



Map 2. Plan of Charleston, 1849. From Hoole Library Maps, University of Alabama Libraries.

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## Preconditions

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Most of the slaves and free blacks involved in the conspiracy of 1822 had resided in Charleston for years, if not decades. These documents chart the arrival and subsequent lives of the key leaders of Vesey's plot. They also establish the context of the plot through their depiction of black life and culture in the Carolina lowcountry. The first of these documents, most of them newspaper accounts, pertain to the purchase, sale, and reacquisition of the enslaved child initially renamed Telemaque, or Telmack, who would later come to be known as Denmark and then Denmark Vesey. Since Denmark remained in Captain Joseph Vesey's possession after mid-1782, the documents reveal his location. After the British evacuation of Charleston in December 1782, the captain bought a house at 281 King Street and began to import goods and small numbers of slaves. Around 1796, he began a relationship with Mary Clodner.

This section also includes the brief biography of Vesey, reprinted here in chronological excerpts, which originally appeared as a lengthy footnote in Intendant James Hamilton Jr.'s pamphlet, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*. Because the dates provided in the biography conform so closely to the newspaper accounts below, that information could only have come from the aged Captain Joseph Vesey (1747–1835), who lived in Charleston until his death. A Francophile slave-trading merchant with an active associational life in the city, Captain Vesey established businesses that formed close commercial ties with the French colony of Saint-Domingue.

### *Affiches Américaines*

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Wednesday, April 24, 1782

Le Navire *la Patience*, de Saint-Thomas, Capitaine Joseph Wesey,[1] est arrive dans ce Port la 23 de ce mois avec usie tres-belle cargaison de Negres de la Côte-di Or, à l' adresse des Sieurs Lory, Pombard & Companie.

1. Despite the misspelled surname, it clearly identifies Joseph Vesey, the Bermudan-born mariner who had invested in Charleston real estate as early as 1774.

## Biography of Denmark Vesey, August 1822

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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.[1] During the revolutionary war, captain Vesey, now an old resident of this city,[2] 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,[3] 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*).[4] On the arrival,[5] 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.

1. France received the western third of the island of Hispaniola by the Peace of Ryswick (1697). There was no French colony called "San Domingo." Yet even before the 1795 Treaty of Basle briefly ceded the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, which occupied the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, to France, Americans often used the term "San Domingo" or "St. Domingo" to refer to the French colony of Saint-Domingue or to the entire island.

2. The *DSGCC*, 84, indicates that the seventy-five-year-old Joseph Vesey then resided at 82 Anson Street. This biographical information, which is supported by the Saint-Domingue newspaper cited below, was surely provided by the captain, and this sentence suggests that Vesey spoke informally to the court.

3. Although Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 268, claimed that Denmark was born in Africa, as do Raymond M. Hyser and J. Chris Arndt, *Voices of the American Past: Documents in U.S. History*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2004), vol. 1: 218, no source precisely identifies the place of his birth. Most likely it was St. Thomas or the Gold Coast region of West Africa. No contemporaneous source identifies Vesey as mixed-race, the assertions of several modern scholars notwithstanding. Philip Morgan, "Conspiracy Scares," *WMQ* 59 (2002): 165–66, errs in insisting that reliable evidence exists to that effect. Morgan cites Archibald Grimké, *Right on the Scaffold, or The Martyrs of 1822* (Washington, DC: The Academy, 1901), 6, a page that makes no mention of Vesey's color. Grimké instead said on page 1: "He was black but comely. Nature gave him a royal body, nobly planned and proportioned, and noted for its great strength." Morgan also cites William Gilmore Simms, *The History of South Carolina* (Charleston, SC, 1840), 328, an unreliable source that incorrectly identifies Vesey as a native of Saint-Domingue who took part in the 1791 slave revolt. Magistrates Kennedy and Parker, *OR*, simply described him as "black," as did the *Charleston City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, August 21, 1822, which appears in Part IV of this volume. Michael P. Johnson,

“Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *WMQ* 58 (2001): 918, also errs in writing that “no source documents Vesey’s physical size.” Apart from Grimké, see Lydia Maria Child to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, March 17, 1860, in Part VI of this volume; Child quoted Thomas Cilavan Brown, a free man of color who had worked as a carpenter in Charleston at the time of the Vesey affair, as describing Vesey as “a Corromantee negro . . . brought from the [African] coast” and “a large, stout man.” Enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast were often called, with variant spellings, Coromantee, after an English trading post created there in the seventeenth century. Among slaveholders in the circum-Caribbean region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Coromantees (also called “Minas” in some countries) acquired a well-earned reputation for insurrectionary behavior. Of the estimated 65,257 African slaves who debarked on the Danish Virgin Islands from 1751 to 1800, 45,399 (70 percent) derived from the Gold Coast (calculated from data in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>, accessed August 5, 2014). Thus, a Gold Coast origin, membership in the Akan ethnolinguistic group, and transit at the end of the middle passage through the island of St. Thomas stand as distinct possibilities for Vesey’s early life. See also John K. Thornton, “War, the State, and Religious Norms in ‘Coromantee’ Thought: The Ideology of an African American Nation,” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), esp. 182.

4. Telemachus figures prominently in Homer’s *Odyssey* as the wandering son of Odysseus and Penelope. He was shipwrecked on the deadly island of Ogyia until rescued by Calypso. Joseph Folker, *A Directory of the City and District of Charleston and Stranger’s Guide for the Year 1813* (Charleston, SC, 1813), 81, listed Joseph Vesey as a schoolmaster who resided on King Street. The naming of Denmark thus suggests Joseph Vesey’s interest in classical literature.

5. As the above notice in the *Affiches Américaines* indicates, Vesey returned to Saint-Domingue in April 1782.

James A. Hamilton, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, SC, 1822), 17.

### Charleston Gazette of the State of South-Carolina

Wednesday, September 24, 1783[1]

NEGROES. Just imported in the schooner POLLY Capt. Higgins, a Cargo of healthy young SLAVES, to be Sold on SATURDAY the 27<sup>th</sup> of September (instant) at Mrs. DEWEES’S, No. 43 Queen-street. The Sale to continue every fair day (Sundays excepted) until all be Sold.

The conditions will be made agreeable as possible to the purchasers.

J. VESEY & Co.  
No. 27¼ Bay

NEGROES. On WEDNESDAY the first of October, at Mrs. DEWEES’S, No. 43, Queen-street, WILL be exposed for Sale, 104 Prime SLAVES, just imported in the schooner Eagle, Captain David Miller. The Sale will continue every fair day (Sundays excepted) until all be sold. The conditions will be made as convenient as possible to the purchasers.

J. VESEY & Co.  
No. 27¼ Bay

1. A number of scholars, including Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 28, speculate that young Denmark may have spent as many as “eight or nine years at sea” with the captain. But these newspaper accounts, together with Joseph Vesey’s importation records (found in the Duties on Trade at Charleston, Manifests and Entries, SCDAH), place the master and his slave in Charleston during the 1780s and 1790s. Most likely, Denmark was a mariner for only one year, from the spring of 1782 to the early spring of 1783.

*Charleston South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*

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Saturday, September 27, 1783

For Sale, the Schooner Dove, Bermuda built, about 230 barrels Rice burthen, known in the West Indies for a strong, fast-sailing Vessel, well calculated for that trade, And the Schooner Polly, Virginia built, burthen about 180 barrels.

JO. VESEY

*Charleston South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*

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Saturday, March 13, 1784

FOR SALE

THE GOOD SNOW QUEEN, Joseph Lightburne, Master, now lying at COCHRAN’S Wharf; is a new Vessel, Virginia built, well sound, burthen about 360 barrels rice.

Inventory may be seen and terms known by applying to the Master on board, or at No. 35, Bay, to

J. VESEY

*Charleston South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*

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Saturday, May 8, 1784

JOSEPH VESEY

REQUESTS the favour of those indebted to him for Negroes sold last year, to discharge their Bonds and Notes before next entering day, or he shall be under the necessity of lodging them with an Attorney, to be sued for without distinction.

No. 35, Bay.

*Charleston State Gazette of South Carolina*

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Thursday, July 1, 1790

. . . *Resolved*, That the elections to be had on the second Monday of October next, and on the day following, for senators and members of the house of representatives, shall be held at the following places, and conducted by the following persons, viz.

For Charleston, including St. Philip and St. Michael, at the city Exchange. Managers, Edward Trescot, Thomas Wright Bacot, Joseph Vesey, and John Beale . . .

Lease, Tuesday, July 26, 1796

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Mary Clodner commonly called Mary Vesey a free East Indian now residing in the City of Charleston purchased three farm tracts of land called the Grove near Charleston from John Irving, lately of Charleston, now of St. James for £1200.[1]

1. The Grove, an estate of thirty-five acres on the Ashley River near the racecourse just north of Charleston, was known for the beauty of its grounds. It stands today as Lowndes' Grove. See Carl J. Vipperman, *William Lowndes and the Transition of Southern Politics, 1782–1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 26

Charleston Deeds, P-6, pp. 467–68, SCDAH.

When slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, where Denmark had briefly labored in 1782, rose for their freedom in August 1791, South Carolinians of both races became aware of the very real possibility of servile revolt closer to home. Jacobinical France's adoption of black liberty in its Constitution of 1794 complicated Franco-American diplomacy. White southerners, particularly lowcountry Federalists, began to abandon the French cause a year earlier, when Edmond-Charles Genet, the French minister who had been sent by the Girondists to the United States, violated neutrality laws by recruiting support for revolutionary France. Captain Vesey continued to do business with Saint-Domingue for years after the outbreak of the slave insurrection that metamorphosed into a social revolution. The use of arson by rebellious slaves became a personal issue in the Vesey household in 1796 when an enslaved domestic named Molly set fire to Mary Clodner's house; Molly's death became Denmark's first brush with arson as a weapon and hanging as a punishment. Despite any doubts Joseph and Mary might have had about blacks as free and independent people, when Denmark won the city lottery in the fall of 1799, they allowed him to buy his freedom. Legally, they might simply have confiscated their chattel's winnings.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines formally declared the independence of Haiti in 1804. Haitian pleas for African Americans to relocate to the black republic followed from his successors and allowed men like Denmark to consider the country a haven for escaping rebels. Aware as he surely was of that nation's poverty, Vesey may have planned to take plunder from Charleston's banks less as a desire to achieve back pay for former slaves than to buy his and their way into Haiti, since serving as a refuge for rebellious black Carolinians would little help Haiti's already unfavorable standing among white politicians around the Atlantic.

Charleston City Gazette & Daily Advertiser

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Thursday, April 25, 1793

COFFEE.

A quantity of excellent GREEN COFFEE, imported in the last vessels from St. Domingo, for sale, by NORTH & VESEY[1] April 25.