

Denmark Vesey

c. 1767–1822



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Denmark Vesey was a former slave who wanted other slaves to experience freedom. He organized a large rebellion, but was stopped before it could start. Nevertheless, Vesey remains an important part of the history of the abolitionist movement.



As you read the biography below, think about how Denmark Vesey's courage helped him plan a well-organized revolt.

Denmark Vesey's life was one filled with irony and courage. A slave trader named Captain Joseph Vesey bought him at an early age, but later sold him to a sugar plantation owner in Haiti. The plantation owner returned Vesey to the captain because he did not want a slave who suffered from **epilepsy**.

Denmark Vesey became the captain's personal servant. He sailed the trade routes from Africa to the West Indies, witnessing the horrible conditions the slaves suffered while on board the ships and when they worked on the plantations.

In 1783 the captain decided to settle in Charleston, South Carolina. Vesey went with him and remained the captain's slave for 17 years. In 1800 Vesey had a stroke of luck when he won \$1,500 in a lottery. Despite the fact that he was treated better than most slaves because he was a personal servant, Vesey's first action was to purchase his freedom. Vesey paid his slave owner \$600. He also tried to buy his own children, but the captain would not sell them.

Vesey used the remaining funds to open a carpentry shop. His work was excellent and he became a very wealthy free man. In 1816 Vesey and other

VOCABULARY

epilepsy disorder of the nervous system often characterized by seizures

African Americans started a Methodist church. Every Sunday Vesey preached to thousands of African Americans.

Around this time, Vesey learned that slaves in Haiti had risen up against their masters and freed themselves. Vesey was inspired by this event and began to speak freely against slavery. Vesey believed he could make a difference, so he began to organize a revolt. He gathered an entire army of slaves and free African Americans. Some records state that almost 9,000 people joined Vesey's group.

After four years of planning, the plot unraveled in its final weeks. It is believed that household slaves who were loyal to their masters informed the slaveholders of Vesey's plans. Vesey was put on trial along with a few hundred other blacks, a fraction of the number of people actually involved in the plot. Vesey was hanged on July 2, 1822.

The most interesting part of Vesey's story is that he was a free man when he planned the revolt. He sacrificed his own freedom, and ultimately his life, in an effort to free the many African Americans who remained enslaved.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Draw Conclusions Why were household slaves often loyal to their masters?

2. Expressing and Supporting a Point of View What do you think was Denmark Vesey's greatest accomplishment? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

ACTIVITY

3. Use magazines to make a collage of words and pictures that describe the life of Denmark Vesey.