

The undead bones of Denmark Vesey : the complications of history

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Description:

Thesis (M.A.L.S.)--Georgetown University, 2010.; Includes bibliographical references.; Text (Electronic thesis) in PDF format. 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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