

# Jacobins of the Lowcountry: The Vesey Plot on Trial

Robert L. Paquette

IN October 1820, Edwin Holland, editor of the Charleston, South Carolina, *Times*, joined with a handful of other elite Charlestonians to petition the state's house of representatives for the suppression of the "existing evil" of an independent black church near the city, whose congregants were allegedly under abolitionist influence.<sup>1</sup> When municipal officials executed Denmark Vesey and other class leaders of that church two years later for masterminding a sophisticated plot to raise the slaves in and around Charleston in rebellion, Holland appeared vindicated. But he was also unsated. Before white panic about black revolt had fully dissipated in the lowcountry, he published a ringing defense of slavery that concluded with this thunderclap: "Let it never be forgotten, that our NEGROES are truly the *Jacobins* of the country; that they are the *anarchists* and the *domestic enemy*; the *common enemy of civilized society*, and the barbarians who would, IF THEY COULD, become the DESTROYERS of our race."<sup>2</sup>

Such forebodings caused Supreme Court Justice William Johnson also to worry about the future of his country. He and his brother-in-law, Governor Thomas Bennett, had emerged as Charleston's two most prominent critics of the official proceedings that had sentenced Vesey and thirty-four slaves to hang. Yes, Jacobinism threatened the land, thought Johnson, but it emanated from political firebrands like Holland, not from the ranks of South Carolina's slave majority, and he

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<sup>1</sup> The petition is excerpted in Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 318–19. Michael P. Johnson, "The Making of a Slave Conspiracy: Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 58 (2001), 926, demonstrates Pearson's "unrelenting carelessness" in transcribing the manuscript court record. (References to Johnson's article are given in parentheses in the text of this comment.) Readers of the book should also be warned that the documents transcribed in Appendix 3 suffer from the same problem.

<sup>2</sup> [Holland], *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated against the Southern and Western States, Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery among Them* (Charleston, 1822), 86.

said so to Thomas Jefferson: "I fear nothing so much as the Effects of the persecuting Spirit that is abroad in this Place [Charleston]. Should it spread thro' the State & produce a systematic Policy founded on the ridiculous but prevalent Notion—that it is a struggle for Life or Death, [then] there are no Excesses that we may not look for—whatever be their Effect upon the Union."<sup>3</sup>

Michael P. Johnson contends that Justice Johnson came far closer to the truth about the Vesey plot than did Edwin Holland. Indeed, the persecuting spirit to which Justice Johnson alluded corrupted a judicial process that hanged innocent men, most of whom had pleaded not guilty at their arraignment. No slave insurrection impended in Charleston in 1822, argues Johnson. The court of magistrates and freeholders assembled to investigate the alleged plot became convinced early on of its reality, the dearth of hard evidence like weapons notwithstanding. The court, its integrity challenged in an intensifying dispute with Justice Johnson and Governor Bennett, continued to manufacture convictions out of the words of frightened, intimidated, and mistreated black witnesses to salve wounded honor and secure public legitimation of the proceedings.

Dissatisfaction with three recent books on the Vesey plot impelled Johnson into South Carolina's state archive, and on examination of the manuscript court transcripts he acquits the accused and indicts historians for embracing what he calls the "heroic interpretation" (p. 915) of Vesey, which over the last quarter century has come to predominate in the academy. The manuscript transcripts, Johnson points out, reveal suspicious silences, including not a peep from Vesey himself. They also suggest procedural inconsistencies from session to session and differ somewhat in organization and detail from the *Official Report* published in October by the court shortly after it had been dissolved.

At one level of analysis, Johnson's stimulating essay serves as a cautionary tale to historians who in sympathetic pursuit of powerful signs of agency from oppressed people have rushed to embrace the judgments of white authorities on black resistance. He asks a vital question: How do you recognize a slave plot when you see it? In every slave society in the Americas, masters at one time or another accused their slaves of elaborate designs to take up the sword and win liberation. In many cases, the accused plotters suffered summary execution without even the barest pretense of justice. In other cases, they entered a legal proceeding, but the official record has survived only in part or not at all. In still other cases, most or all of the official documentation survives, but its

<sup>3</sup> Johnson to Jefferson, Aug. 11, 1823, in *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 1 (July 1900), 212.

worth varies widely and, at best, represents a tantalizing abridgment to a complicated, confusing story. Legal standards for slaves differed from country to country and changed within countries over time, but everywhere they reflected the low status of this “distinct class of persons.”<sup>4</sup> Cuba’s Conspiracy of La Escalera (1843–1844) may have set a record for a slave plot in generating thousands of pages of official transcripts that included lengthy interrogations of the accused. In contrast, the court to which Charleston’s magistrates and freeholders turned in 1822 for precedent yielded a few dozen official pages after convening in the upcountry town of Camden six years before to try about twenty alleged slave conspirators, all of whom proclaimed their innocence.<sup>5</sup> By the Camden standard, the Charleston court could rightfully claim to have paid excessive attention to record-keeping.

The amount of documentation bears no necessary correlation to its credibility. Torture has a foundational association with slavery in Western culture as a requisite means of disgoring truth from slaves and other subaltern people who lacked, as Aristotle put it, the “deliberative faculty.”<sup>6</sup> Since every court ever assembled to investigate slave plots did so against a backdrop of coercion and fear, students of slave resistance must look at all official testimony with a degree of skepticism. Recall, for example, the terror that produced the windfall of official paper during La Escalera. That 1844 went down in Cuba history as “el Año del Cuero” (“The Year of the Lash”) says enough. Because of the bloodletting, generations of Cuban historians had tended to be dismissive of the bundles of court records archived in Havana as unredeemably tainted sources. As a result, Cuban historiography had enshrined an interpretation of La Escalera as process, not as an actual plot. Yet related documents unearthed in archives outside of Cuba argue strongly for the existence in 1844 of a revolutionary movement of Cuba’s people of color,

<sup>4</sup> John Oliver Killens, ed., *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston, 1970), 3. See David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua, with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore, 1985), esp. chap. 1, for a particularly good discussion of the problems associated with the study of slave conspiracies.

<sup>5</sup> Luis Marino Pérez, *Guide to the Materials for American History in Cuban Archives* (Washington, D. C., 1907), 142, estimated “not less than 12,000 pages” for only one cache of official documents. He did not exaggerate. On the Camden plot, which merits further study, see Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 4; Kershaw County: MS, July 3–17, 1816, Negro Trials, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; Kershaw County Magistrate and Freeholder Trial Papers, 1802–1861, #786, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (SCDAH). One could readily build a case, based on the skimpy official record, for an imagined plot in Camden as well.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see Robert Paquette, “Discipline and Punishment,” in Paul Finkleman and Joseph C. Miller, eds., *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, 2 vols. (New York, 1998), 1:252–57.

although Cuba's officials, like those in Charleston and in other slaveholding places, fleshed out the plot's content with something less than precision.<sup>7</sup> In truth, a heavy fog hangs over all slave plots; none can be reconstructed beyond peradventure. Rumors swirled; vigilantes mobilized; accused as well as accusers moved to advance hidden agendas. A good historian with painstaking research can reasonably hope to do no more than persuade a jury of his peers by a preponderance of the evidence.

Johnson's case against the Vesey plot remains unconvincing because he terminates his trial in the discovery stage of the investigation, failing to follow promising leads from the manuscript court records themselves and ignoring evidence relevant to a historian (though not necessarily to a lawyer), absent in the official documents. Only a few examples can be noted here.

Johnson mentions in the beginning of his essay that Thomas Wentworth Higginson, abolitionist extraordinaire, had in 1861 repeated the wisdom then prevalent that the Vesey plot "was the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves" (p. 916). Yet Higginson, one of the Secret Six who supported John Brown, was also one of antebellum America's most diligent researchers into the history of slave rebellion. For information he pressed, among other sources, the abolitionist network and obtained from David Lee Child "a few memoranda of a conversation . . . with a free colored man who had worked in Vesey's shop during the time of the insurrection; and these generally confirm the official narrative."<sup>8</sup>

Moses Stuart, a highly regarded biblical scholar from New England, arrived in Charleston near the end of July 1822, shortly after the worst round of hangings. He partook of the hospitality of an unnamed city magistrate and recalled what he had to say when Stuart questioned him about the response of Charleston's blacks to the executions:

Why they marched by my house by thousands in perfect triumph. They sung; they danced; they shouted, so as to make the welkin ring. And the criminals? said I. As to them, replied he, they considered themselves as martyrs to the glorious cause of liberty; and so did all the procession. They ascended the scaffold exultingly, and shouting as if their masters were within

<sup>7</sup> I argue that La Escalera consisted of an intricate set of discrete yet overlapping plots in *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, Conn., 1988), 4 (quotation).

<sup>8</sup> [Higginson], "Denmark Vesey," *Atlantic Monthly*, 7 (June 1861), 741. The Thomas Wentworth Higginson Collection, bms Am 784, Houghton Library, Harvard University, contains some of the materials on slave rebellion that he collected.

hearing, they said: Now we are going to have *freedom*, the glorious liberty of the children of God, and you can no more deprive us of that.<sup>9</sup>

The magistrate confessed that separating guilty from innocent had become a problem, for “all the best servants in the city, male and female, were coming forward, and accusing themselves as partners in the conspiracy, even those who were as innocent of it as the child unborn. The spirit of martyrdom had got among them, and they had a burning thirst for the honors of a martyr’s death.”<sup>10</sup>

When in Charleston, Stuart also conversed with Benjamin Morgan Palmer, one of the city’s most prominent ministers, who was well connected to segments of the black population through missionary activities. Johnson overlooks Charleston’s white ministers during the Vesey affair, but they cannot easily be ignored, for they were busy visiting the incarcerated, counseling and comforting them, as well as eliciting confessions. The Reverend D. Hall, a Methodist minister, provided the court with the confession of Jesse Blackwood. John Bachman, the famous Lutheran pastor, helped obtain the confession of Bacchus Hammet.<sup>11</sup> Reverend Palmer of the Independent or Congregational Church, Richard Furman, Charleston’s leading Baptist minister, and other preachers actually met with Denmark Vesey and his alleged coadjutors before their execution, and several clergymen, including Palmer, attended at least some of the condemned men before they stepped onto the scaffold. Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach, a venerable sister of the Circular Church, had several dear friends, including Palmer and members of the Legaré family, involved in or near the proceedings. Her letters, uncited by Johnson, speak of Vesey’s “hardened” state of mind in jail and how he had “impressed or tried to” impress Rolla Bennett and other slaves who were professing churchmen “that they ought to engage

<sup>9</sup> Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution with Remarks on the Recent Speech of the Hon. Daniel Webster in the Senate of the United States on the Subject of Slavery* (Boston, 1850), 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> This Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1781–1847) should not be confused with his more famous nephew (1818–1902). On his involvement with the accused, see Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach to Elizabeth L. Gilchrist, July 5, 15, 23, 25, 1822, Beach Letters, South Carolina Historical Society (SCHS). The Rev. Hall’s help is acknowledged by the court. See Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 58. F. A. Mood, *Methodism in Charleston: A Narrative of the Chief Events Relating to the Rise and Progress of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S. C. . . .* (Nashville, 1856), 204, identifies Hall as a Methodist. The Confession of Bacchus Hammet, William and Benjamin Hammet Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, refers to Rev. Bachman’s contribution, although his name is misspelled.

in the business [that is, the plot] on account of their abridgement of religious privileges." The most trusted slave in Governor Bennett's household, who, like his master, had worshiped with Beach at the Circular Church, Rolla confessed his "sin" as a principal in the plot to the Reverend Palmer.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later the dragnet pulled in Billy, one of the Palmer family's own slaves. The good reverend initially reacted in stunned disbelief at the arrest of a slave he had helped raise and who had received the Holy Communion from him only a few days before. Yet, as Mary Beach recorded, both the Reverend Palmer and his father, Job, became "fully convinced" of Billy's guilt.<sup>13</sup> To date, not a single line of testimony has surfaced from Charleston's white clergy to suggest their dissent from the court's core findings. Nor did Palmer stand alone among Charleston's ministers in possessing sufficient fortitude to confront secular officials about the gross abuse of slaves.<sup>14</sup>

Stephen Elliott, president of the Bank of South Carolina, observed in 1822 that Charleston's lawyers were "frequently men of talent and generally of integrity."<sup>15</sup> None of them, it appears, dissented from the court's core findings, even though Governor Bennett and Justice Johnson had good friends in Charleston's legal establishment who participated as counsel for the defense. William Crafts, with whom Johnson had a friendly conversation on that fateful Sunday, July 16, about the "Melancholy Effects of Popular Excitement," counseled the accused slaves Billy Robinson and Denbow Martin.<sup>16</sup> Bennett chose Jacob Axson, whom Douglas Egerton correctly describes as "a superb, high-priced Charleston attorney," to defend his accused domestic slaves

<sup>12</sup> See esp. Beach to Gilchrist, July 5, 1822, Beach Letters, SCHS.

<sup>13</sup> Beach to Gilchrist, July 23, 1822, SCHS; [Frederick Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures, Relative to the Slave Population of South-Carolina* (Charleston, 1823), 37. Dalcho, an assistant minister of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, also had close contact with some of the jailed slaves and alluded to Rev. Palmer's grief over Billy.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 94, tells of Palmer's defiance of Robert Young Hayne, when as governor he sought to enforce the law prohibiting slaves from being taught to read. According to Stuart, Hayne told Palmer: "Well, Doctor, we are not afraid that you will teach them anything bad. Do as you please, only keep it to yourself."

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Elliott to William Elliott, July 22, 1822, Elliott and Gonzales Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), University of North Carolina Library.

<sup>16</sup> [William Johnson], *To the Public of Charleston* (Charleston, 1822), 4; *Charleston Courier*, June 21, 1822; Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 125, 129. Johnson's public explanation for the *Courier* article demands closer attention. Suffice to say here that his initial concern about rumor mongering on "the weaker sex" should be taken seriously. He had two adopted children, orphaned refugees from the slave revolution in St. Domingue. The girl, Marie Madeleine L'Engle, was a favorite. See Donald G. Morgan, *Justice William Johnson, the First Dissenter: The Career and Constitutional Philosophy of a Jeffersonian Judge* (Columbia, S. C., 1954), 25.

Rolla, Batteau and, Ned, all of whom were executed. Axson then switched roles and, as one of the two magistrates on the second of the two courts that tried the Vesey plotters, completed the executions by sentencing William Garner to hang.<sup>17</sup>

In denying the Vesey plot by interpreting it as a process in which “reading and rumors transmuted white orthodoxies into black heresies,” Johnson persistently employs the convenient synecdoche “the court” (p. 915) to identify a reality of two courts with a total of fifteen magistrates and freeholders.<sup>18</sup> He fails to probe the character of the individuals, as if Robert J. Turnbull had the same mind as Joel Roberts Poinsett (a close friend of Justice Johnson, by the way) or James Legaré’s temperament mirrored that of Robert Young Hayne. It also bears repeating that neither Governor Bennett nor Justice Johnson doubted the existence of some kind of plot in 1822, although, to be sure, they parted company with the *Official Report* as to the plot’s seriousness and magnitude.<sup>19</sup> Curiously enough, the private thoughts of Anna Johnson, the justice’s daughter, reveal that she endorsed the courts’ version of the plot, not that of her own father.<sup>20</sup>

Johnson would seem to score points for the opposition when he contends that “the source of the inflammatory ideas” (p. 962) among Charleston’s slaves appeared in December 1821 in the accounts in Charleston’s newspapers about (state) legislative action on petitions to “emancipate” (that is, manumit; p. 962) slaves. Rather than *the* source of combustion, however, such news while being bruited about by the slaves could easily have become conflated with antislavery bits and pieces previously derived from rather lengthy, conspicuous articles published over the years also by Charleston’s newspapers on the Missouri question.<sup>21</sup> A young northern clergymen who visited Charleston in 1821 “anticipated many long arguments upon the subject of Missouri with these hot-headed Carolinians” and was not disappointed.<sup>22</sup> That literate, privi-

<sup>17</sup> Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, 1999), 181; Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 41, 47, 54, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 41, 132, 163. Henry Deas replaced James Legaré, who stepped down from the first court because of illness.

<sup>19</sup> William Johnson to Jefferson, Dec. 10, 1822, Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Bennett’s most comprehensive statement on the plot is his address to the South Carolina State Legislature, Nov. 28, 1822, Records of the General Assembly, Governors’ Messages #1328, SCDAAH. The address so displeased its audience that a large majority (80 to 35) voted against publication.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Johnson to Elizabeth Haywood, June 28, July 18, 27, 1822, Ernest Haywood Collection, SHC.

<sup>21</sup> For this essay, I have examined issues of the *Charleston Courier* and the (Charleston) *Southern Gazette*, and *Commercial Advertiser* for 1821 and 1822.

<sup>22</sup> P. J. Staudenraus, ed., “Letters from South Carolina, 1821–1822,” *S.C. Hist. Gen. Mag.*, 58 (1957), 213.

leged slaves, reading newspapers and shadowing the dinner tables of Charleston's elite, would have registered the Missouri debates in some way hardly stretches credulity. At any rate, historians of slave rebellion have shown that, whatever their sources, rumors of a general emancipation somehow denied or kept from the slaves have proven to be one of the most potent precipitants of organized slave revolt in the history of the Americas.<sup>23</sup> The misinterpreted news of December 1821 could have sparked the long-smoldering resentments of Vesey and his followers at a time when relations between white and black were unquestionably explosive, preconditioned so by both the slaves' frustrated religious and political aspirations and a growing white concern that in an age of revolution the bonds of enslavement in Charleston had dangerously loosened.<sup>24</sup>

When Stephen Elliott complimented Charleston's lawyers in July 1822, he took comfort that the plot seemed confined to Charleston. He may have spoken too soon, for newspapers outside Charleston published excerpted letters from his home district of Beaufort about a slave insurrection there on the night of September 15.<sup>25</sup> Johnson brushes aside testimony that the Vesey plot may have branched out from Charleston into the countryside, but James Ferguson, a big planter in the region, had no doubt after discovering with documented ingenuity that his trusted driver and other estate slaves had joined Vesey's plot.<sup>26</sup> Elias Horry, one of the wealthiest slaveholders in South Carolina with multiple estates on the Santee River, must have had his head cleared about the plot and a country connection when he heard the answers of his favorite coachman to two questions: "Tell me, are you guilty [of involvement in the plot]? For I cannot believe unless I hear you say so—yes replied the Negro—what were your intentions?—to kill you, rip open your belly & throw your guts in your face."<sup>27</sup> One can only imagine how Mr. Horry would have responded to Professor Johnson.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, David Geggus, "Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean, 1789–1815," in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Geggus (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), esp. 7–9, 12.

<sup>24</sup> On the theme of an age of revolution, see (Charleston) *Southern Patriot and Commercial Advertiser*, May 5, 1821; Holland, *Refutation of the Calumnies*, passim; "Caroliniensis" [attributed to Robert J. Turnbull, who sat on the first court], *A Series of Articles Discussing a Pamphlet Entitled "The Opinion of the Hon. William Johnson . . ."* (Charleston, 1824), 41–46, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Elliott to William Elliott, July 22, 1822, SHC; *Washington Gazette*, Sept. 26, 1822.

<sup>26</sup> See Ferguson's letter of Sept. 16, 1822, in Killens, ed., *Trial Record*, 18–21, and the Memoirs of Samuel Wragg Ferguson, 15–16, in Samuel Wragg Ferguson Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University. For the role of drivers in the history of slave rebellion in the Americas, see Paquette, "The Drivers Shall Lead Them: Image and Reality in Slave Resistance," in *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, ed. Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger (Charlottesville, 2000), 31–58.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Proctor Richardson to James Screven, Aug. 7, 1822, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC.