Denmark's Gamble in South Carolina

DENMARK VESEY

(Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City)

Slave Quarters on South Carolina Plantation

Slavery existed in America from the earliest days of colonization. There were slaves in Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in North America. The existence of slavery has had a powerful effect on the course of American history.

Slavery was practiced throughout the colonies. There were slaves in New England as well as in the Southern Colonies. Many New England shipowners made money through the slave trade.

Although the practice of slavery was widespread, not all Americans felt it was right. When writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveowner, wanted to include a statement saying that slavery was wrong. Representatives from South Carolina and Georgia opposed the statement. For the sake of colonial unity, the antislavery statement was not included in the final copy.

The Declaration said that "all men are created equal" but such a concept did not apply to slaves. Even though slaves were human beings, they were treated like private property. Like work animals, they could be bought or sold.

As years went by, slavery became concentrated in the South. Northern states gradually made slavery illegal. In the Southern states, however, slavery was believed necessary for the economy and it was not made illegal. Plantation owners believed that they could not make a profit without the use of slave labor.

In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. This machine made it easier to prepare cotton for market. As a result, much more cotton could be grown for sale. In 1791, South Carolina produced 15 million pounds of cotton. By 1812, production had risen to 50 million pounds. As South Carolina and other states became more dependent on a cotton economy, they also became more dependent on slaves. More and more slaves were used to work on the plantations.

There were South Carolinians who opposed slavery. Some economists argued that slavery was not good for the economy. They said the cost of housing, feeding, and caring for slaves cut back the profits that cotton growers could make. They thought it would be cheaper to hire workers rather than keep slaves. Other opponents of slavery, like Angelina and Sarah Grimke, argued that slavery was morally wrong. Arguments against slavery were not effective at making it illegal in the South.

Slaves sometimes attempted to revolt to gain their freedom. Whites often feared the possibility of slave revolts, and laws were passed to prevent their occurrence.

In South Carolina there were a number of laws governing how

slaves were to be treated. For example, it was against the law to teach slaves to write. This was intended to prevent slaves from organizing a large-scale rebellion through the sending of messages. It was illegal for more than seven slaves to travel on certain roads unless a white person was with them. Slaves who were away from their owners had to have written passes saying where they were going and for what purpose. Slaves without passes could be beaten if they were caught by the authorities. Slaves who committed crimes, like stealing, could be severely punished or executed. Whites who killed slaves would usually be fined, but slaves who killed whites, even in self-defense, were usually executed.

Not all blacks were slaves. Some were free, but there were special laws governing them. For example, free blacks could own property, but they could not vote. In trials, free blacks could not testify against whites, but slaves could testify against free blacks. Whites could testify against any black person. Blacks accused of crimes were not allowed trial by jury. A group of judges decided their cases. Free blacks had certain liberties, but they were not treated the same as whites.

As South Carolina became more dependent on cotton, it seemed unlikely that slavery would be abolished or the laws changed. One man, Denmark Vesey, eventually decided to take drastic action.

As a boy, Denmark was a slave on the island of St. Thomas in the West Indies. One day in 1781, a slavetrader, Captain Joseph Vesey, came to the island and loaded hundreds of slaves on his ship. Twelve-year-old Denmark was one of them. The captain and the crew were impressed with Denmark's intelligence and personality.

Captain Vesey took his slave cargo to St. Dominique, a rich French colony. Denmark and the other slaves were sold on the island. A few months later Captain Vesey returned and was told that young Denmark was an unfit slave because he seemed to have fits of epilepsy. As a result, the captain had to take Denmark back. He became the captain's personal slave, and by custom took the last name Vesey.

With Captain Vesey, Denmark sailed for many years. In the course of his travels he learned to speak French, Spanish, and Danish. He also learned firsthand of the horrors of the slave trade. He sailed to Africa where rum and other goods were traded for slaves. The slaves were brought to the West Indies or Southern states where those who survived the grim voyage were sold.

In 1783, Captain Vesey decided to settle in Charleston, South Carolina, and become a merchant. The seafaring Denmark, now 16 years old, became a slave on land. Charleston was one of the largest cities in the United States and the major trading center in the South. In the Charleston area there were many more blacks than whites. According to the census of 1800, there were 63,615 blacks and 18,768 whites in the area. Most of the blacks were slaves.

City slaves had many different jobs. Some worked in the markets; some worked in the fishing business; still others were carpenters, butchers, blacksmiths, and painters. Owners often hired out their slaves to perform skilled labor for others.

By chance, Denmark Vesey became a free man. In 1800 he won $1,500 in a lottery, a form of gambling. He used $600 to buy his freedom from Captain Vesey. At the age of 33, Denmark Vesey was no longer a slave.

Vesey was a skilled carpenter and became known as one of the best workers in the area. He had a house and was able to save a substantial amount of money. He married several times. His wives were slaves, however, and he could only see them, or his children, with the permission of their owners. Although he was free, the effects of slavery were still with him.

Vesey hated slavery. With anyone who would talk with him, he argued that slavery was wrong. In later years, one slave, William Paul, said of Vesey: "He studied the Bible a great deal, and tried to prove from it that slavery and bondage is against the Bible." Vesey came to despise whites. According to Paul, "He said he would not like to have a white man in his presence—that he had a great hatred for the whites." Vesey urged blacks to walk with pride and dignity among the whites.

Vesey knew he was not alone in opposing slavery. He heard of the slave revolt on St. Dominique, where he had spent time as a slave. In 1791, the slaves staged a mass revolt. At least one thousand sugar and cocoa plantations were set aflame and hundreds of whites were killed. Some of the white survivors made their way to Charleston. Their stories heightened white fears of slave uprisings.

Vesey also heard of attempts by Northern abolitionists to get rid of slavery. He read articles and pamphelts opposing slavery. He also heard of debates about Missouri. In 1819, Missouri was about to become a state and there was heated argument about whether it should be a free or slave state. Vesey was impressed with the anti-slavery arguments in the debate.

Vesey also knew there had been attempted slave revolts in the

United States. In 1800, for example, a Virginia slave, Gabriel Prosser, organized an army of slaves and attempted to attack Richmond. Two slaves informed the authorities of the coming attack, and Governor James Monroe gathered troops and put an end to Prosser's plan. Over thirty slaves were hanged for trying to rebel.

Although it was dangerous, Denmark Vesey became determined to lead a slave rebellion. To succeed, he knew it had to be carefully planned, well organized, and kept secret. He had been lucky in the lottery, but it would take more than luck to win this time.

Late in 1821 he called together a small group of men he thought he could trust. They would help him lead the revolt. Ned and Rolla Bennett, servants of the governor, Thomas Bennett, agreed to join. Peter Poyas, a skilled ship carpenter and strong leader, agreed. Gullah Jack, a slave whom some thought had mystical powers, joined. At least two other slaves, Monday Gell and Jack Purcell, also joined the original group of leaders.

In secret meetings more were recruited to the plan. Vesey and others were careful that their plot would not be discovered by anyone. Peter Poyas warned, "Take care and don't mention it to those waiting men who received presents of old coats from their masters or they'll betray us."

The plan was complex. Slaves in the surrounding countryside were recruited. Gullah Jack told some of them that his magic would protect them. Weapons were obtained and stored in secret places. Points of attack were planned carefully to assure success. Some have estimated that nine thousand were eventually organized for the revolt. Many slaves refused to join. They were told they would be killed if they revealed the plot. One slave reported that Vesey opened a meeting saying "he had an important secret to communicate to us, which we must not disclose to anyone, and if we did, we should be put to instant death."

The date for the revolt was to be Sunday, July 14, 1822. On Sunday blacks from the countryside commonly visited in the city. The action was to begin at midnight. One group, led by Rolla Bennett, would kill Governor Bennett and the mayor. Other groups would attack arsenals and other places where guns and ammunition were stored. Still other groups would ride through the streets killing any who might sound a warning. After capturing weapons, the rebels would kill all whites in the area and any blacks who refused to join in. Quoting selected passages from the Bible, Vesey ordered that women and children should also be killed.

The plan was set but it was not to succeed. In spite of Poyas' warning, William Paul tried to recruit a "house slave," Peter Prioleau. Paul talked to him in May, but Prioleau refused to join. After thinking it over Prioleau decided to tell his owners that a slave revolt was being planned.

The governor and mayor were told of the planned revolt but they did not know the details. William Paul was arrested, held in jail, intently questioned, and possibly tortured. He eventually identified two leaders of the plot. They were arrested but acted so innocently that they were released.

In the meantime, Major John Wilson, having heard rumors of the revolt, began a private investigation. He asked a trusted slave, George Wilson, to do some spying. On June 14, George brought back shocking news. There was to be a revolt and it was going to begin in two days! Having heard of the arrests, Vesey decided to act a month earlier than planned.

The authorities moved quickly. Troops were placed on guard. They protected the areas where weapons were stored. Vesey learned that officials had been warned and, as the hour for the revolt approached, he decided it was too risky. The revolt was called off.

An investigation was organized and suspected slaves were arrested. The arrested slaves were questioned and, according to some witnesses, tortured. Peter Poyas said, "Do not open your lips! Die silent, as you shall see me do." Most followed his command but some broke under the pressure and began revealing names and details. Soon Denmark Vesey and others were arrested.

In all, 131 blacks were arrested. Of these 53 were found innocent; 43 were banished from the state; and 35 were hanged. Among those sentenced to death were Peter Poyas, Ned and Rolla Bennett, Gullah Jack, and Denmark Vesey.

When pronouncing the sentence, the judge said to the 55-year-old Vesey:

> Your professed design was to trample all laws . . . to riot in blood . . . to introduce anarchy and confusion in their most horrid forms. Your life has become, therefore, a just and necessary sacrifice. . . . You were a free man; were comparatively wealthy; and enjoyed every comfort compatible with your situation. You had, therefore, much to risk and little to gain. From your age and experience, you ought to have known that success was impracticable.

> A moment's reflection must have convinced you, that the ruin of your race would have been the probable result, and that years would have rolled away before they could have recovered that confidence which they once enjoyed in this community.

One result of the attempted revolt was the passage of harsh new laws. One was called the Negro Seamen's Act. According to this law, any free blacks working on ships entering Charleston Harbor were to be put in jail until the ship left.

The federal government opposed this law, and it was declared unconstitutional because it violated the central government's right to make treaties. A treaty with England permitted ships' crews to move about freely when in U.S. ports. South Carolina said the federal government had no right to interfere with its right to make laws protecting itself. Debate over the Negro Seamen's Act was one instance of a growing disagreement about the rights of the states and the rights of the federal government. This general disagreement over states' rights was a major factor that led to the Civil War.

The major sources for this story were:

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