building used for the punishment of slaves, located near the marshes that then marked the eastern limit of the city of Charleston, South Carolina. No black person without special authorization was allowed within two blocks of the building, but throughout that third week of June 1822, freemen and slaves under arrest came and gave testimony against him inside a small room on the upper story of the prison. Later that

autumn, after his hanging, two of the judges on his trial published an official record of the proceedings. At no point in this 164-page text did either of the judges think it necessary to describe his features. Throughout his trial and sentencing, he is officially depicted as a black man, and as a freeman.

The enigma of his face returned to confront the city of Charleston 154 years after his execution. In 1976 the city commissioned his portrait to be painted and placed in honor at the new municipal auditorium. The artist was thus presented with the problem of portraying a man of





*The city was to be burned to its foundations  
with explosives and incendiaries.*

whom there was no known likeness. But this wasn't the only difficulty. "If black leaders in Charleston had searched for a thousand years," a white columnist of the *Charleston Post and Courier* wrote when the art project became known, "they could not have found a local black whose portrait would be more offensive to many white people." A letter to the same newspaper, presumably from a white reader, proposed that if this man deserved such an honor, "we should also hang portraits of Hitler, Attila the Hun [and]

Herod the murderer of babies."

The bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston replied, "We know what he intended to do to them [whites], and we know what they did to him." The man to be pictured, the bishop said, was a "liberator whom God sent to free the people from oppression." The portrait eventually was finished, and, in a public ceremony, it was placed in Charleston's Gaillard Auditorium. The artist solved his problem by portraying his subject facing away from the picture's frame and addressing a group of his followers. Well over 150 years after his death, Denmark Vesey still turns his back on the twentieth-century observer.

Denmark Vesey in 1822 organized the most elaborate and well-planned slave insurrection in the history of the United States. Had it succeeded, it also would have been the most violent. Nine years before Nat Turner's slave revolt in Jerusalem, Virginia, and thirty-seven years before John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Vesey planned to seize the United States arsenal and the ships at harbor in Charleston, then the sixth-largest city in the nation. Recruiting perhaps nine thousand slaves in his cause, he preached the doctrine of negritude, the shared spiritual and political identity of all black people, whether in Africa, the Americas, or the West Indies.

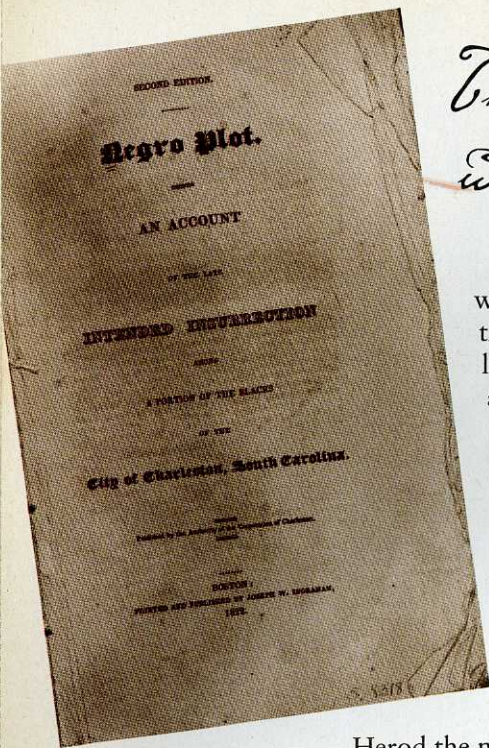
Three months before the July date of the planned uprising, Vesey corresponded with the president of the new black Republic of Haiti, in hopes of obtaining that nation's military aid in his rebellion. On the night of the attack, trusted house servants who were among his closest co-conspirators were to assassinate the governor of South Carolina and

other important state officials as they slept in their Charleston homes. Vesey had prepared four infantry and cavalry companies of armed slaves to roam through the streets of Charleston following these deaths and murder the entire white population, including children. The city itself was to be burned to its foundations with explosives and incendiaries. The sole whites to be spared would be the captains and navigators of ships seized after the revolt to carry him and his followers to Haiti.

**H**e failed, and in the summer of 1822 Vesey and thirty-four of his followers were hanged. But when the details of the Vesey plot and the fact of its near-success became known outside of Charleston, his planned actions had consequences throughout nineteenth-century American history. President James Monroe withheld diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Haiti; the United States would not formally acknowledge this republic, founded on revolutionary principles identical to its own, until 1863. A former U.S. president, Thomas Jefferson, saw in the events at Charleston a melancholy confirmation that black slavery inevitably would sunder the nation that he had worked to make whole; and the secretary of war in 1822, John C. Calhoun, quietly began transferring sympathetic U.S. officers and troops southward to support the slaveholding states in the coming crisis.

Despite his significance as an attempted liberator and the magnitude of his planned revolt, Denmark Vesey's name remains unfamiliar to most twentieth-century Americans. At times his story has been willfully obscured. I initially became aware of Vesey in the late 1980s when I was researching the subject of my first biography, the segregationist governor and former U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, a native of Charleston. Determined to learn more about the city's past and the social histories of all the races that live there, I soon discovered that Denmark Vesey was the missing piece in a nineteenth-century puzzle.

Published guides to the city made brief references to Vesey's planned attack and his execution, but I could find no plaques or markers in modern Charleston commemorating what had happened or where. Even in the traditionally African-American neighborhoods of the city, there are no streets or public high schools named for Vesey. The oak



**PUBLISHED RECORDS SPREAD WORD OF THE FAILED PLOT (TOP), AND CHARLESTON'S SLAVES HAD TO CONTINUE TO WEAR IDENTITY TAGS (ABOVE); IN 1848 EVEN FREE BLACKS WERE FORCED TO DO SO.**

TOP: AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY, WORCESTER, MASS.; ALL OTHERS: CHARLESTON MUSEUM, S.C.



**CLASS No. 1.**

*Comprises those prisoners who were found guilty and executed.*

Prisoners Names.	Owners' Names.	Time of Commit.	How Disposed of.
Peter	James Poyas	June 18	Hanged on Tuesday the 2d July, 1822, on Blake's lands, near Charleston.
Ned	Gov. T. Bennett,	do.	
Rolla	do.	do.	
Bateau	A free black man	22	Do. on the Lines near Ch.; Friday July 12.
Denmark Vesey	Thos. Blackwood	29	
Jessy	Elias Horry	July 5	
John	Paul Prichard	do.	Hanged on the Lines near Charleston, on Friday, 26th July.
Gullah Jack	Wm. Harth	June 21	
Mingo	Forrester	July 6	
Lot	P. L. Jore	8	Do. Tues. July 30.
Joe	Thos. Forrest	10	
Julius	Mrs. Russell	do.	
Tom	Robt. Anderson	11	Do. Friday, Aug. 9.
Smart	John Robertson	do.	
John	do.	do.	
Robert	do.	do.	Do. Tues. July 30.
Adam	Mrs. Faber	do.	
Polydore	Benj. Hammet	13	
Bacchus	Wm. Sims	do.	Do. Friday, Aug. 9.
Dick	Thompson	13	
Pharaoh	Mrs. Clement	19	
Jemmy	Mordecai Cohen	do.	Do. Tues. July 30.
Mauidore	Mitchell	12	
Dean	Mrs. Purcell	18	
Jack	Est. of Jos. Yates	do.	Do. Friday, Aug. 9.
Bellisle	do.	do.	
Naphur	do.	16	
Adam	John S. Glen	18	Do. Tues. July 30.
Jacob	John Billings	22	
Charles	N. McNeill	do.	
Jack	Miss Smith	23	Do. Friday, Aug. 9.
Cesar	Jacob Lankester	24	
Jacob Stagg	Wm. M. Scott	Aug. 2	
Tom	Mrs. Garner		
William			

*The man is not easily revealed. Vesey*

tree from which, according to Charleston's Emanuel A.M.E. Church, Denmark Vesey was hanged was declared a traffic hazard in the 1970s and cut down by the city. The workhouse where Vesey was imprisoned before his execution was razed

been discovered; with the presence of more than five hundred heavily armed militia men patrolling the city against any further slave insurrections, she wrote, "I believe all danger for the present season is over." And I found evidence that even many years after Vesey's plot had been betrayed and its leader hanged, Charleston's slaves continued covertly to remember Denmark Vesey. Daniel Goddard, a black Carolinian born in 1863 and interviewed in South Carolina by writers for the Works Progress Administration in 1937, recalled that "the Vesey conspiracy was discussed often in my presence, by my parents and my friends."

Incidents such as these convinced me by the early 1990s that the significance of the Vesey conspiracy had been historically buried during the twentieth century, and that the life of Denmark Vesey deserved a modern biography. Yet the man himself is not easily revealed. Vesey made no confessions, and he spoke no final words on his gallows. Throughout his trial, as former conspirators were brought into the small upstairs room to tell what they knew, "he remained immovable," his judges wrote; "he folded his arms and seemed to pay great attention to the testimony given against him, but with his eyes fixed upon the floor." Vesey and his chief co-conspirators, according to his judges, "mutually supported one another" with the byword they repeated among themselves in their prison cell: "Do not open your lips! Die silent, as you shall see me do."



**A GRIM ACCOUNTING (ABOVE) PLACES VESSEY'S EXECUTION OUTSIDE THE CITY, BUT LOCAL LEGEND PUTS IT ON ASHLEY AVENUE (RIGHT), WHERE A YOUNGER OAK HAS REPLACED THE ORIGINAL HANGING TREE, CUT DOWN IN THE 1970S.**

in the 1930s. Some academics in the South even asserted that Vesey's organization of slave rebels had never, in fact, existed. The Vesey plot of 1822, in the words of one such historian writing in 1964, "was probably never more than loose talk by aggrieved and embittered men." Yet, the more I learned about the surviving buildings and documents of early-nineteenth-century Charleston, the more convinced I became that Denmark Vesey's conspiracy, although historically neglected, fully explained many otherwise puzzling events.

For instance, in the months immediately after Vesey's arrest and execution, the descendants of Miles Brewton, a wealthy Charleston eighteenth-century slave merchant, had a spiked, wrought-iron fence installed completely surrounding their magnificent home. (The Miles Brewton mansion and its fence continue to stand at 27 King Street.) Also in the summer of 1822 a middle-aged Charleston widow, Mary Beach, wrote her relatives in Philadelphia to assure them of her safety after Vesey's plot had

**M**uch of what is known about Denmark Vesey's life is secondhand information from what others recalled, sometimes narrated in fear and often incongruous. The major source is the book published in 1822 in Charleston by his judges and executioners: *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes Charged With an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina*. From the densely packed type of this early-nineteenth-century book, its pages as stiff and cracking as the sails of an old slave ship, a personality struggles to come to life. "At the head of the conspiracy stood Denmark Vesey," the book begins; "with him the idea un-



*made no confessions, and he spoke no final words on his gallows.*

doubtedly originated.” From its following pages we learn that Vesey was born in either Africa or the Danish Virgin Islands but was a long-time resident of the United States, and that as a teenaged boy he had worked as a slave on the French sugar plantations of Haiti. He received no formal education, but as an adult he could speak and write both English and French with eloquence. While being transported among a cargo of 390 other slaves, he was noticed by the ship’s captain as possessing particular “beauty, alertness, and intelligence.” Capt. Joseph Vesey included this young slave among his household when he retired from the sea in 1783 to settle in Charleston. Denmark Vesey subsequently was trained to work as a carpenter, and he labored at this skill as a slave for his master for the next seventeen years in the city he later planned to destroy.

**I**ncredibly, a Charleston lottery made it possible for Vesey to buy his own freedom. Charleston tolerated the “hiring out” of slaves by their masters for additional income, and it was sometimes possible, with guile, for a slave to withhold a little money. Using his own funds, Vesey purchased a ticket from the East Bay Street lottery in late 1799. A few months later he was informed that he held the winning ticket, worth \$1,500. According to the tortuous slave codes developed over two centuries in Charleston, the money legally belonged to Denmark Vesey to spend as he pleased, even though Vesey himself was the property of another man. Vesey promptly bought his own freedom for \$600.

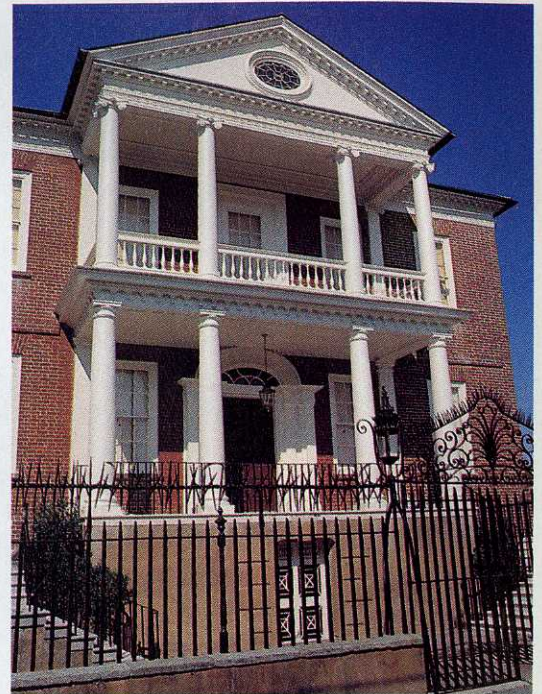
From this self-liberation in 1799 until his execution by the city of Charleston in 1822, Denmark Vesey was, legally, a human being. As a free black he owned, or at least rented, a house and shop at 20 Bull Street, located within a few blocks of the private residences of both the governor of South Carolina and the mayor of Charleston. (The house, now numbered as 56 Bull Street, continues to be a private residence and has been designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.) He employed several helpers over the years in his carpentry business, and he became an active member of both the Presbyterian and A.M.E. churches in Charleston. He acknowledged seven women as his wives, either at foreign ports or in Charleston, and he had at least two sons and several stepchil-

dren in the city. At the time of his trial, when he was probably in his late fifties, he was described by his judges as still “distinguished for great strength and activity”; “among his color, he was always looked up to with respect and awe.”

Although Vesey was free, he was never content. He began to obtain anti-slavery pamphlets from Northern states and to read them to slaves gathered at his shop. A white adolescent who later testified at Vesey’s trial recalled frequently overhearing him during his carpentry work “speak of the creation of the world, in which he would say all men had equal rights, blacks as well as whites.” A black witness attested that he once had asked Vesey whether as a free man he did not desire to emigrate to Africa. Vesey replied, according to this slave’s testimony, that although a change in nation might attract other free black men, “he had not [the] will; he wanted to stay and see what he could do for his fellow creatures.”

His attitude toward enslaved blacks varied from compassion to haughtiness or, at best, a certain impatience. For example, as a free man he refused to bow to whites he encountered on Charleston’s palmetto-shaded sidewalks. (This was an expected obeisance that other blacks considered necessary for survival.) Within hearing of white pedestrians, he would then rebuke those who did bow, declaring that “all men were born equal” and that he himself “would never cringe to the whites, nor ought anyone who had the feelings of a man.” Once, when some blacks answered, “We are slaves,” Vesey was reported to have glared and said scornfully, “You deserve to remain slaves.”

Perhaps as early as 1818 he began organizing his revolt at meetings held at his shop or at Charles-



**SOON AFTER THE PLOT WAS DISCOVERED, THE MILES BREWTON HOUSE, A CHARLESTON MANSION, SPROUTED ITS DEFENSIVELY SPIKED RAILING.**





**IN A TRIBUTE  
AT CHARLESTON'S  
EMANUEL A.M.E.  
CHURCH, WHICH  
DESCENDS FROM  
THE ONE VESEY  
FREQUENTED, A  
SCULPTOR PORTRAYED  
CHILDREN INTENTLY  
LISTENING TO THE  
LEADER'S SERMONS  
OF LIBERATION.**

ton's A.M.E. church. He frequently read aloud Joshua 6:21: "And they utterly destroyed all that were in the city, both young and old. . . ." He gathered lists of recruits, which by 1822 contained about nine thousand names. These lists were divided among his chief lieutenants, so that if any one of the rebel organizers was arrested, only a single list would be seized and not all the names would be betrayed. Slave blacksmiths secretly hammered out knives, swords, and pikes and cached them at locations throughout the city. Fuse and a keg of gunpowder were stolen in order to start the conflagration of the city, and companies of slave infantry and cavalry were organized and assigned specific buildings to seize once the rebellion began. And, in a detail that was later particularly enraging to his captors, Vesey had purchased wigs and false whiskers, made from the hair of white people, from an unwitting white barber. "With the assistance of these, and by painting their faces," Vesey's judges later wrote of the black rebels, "they hoped in the darkness of night to be mistaken for white men." Such disguises would have enabled Vesey and his chief conspirators "to advance singly some distance ahead of his party" and then to "surprise and put to death the sentinel" in front of Charleston's police headquarters.

Vesey chose midnight of July 14, 1822, an anniversary of Bastille Day, and also a moonless night, for his intended insurrection. During the preceding months he enforced silence among his recruits: Anyone who spoke of this plot to whites would be "put to instant death." He particularly distrusted domestic slaves and other black bondsmen who were better treated—and had more to lose—than field slaves. "Take care and don't mention it [the insurrection] to those waiting men who receive presents of old coats from their masters," Vesey's earliest disciple, Peter Poyas, told the recruiters, "or they'll betray us. *I will speak to them.*"

Just such a house slave, Peter Desverneys, was unwisely invited to join the conspiracy by an enthusiastic recruit, and the consequences foreseen by Vesey quickly followed. Desverneys betrayed the plot to his master, and over the summer of 1822 a

total of 131 blacks were arrested by the city of Charleston on charges of fomenting a rebellion. A white minister who visited the insurrectionists at the workhouse described Vesey as "in a very hardened state" toward his captors, refusing to discuss either his planned rebellion or whether he felt any remorse for his aim of destroying Charleston's white population. Vesey and his co-conspirators went to their gallows on July 2, 1822, true to their vow to "die silent."

**T**he ferocity of Vesey's planned revolt, and his determined silence about it, continue to make him one of the most enigmatic and polarizing figures in American history. On one hand, there has been sufficient academic curiosity to prompt the publication earlier this year, by the University of North Carolina Press, of the 1822 trial record. On the other hand, also earlier this year, the South Carolina legislature dropped a representation of Vesey from a proposed African-American history monument at the state capitol, in Columbia.

To a United States in the last years of the twentieth century, now redefining itself as a racially and ethnically pluralistic nation, the attempted revolt of Denmark Vesey poses the starkest of public questions. In retaliation for past wrongs against his race, Vesey was prepared to destroy a major city and all the whites within it and to seek sanctuary only in another land, among other black people. But that was never what he would have preferred: *He had not a will to go to Africa; he wanted to stay and see what he could do for his fellow creatures.* In our age the public debate over the virtues of multiculturalism has heightened awareness of ethnic and racial heritages and begun to correct the history of black slaves from one of passive victims to one of active resisters. But we continue to be haunted by both racial violence and the fear of it. Although a majority of twentieth-century Americans, black or white, would not recognize his name, we are still remembering Denmark Vesey. His is a face that we cannot see but that is always with us. ★

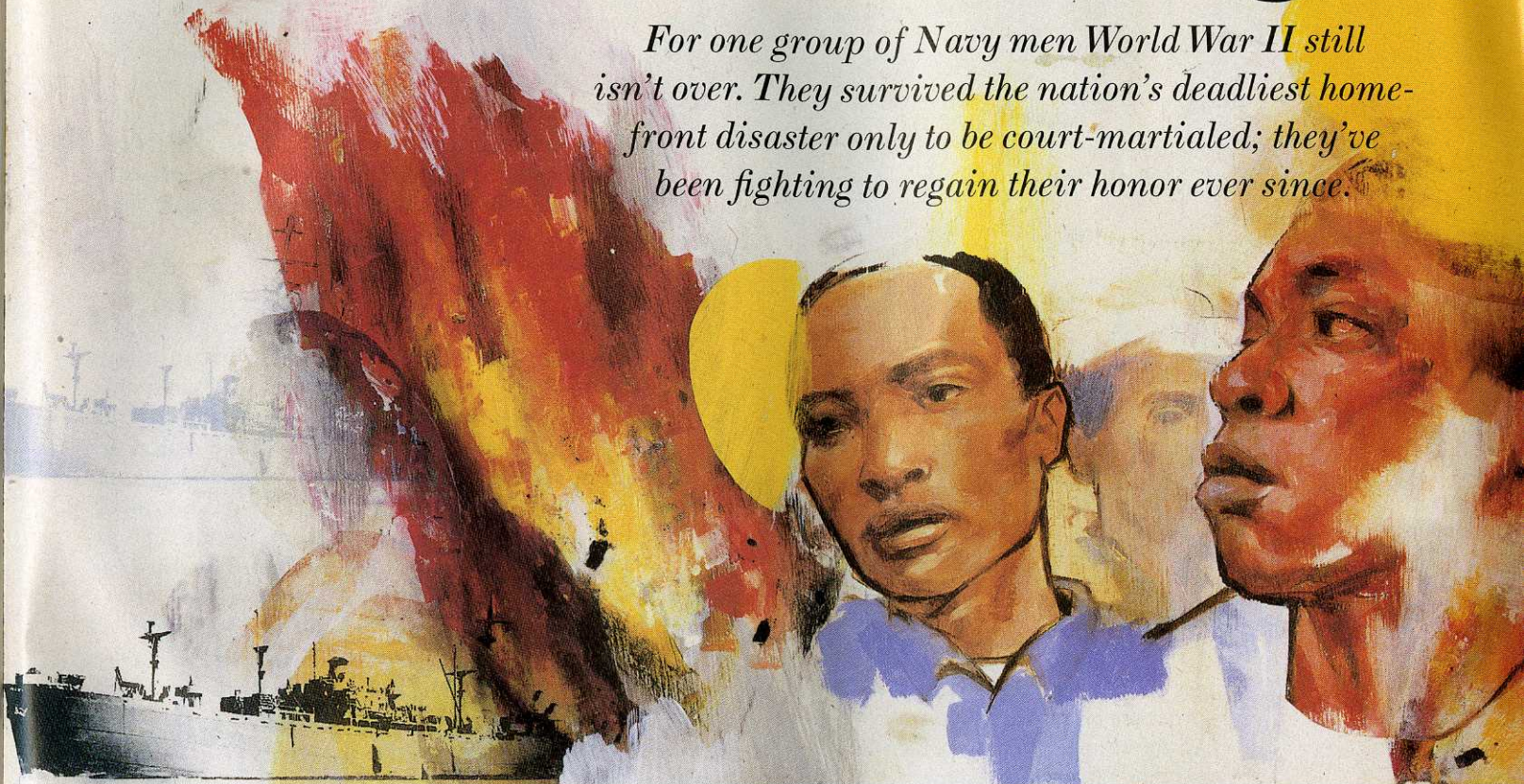
*David Robertson is a biographer and historical novelist. His new biography of Denmark Vesey is being published by Alfred A. Knopf.*



BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

# Explosion at Port Chicago

*For one group of Navy men World War II still isn't over. They survived the nation's deadliest home-front disaster only to be court-martialed; they've been fighting to regain their honor ever since.*



FREDDIE MEEKS WAS NOT PLEASED WHEN HE HEARD President Clinton tell an interviewer in June 1997 that he would consider apologizing for slavery. It was a painful reminder that despite the pleas of numerous congressional leaders, Clinton had offered no apologies to MEEKS or forty-nine other black Navy men convicted of mutiny during World War II. They and their supporters believe that their convictions are the greatest travesty of justice in U.S. military history.

On July 17, 1944, the naval depot at Port Chicago, about forty-five miles southwest of Sacramento, was leveled by a huge explosion aboard two adjacent munitions vessels. According to some reports, the blast had one-third the force of the atomic bomb

dropped on Hiroshima. It killed more than three hundred seamen, almost two-thirds of them black, and caused damage in towns thirty-five miles away. The African-Americans stationed at Port Chicago had been assigned the dangerous task of loading bombs and artillery shells onto the holds of ships bound for the Pacific, yet they had not been trained to handle ammunition. Two hundred and two of them died in the accident, more than 15 percent of all the African-American casualties in World War II.

Less than a month later the surviving black sailors were told to resume work, still with no attempt by the Navy to train the men. This time the sailors refused and were arrested. The subsequent trial of fifty alleged ringleaders of this mutiny aroused the





anger of African-Americans nationwide; this was yet another reminder of racism in the U.S. military.

All the branches of the armed forces were segregated, but Meeks and the forty-nine other black defendants had the ill fortune to be assigned to the branch of the service where racism was most deeply entrenched. Even though, in 1942, after intense pressure from the Roosevelt administration and civil rights groups, the Navy had opened its general services to blacks, the majority were still denied positions as clerks, radio operators, and gunners. They served instead as mess attendants, stewards' mates, and common laborers—cooking, cleaning, shining shoes, doing the laundry, and in the case of the Port Chicago sailors, loading ammunition.

At Port Chicago black sailors were housed in segregated barracks and base facilities. They were served their meals only after white sailors had finished eating. When they had shore leave, the military gave them (unlike whites) no transportation to and from

Oakland or San Francisco, and the citizens of the town near the base were less than welcoming. They claimed they were frequently denied ratings and promotion. Moreover, they were the only sailors responsible for loading ammunition onto the ships, and they were frequently subject to impossible speedups—mostly imposed by contests among white officers to see which division could load the most ammunition during each shift. The Navy punished even the mildest complaints from black servicemen with threats of jailing, courts-martial, and dishonorable discharges.

“We were treated like a slave outfit,” recalls one black recruit. Freddie Meeks, who was a twenty-year-old seaman in 1944, remembers that he and the other loaders received no training in safety regulations, equipment operations, or ammunition-loading procedures. The white officers had no real training themselves, and the officer in charge at Port Chicago failed to post safety procedures in the barracks because he did not think the sailors could understand them. Because of this, live shells were frequently dropped. The situation was so dangerous that the longshoremen’s union refused to allow any of its members to work at Port Chicago, and reportedly issued a warning: If the Navy continued to operate with untrained personnel, the entire operation would meet with disaster.

**A**round 10:00 P.M. on July 17, the two vessels loading ammunition at Port Chicago, the *E. A. Bryan* and the *Quinalt Victory*, exploded. The blast instantly killed everyone aboard the two ships and on the pier, destroyed the vessels, and wounded nearly four hundred people. The Port Chicago disaster, as it quickly became known, was the deadliest military accident of the home front and one of the worst in U.S. history.

Although Meeks had escaped injury—he was away that night on leave—the incident would trigger a chain of events that would haunt him for the rest of his life. During that night and the next morning, he and 257 other black loaders returned to the docks for cleanup duty. “It was a mess,” Meeks recalls. “They made the blacks stand watch for hours





in a warehouse over open baskets in which badly mutilated bodies had been shoved.”

“You can imagine what it did to young men of twenty-one or twenty-two,” recalls Robert Routh, Jr., nineteen at the time and permanently blinded by shattered glass from the blast, “when, on the night of the explosion, they found the decapitated bodies of fellow sailors.” Only 51 out of the 320 dead were ever positively identified.

Although a Navy review panel promptly began an inquiry into the explosion and heard testimony from 125 witnesses (only five of them black seamen), the investigators were unable to find an exact cause. In its report the panel ultimately cited mishandling of equipment and improper loading procedures, but it also absolved the white officers of any responsibility. The panel’s conclusion strongly implied that the blast was caused solely by the bungling of black seamen. The judge advocate stated that “the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives.”

Nevertheless, even before the panel had completed its investigation, Navy officials decided to send the “incapable” ammunition loaders back to work, despite the fact that the white sailors who helped in the cleanup had been given thirty-day leaves. When

Meeks and the other blacks were told to resume loading the ships with ammunition, they balked. (It has never been clear as to whether the sailors were initially asked or ordered to return to work.) “Many of the men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion in which so many of their friends had died,” writes Robert L. Allen in his book, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*.

**N**ow afraid to handle ammunition, 258 sailors refused their orders and were promptly imprisoned on a barge in San Pablo Bay. Naval officers threatened them with long prison sentences if they didn’t go back to work. They continued to hold firm. Finally the commanding admiral gathered the men and told them they would be charged with mutiny and most likely put before a firing squad, since mutiny in time of war carried the death sentence. They were stunned. Most of them were very young, from the South, and familiar with racial violence and lynchings. The majority gave in and were taken to Camp Shoemaker for interrogation and summary courts-martial before returning to the loading docks.

But the fifty sailors who held out were charged with mutiny and imprisoned. “It was ridiculous,” Meeks bitterly remembers. “We weren’t disloyal. We



## Nothing but wiping the original conviction from their records will bring peace to the accused men.

didn't assault any officers. We didn't try to take over the base. We were scared that we would die if we went back to work." President Franklin Roosevelt apparently agreed—but only when it came to the 208 men who were willing to return to work. In a private memo to the Navy secretary he wrote that these men were "activated by mass fear and . . . this was understandable."

An all-white military tribunal did not sympathize, especially with the fifty men on trial. After thirty-two days of hearings, the Navy court took eighty minutes to convict Meeks and the other men of mutiny. The panel went on to drop the death penalty, almost certainly because of pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the black press, but it sentenced the men to fifteen years and stripped them of their benefits. Thurgood Marshall, who was working as a lawyer for the NAACP, immediately began to prepare an appeal for the convicted men. He questioned why when more than one black man disobeyed an order it was called a mutiny, and he criticized the Navy and its "whole vicious policy toward Negroes," calling for a more thorough investigation of Navy practices.

The men were freed in 1946 as part of a general amnesty for imprisoned servicemen and war resisters. Initially they received dishonorable discharges. All but five of the fifty convicted sailors eventually finished their enlistments and received general discharges under honorable conditions, their benefits restored. Of the five remaining, three sailors received honorable discharges by way of an administrative error, one was given a dishonorable discharge due to misconduct unrelated to the court-martial, and one conviction was set aside because the accused man was judged to be mentally incompetent; he received a discharge under honorable conditions.

Continued pressure from Thurgood Marshall and civil rights groups and the urging of Eleanor Roosevelt finally helped push the Navy in 1946 to desegregate its ships and shore facilities, but the changes came too late for Meeks and his fellow seamen. The Navy "didn't care about us. They were determined to make an example of us to keep the other blacks in line, even if it meant ruining my

life," says Morris Souble, another Port Chicago defendant. "I really believe the men who were sent to prison were railroaded."

**A**lthough the fifty defendants saw their sentences reduced to time served, their convictions stood. They were permanently branded as mutineers. It was the beginning of a fifty-year odyssey of fear, pain, and hardship for them. Some changed their names and moved frequently to find jobs while hiding their pasts. "I had to conceal what had happened to me," said Meeks. "I was afraid of what people would say." The most painful part of Meeks's ordeal was his decision not to tell his own children. Only when the plight of the Port Chicago survivors attracted media attention in the early 1990s did he summon the nerve to speak to them of his imprisonment. A son, Daryl, a sergeant with the L.A. County Sheriff's department, remembers his father's confession: "He broke down and cried. It was like a dam burst inside of him from the pressure of keeping it a secret."

Still, nothing but wiping the original conviction from their records would bring peace to Meeks and the others accused of the mutiny. In 1977 an attempt by one of the formerly convicted sailors to have his name cleared had gone nowhere. Yet over the years, as the men began to publicize their experience, the Port Chicago story captured wider attention, inspiring a book, two television documentaries, a made-for-TV movie, and articles in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. The case was reopened briefly in 1994, at the urging of California Reps. Ronald Dellums, George Miller, Fortney "Pete" Stark, and Don Edwards and Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. They attached a resolution to a military authorization bill calling for the Navy to review the controversial convictions.

There was little to dispute about the facts of the case: Blacks were the only ones forced to load ammunition; they were improperly trained, were offered no leaves after the explosion, and were convicted by an all-white tribunal. According to Adm. William Perry's letter to Representative Dellums, summarizing the Navy's report, the review panel acknowledged



## The mutiny is an issue on which military authorities and the convicted sailors will probably never agree.

that “racial discrimination did play a part in the assignment policies that resulted in African-American sailors being assigned to menial, unskilled work, such as loading ammunition,” but it concluded, in what many considered an astonishing twist of logic, that “racial prejudice and discrimination played no part in the court-martial convictions or sentences.”

The Navy panel found that “the sailors who refused to load ammunition after the explosion had a reasonable basis for fear . . . [but] the danger to them was no greater than that faced by sailors in combat, and . . . seventy other sailors assigned to their divisions followed orders to load ammunition after the explosion.”

This is an issue on which the men who participated in the Port Chicago mutiny and military authorities will probably never be able to agree. A huge chasm of perception separates the two sides. While the sailors claim that they were disobeying orders out of fear, and that the very fact of racial discrimination and all that issued from it was enough to justify their acts, the Navy insists that “sailors are required to obey the orders of their superiors even if those orders subject them to grave danger.” Thus, the panel’s report concludes, “Under military law, an intentional overt act in opposition, resistance, or defiance of superior military authority (as in the case of the fifty sailors who acted in concert to refuse orders) is mutiny.”

For those who feel strongly that President Clinton should issue an apology, the continuing silence is painful. There was a brief moment of hope in 1994 when the National Park Service, acting on congressional authorization, dedicated a monument to the dead servicemen at the former Port Chicago, now the Concord Naval Weapons Station. The monument listed the names of the white and black servicemen killed in the blast, but it didn’t mention the mutiny trial or the Port Chicago defendants. However, Meeks and the other black seamen convicted of mutiny were invited to the ceremony, and the fact that they were included was a kind of backhanded acknowledgment by the Navy that the accused men had contributed to the war effort. Meeks took it as a sign that justice would ultimately prevail.

Sandra Evers-Manly, president and founder of the Black Hollywood Education and Resource Center, in Los Angeles, started a support group for the Port Chicago survivors in 1997 and has worked tirelessly on a national write-in campaign to have President Clinton expunge the records of the convicted sailors. And she has taken further steps. “We are talking to a law firm in Washington, D.C., because we now want to take the legal route,” said Evers-Manly. “This year marks the fifty-fifth anniversary of the blast. All these men wanted was to serve our country by going to war. They were denied that chance because of the color of their skin.”

But time is running out. Many of the Port Chicago defendants have died, and others are in poor health. It is important to Meeks that his conviction be erased for his family’s sake. “If nothing is done,” he says, “then even after I’m gone, my family would still have this hanging over their heads.”

**P**resident Clinton’s failure to act puzzles Meeks and his former shipmates. They have seen the government apologize, pardon, or pay reparations to the victims of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, to the Japanese-Americans interned in detention camps during World War II, and this past February to the descendants of Lt. Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, who in 1881 was falsely accused of embezzlement of commissary funds and dishonorably discharged. Meeks still believes that the President will do the right thing. “I think he’s been fair to blacks,” he says, “and will take an interest in our cause if somebody calls it to his attention.” Meeks hopes that a personal appeal from Daryl, his son, will move Clinton to act before he leaves the White House—and while some of the Port Chicago defendants are still alive.

His guarded optimism is rooted in the firm belief that he and the other men charged with mutiny loyally served their country, and that their only crime was being black. ★

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*Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a Pacific News Service commentator and the author of The Assassination of the Black Male Image and The Crisis in Black and Black.*