OF FACTS AND FABLES: NEW LIGHT ON THE DENMARK VESEY AFFAIR

ROBERT L. PAQUETTE AND DOUGLAS R. EGERTON*

A WOODCUTTER RETURNS HOME ON A COLD, WINTRY DAY. Along the way he spies a serpent frozen nearly to death in the ice. He picks up the serpent, puts it under his coat, and takes it home to his family. Warming up before an open fire, the serpent stirs. One of the woodcutter's playful children reaches down to stroke it, but the serpent draws back ready to sink its fangs into the child's flesh. In a flash the woodcutter seizes his ax and preempts the strike by cleaving the serpent in two. The moral of the story: Do not expect gratitude from the wicked.

During the summer of 1822, a court of magistrates and freeholders in Charleston referenced Aesop and his fable of the frozen serpent in sentencing to death ten slaves convicted of involvement in an extensive plot to raise an insurrection. After an official investigation that lasted more than two months, two courts, each comprised of two white magistrates and five white freeholders, decided the fate of more than 100 jailed persons of color, most of them slaves. Witnesses testified that the conspiracy centered in Charleston's growing population of skilled, literate, and privileged slaves. They had not only committed "treason," the judges determined, but had demonstrated to their masters "the vilest ingratitude" and "grossest impiety."[1] A number of alleged ringleaders belonged to the Charleston branch of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, an independent black church that had surfaced in the city little more than four years before. The first court, sitting for about six weeks, handled the lion's share of the cases. It convicted Denmark Vesey, a free black carpenter, of masterminding a "diabolical plot" to "trample on all laws, human and divine; to riot in blood, outrage, rapine, and conflagration, and to introduce anarchy and confusion in their most horrid forms."[2] He and thirty-four slaves ended their lives swinging from the gallows.

The second court conducted a mopping-up session that lasted less than a week in early August, and despite the public boast shortly thereafter of

* Robert L. Paquette is Publius Virgilius Rogers Professor of American History at Hamilton College. Douglas R. Egerton is Joseph C. Georg Professor of History at Le Moyne College. The authors wish to thank Douglas Ambrose, William Freehling, Eugene Genovese, Charles Lesser, Mark Smith, and Clyde Wilson for their comments on various versions of this essay.

[1] John Oliver Killens, ed., *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 139.

[2] Ibid., 135.

considered subversive to its continued supremacy.[4] In Johnson's view, the black men who were hanged and exiled in the summer of 1822 were not diabolic plotters but victims of a diabolic plot, "the James Hamilton, Jr. conspiracy."[5]

In this issue of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Robert L. Paquette and Douglas R. Egerton—active participants in the ongoing debate about the Vesey affair who, in their words, "remain unpersuaded by Johnson's scholarship"—advance the discussion by offering new evidence in support of the traditional interpretation: an exchange of letters between the Board of Managers of the Charleston Bible Society and Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr. recently recovered from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.[6] Typescripts of the letters—one of which has never before been published in its entirety, and the other of which has never before been published or cited—are appended to the article. The Editorial Board and I are pleased to have the *Magazine* serve as a forum for furthering dialogue on this important chapter of South Carolina's history.

MATTHEW A. LOCKHART
EDITOR

[4] Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (October 2001): 915-76.

[5] Johnson, "Reading Evidence," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 201.

[6] Robert L. Paquette and Douglas R. Egerton, "Of Facts and Fables: New Light on the Denmark Vesey Affair," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 105 (January 2004): 11.

Charleston's intendant, James Hamilton, Jr., that "there is nothing they [the slaves] are bad enough to do, that we are not powerful enough to punish," chastened lowcountry whites reclaimed their pews to thank a providential god for sparing them from a fiendish bloodletting.[3] City officials could not be precise about the total number of rebels—probably hundreds, perhaps thousands—nor about their geographic reach outside of Charleston, but the judicial proceedings placed Vesey squarely in the front of a revolutionary movement that appeared to rank as the largest act of collective slave resistance in the history of the United States.

Both the presiding magistrates of the first court (Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker) and Intendant Hamilton published detailed reports on the Vesey affair. Although modern historians have delved into these sources with moral sentiments sharply divergent from those of Vesey's executioners, the resulting scholarship has sounded almost unanimous in endorsing the official judgment that a major slave revolt impended in Charleston in 1822 and that the "author and original instigator" was Denmark Vesey.[4] Indeed, the publication in close succession at the end of the twentieth century of three scholarly books on the affair, each portraying Vesey as a gifted and courageous insurgent who had suffered a martyr's death in the epoch-making struggle against slavery, would seem to have firmly secured his star in the firmament of antislavery activists.[5]

In 2001, however, a lengthy review of these three books by historian Michael Johnson for the *William and Mary Quarterly* impeached the prevailing wisdom. After turning from the published official reports to manuscript court transcripts housed in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Johnson not only backtracked from his own previously published assessment of Vesey as a "black Moses," "revolutionary assassin," and "beyond question" a man who "believed that many whites must die if blacks were to be free," but also denied the very existence of an insurrectionary

[3] [James Hamilton, Jr.], *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1822), 2.

[4] Ibid.; Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, eds., *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South-Carolina...* (Charleston, S.C.: James R. Schenck, 1822), especially 177. Killens, *Trial Record*, is a convenient republication of *Official Report*.

[5] Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1999); 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); David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

plot.[6] "'Denmark Vesey and the men who were hanged,' said Johnson to one interviewer, 'were not guilty of launching a slave insurrection, or even planning one.'"[7] Charleston's governing planter elite, he charged, had concocted an opportunistic scheme of its own that resulted in the hanging of innocent men. The judges on the court, the majority of them big planters, wanted convictions, so they indulged in a kind of unholy "collaboration" with a number of terrified jailed slaves who told the court what it wanted to hear in the hope of saving their skins.[8]

Because of the sweeping nature of Johnson's revisionist essay, the editors of the *William and Mary Quarterly* invited responses from the authors of the three books under review and from several other specialists in the history of slave resistance. These responses, along with Johnson's rejoinder, were published as a forum in a subsequent issue of the journal.[9] The debate would eventually garner national attention with coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Nation*, among other media.[10] In 2002 the editors of the *William and Mary Quarterly* awarded Johnson a prize for having written the best article published in the journal during the previous year.[11] A number of

[6] Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1984), 37-42; Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (October 2001): 915-976. As Johnson correctly points out (p. 921), two manuscript court transcripts, one a partial copy of the other, exist as Document B in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereinafter cited as SCDAH). The transcript marked "Evidence Document B" contains information on the proceedings of the second court that is lacking in the copy marked "Document B House of Representatives." In no way, however, should even the lengthier document be seen as a full or complete recording of the courts' proceedings.

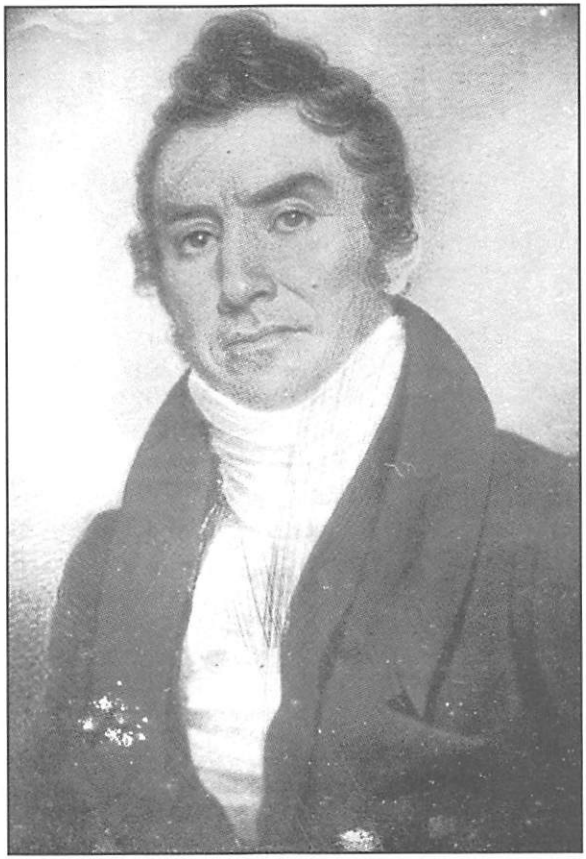
[7] As quoted in Glenn Small Homewood, "Sleuthing Prof Debunks Slave Plot," *Gazette Online: The Newspaper of The Johns Hopkins University*, October 22, 2001.

[8] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," especially 971.

[9] "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, Part 2," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 135-202. The following scholars contributed to the forum: Edward A. Pearson, Douglas R. Egerton, David Robertson, Philip D. Morgan, Thomas J. Davis, Winthrop D. Jordan, James Sidbury, Robert L. Paquette, and Michael P. Johnson.

[10] Dinitia Smith, "Challenging the History of a Slave Conspiracy," *New York Times*, February 23, 2002; Jonathan Wiener, "Denmark Vesey: A New Verdict," *Nation* 274, no. 9 (March 2002): 21-24. Wiener's paean to Johnson's scholarship contains numerous errors and does not identify Wiener's long-standing friendship with Johnson, which harkens back to the 1970s when both were colleagues in the Department of History at the University of California, Irvine.

[11] Wiener, *Nation* 274, no. 16 (April 2002): 2, announced that Johnson had won the award more than a month before the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (July 2002): 818, officially published the fact.



Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr. Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

prominent historians have added to the recognition by rushing to embrace Johnson's novel interpretation.[12]

The authors of this article, however, having previously joined the debate, remain unpersuaded by Johnson's scholarship and have promised to advance the discussion.[13] The publication here for the first time of an exchange of letters between the Board of Managers of the Charleston Bible Society and Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr. can be seen as a small but

[12] See, e.g., Philip D. Morgan, "Conspiracy Scares," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 159-66, and Jacqueline Jones, et. al., *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States* (New York: Longman, 2003), 376.

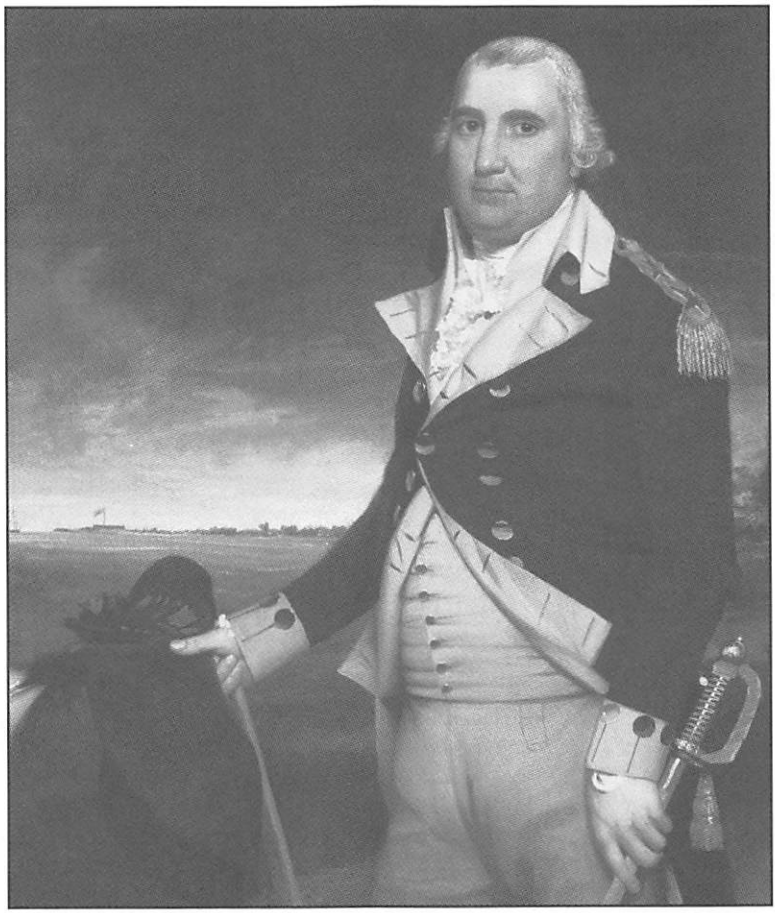
[13] See our brief response to Wiener's essay in "Letters," *Nation* 274, no. 16 (April 2002): 2.

significant step in that direction.[14] The nine-page draft letter of the Bible Society, dated September 23, 1822, and never before published in its entirety, consists essentially of two discrete pleas to the governor to exert his executive authority: first, to declare a statewide day of thanksgiving and prayer to honor the Almighty for having spared Charleston from servile rebellion; second, to prevent passage in the state legislature of any punitive law that would interfere with the Bible Society's ability to promote the religious instruction of slaves. Bennett, with a nonconformist reading of evidence in the Vesey case, responds on October 1— in a letter never before published or cited— by demurring on the first issue but suggesting succor on the second. Both letters, written before the mid-October publication of the first court's *Official Report*, speak with particular cogency about the alleged plot because their authors figured conspicuously in the swirl of events and had close personal ties to slaves who were hauled before the court.

Although the Bible Society's draft letter bears the name of the by-then venerable Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a revered figure in South Carolina in 1822 for his contributions to the founding of the Republic, the document in its entirety can be more accurately described as the collective expression of the Bible Society's directorate. Pinckney had helped found this private interdenominational association of Protestant clergy and pious lay elders in 1810, and a dozen years later, by the summer of the Vesey affair, it had known no other president. The Board of Managers, however, a core group of two dozen officers, ran the organization, whose expressed mission aimed at the distribution of free copies of Scripture to such "poor and destitute" groups as orphans, Indians, soldiers, and mariners.[15] Because slaves also received charitable attention from the Bible Society, its activities generated almost immediate hostility from some planters who worried about the lessons literate slaves might learn in reading the Bible for themselves. In December 1810, a perturbed Pinckney apprised the celebrated geographer and Congregationalist minister Jedediah Morse of the "opponents" to the Bible Society's mission, "who are apprehensive, or rather, I think, pretend to be apprehensive, that it will have a tendency to excite disturbances

[14] Nicholas M. Butler, archivist at the South Carolina Historical Society (hereinafter cited as SCHS), recovered the letters in the Charleston Bible Society Records, 1815-1978 (0239), acting on a lead drawn by Paquette from Marvin R. Zahniser, *Charles Cotesworth Pinckney: Founding Father* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 273, n. 44.

[15] Ibid., 272-74; *The Constitution of the Bible Society of Charleston, and the First Report of Its Managers...* (Charleston, S.C.: J. Hoff, 1811), especially 3 and 9; *Report of the Charleston Bible Society, Made at Its Twelfth Anniversary, 17th June, 1822* (Charleston, S.C.: J. R. Schenck, 1822), 10.



General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a founder and president of the Charleston Bible Society. Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, Charleston, S.C.

among our Domestics."[16] At this time, Pinckney regarded such thinking as foolish.

Governor Bennett stood outside the inner circle of the Bible Society but numbered among its first benefactors. In 1822 the Bible Society's distinguished board included, besides Pinckney: Richard Furman, the antebellum South's most influential Baptist minister; John Bachman, the antebellum South's most influential Lutheran minister; Benjamin Morgan

[16] Charles Cotesworth Pinckney to Jedediah Morse, December 1, 1810, Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Palmer, pastor of Charleston's Independent or Congregational Church and an understudied pioneer in missionary outreach to South Carolina's slaves; Arthur Buist, pastor of Charleston's First (Scots) Presbyterian Church; Artemas Boies, pastor of Charleston's Second Presbyterian Church, in which Denmark Vesey in 1817 took communion; James Legaré, a respected planter who served on the first court of magistrates and freeholders; and Thomas Smith Grimké, an erudite lawyer and searching moralist who harbored genuine uncertainties about the rightfulness of slavery.[17]

Richard Furman, like his good friend Pinckney, had shaped the structure and mission of the Bible Society from its inception, and, without question, the draft letter bears his imprint, for the nine pages of text represent an almost verbatim transcription of two manuscript fragments written by Furman and currently preserved separately in the manuscript collections of Furman University and the University of South Carolina.[18] Although Furman

[17] *Constitution of the Bible Society*, 13; *Report of the Charleston Bible Society*, 10. The best biography of Furman is James A. Rogers, *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985). On Bachman, see Raymond Morris Bost, "The Reverend John Bachman and the Development of Southern Lutheranism" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1965), and Lester D. Stephens, *Science, Race, and Religion in the American South: John Bachman and the Charleston Circle of Naturalists, 1815-1895* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1781-1847) should not be confused with his more famous nephew and namesake (1818-1902), who was a Presbyterian minister. A scholarly biography of the uncle remains to be written. For information on his pastorate, see George N. Edwards, *A History of the Independent or Congregational Church of Charleston South Carolina, Commonly Known as Circular Church* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1947), 65-71. George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina*, 2 vols. (Columbia, S.C.: W. J. Duffie, 1870-1883), II, passim, contains scattered information on Palmer, Arthur Buist, and Artemas Boies. On James Legaré, see N. Louise Bailey and Elizabeth Ivey Cooper, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives*, vol. 3, *1775-1790* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), 426-27, and John Hammond Moore, ed., "The Abiel Abbot Journals: A Yankee Preacher in Charleston Society, 1818-1827," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 68 (April 1967): 53; idem, "The Abiel Abbot Journals: A Yankee Preacher in Charleston Society, 1818-1827," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 68 (October 1967): 233-36. Thomas Smith Grimké, like Benjamin Morgan Palmer, is also deserving of a scholarly biography. For a beginning, see Adrienne Koch, "Two Charlestonians in Pursuit of Truth: The Grimké Brothers," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 69 (July 1968): 159-70, and William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 180-82.

[18] The first four pages, dated September 1822, of Furman's eight-page draft can be found in Richard Furman Papers, series I, Special Collections, Furman University. The last four pages, described in the Thomas Cooper Library's electronic catalog entry as Furman's "Letter, c. 1822 to Gov. Thomas Bennett, Columbia, S.C. re Denmark Vessey [*sic*] slave rebellion and S.C.'s opposition to evangelizing slaves,"

appears to have been the chief draftsman of the entire Bible Society letter, it speaks in the name of the Board of Managers, and Governor Bennett addressed his return mail accordingly. This point proves crucial to any evaluation of the letter's content on the Vesey affair, for ministerial members of the Board of Managers had repeated and intimate access to principals in the plot. Bible Society ministers conversed in jail with Vesey, his alleged lieutenants, and other inmates. They asked questions. They heard private words that no trial document recorded as well as the last words of condemned men on their way to the gallows. The ministers also searched for the truth outside the jailhouse where they had an active network of friends and contacts in Charleston's slave and free-colored communities that included no less than the founders of the city's AME Church.[19] During the summer of 1822, Bible Society ministers and other informed members shared intelligence about the Vesey affair, made connections, discerned patterns, and drew reasoned conclusions. By the end of September, they had learned enough to affirm collectively and unequivocally in their letter to Bennett the existence of a "ferocious, diabolical design . . . fraught with every Principle

can be found in the Furman Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. The handwriting in both fragments is clearly Furman's. The nine-page draft letter in the Charleston Bible Society Records at the SCHS is clearly not in Furman's script, and the editorial insertions are written in a hand different from the one that copied the text of Furman's draft for the Bible Society. Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 157-58 and 349-50, saw both parts of Furman's draft letter in different archives but failed to connect the two as one composition. He transcribed much of the fragment in the South Caroliniana Library for publication in his book, but for an unknown reason erroneously dates it October 1822. The "letter" of September 1822, which Pearson read at the Southern Baptist Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, is a microfilm copy of the original fragment held by Furman University. Pearson fails to mention the location of the original.

[19] Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach to Elizabeth Gilchrist, July 5, July 23, and July 25, 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers, SCHS; Confession of Bacchus Hammet, William and Benjamin Hammet Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University; Nathaniel Bowen, *A Pastoral Letter, on the Religious Instruction of the Slaves of Members of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of South Carolina* . . . (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1835). The Bible Society ministers were not the only clergy to visit with the jailed suspects. See Killens, *Trial Record*, 46, 56, 64, for the role of the Methodist minister D. Hall. The Episcopalian minister Frederick Dalcho, in *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures, Relative to the Slave Population of South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller; 1823), 33, complained of one religious inmate's misinterpretation of a chapter in the Gospel of John. *The Diurnal of the Right Rev. John England, D.D., first Bishop of Charleston, S.C., from 1820 to 1823* (Philadelphia: American Catholic History Society, 1895), 5, contains an entry for July 26 when Bishop England "attended a Culprit concerned in the Negro conspiracy to execution." Richard Furman must also have obtained information about the plot from his son, Charles Manning Furman, who served as a judge on the second court.

of premeditated wickedness" and to brand Denmark Vesey its "prime Mover."[20]

No slaveholder in Charleston suffered a greater loss of property and reputation during the Vesey affair than Governor Bennett. Within days of first hearing about the plot from Intendant Hamilton, Bennett awakened to find four of his domestic slaves swept up into confinement by municipal authorities. He hired Jacob Axson, a prominent attorney who would subsequently become a magistrate on the second court, to defend them. His counsel notwithstanding, the first court sentenced three of Bennett's jailed slaves—Rolla, Ned, and Batteau—to accompany Vesey to the gallows on July 2 during the first round of executions.[21] As the investigations proceeded, Bennett emerged in Charleston as the most vocal critic of the first court's proceedings. He issued an official circular about the plot on August 10, shortly after the adjournment of the second court. He delivered his most comprehensive assessment of the Vesey affair in a message to the state legislature on November 28.[22] Written between these dates, Bennett's ten-page letter to the Bible Society presents perhaps his most revealing private commentary on the plot that has yet come to light.

Bennett's writings, like the manuscript court transcripts, must be examined carefully because Johnson's revisionist interpretation has created the utterly false impression that Bennett doubted the existence of the conspiracy (a theory first advanced in 1964 by Richard C. Wade and recently repeated by Robert Gross, who erroneously suggested, based on Johnson's essay, that "[d]oubts were raised at the time" by Charleston whites).[23] In truth, Bennett had no such doubts, public or private, as the record makes

[20] Board of Managers of the Charleston Bible Society to Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr., September 23, 1822, Charleston Bible Society Records, SCHS.

[21] Killens, *Trial Record*, 41, 47, 54, 140, 144. On Jacob Axson, see John Belton O'Neall, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina*, 2 vols. (Charleston, S.C.: S. G. Courtenay, 1859), 1: 338-46, and Alexander Moore, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives*, vol. 5, *1816-1828* (Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives & History, 1992), 8-9.

[22] Both documents can be found in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly. For republications of the circular letter with editorial glossing, see: *Charleston Courier*, August 23, 1822; [Washington, D.C.] *National Intelligencer*, August 24, 1822; *Washington* [D.C.] *Gazette*, August 24, 1822; [Hartford] *Connecticut Courant*, September 3, 1822. For an insightful interpretation by the famous abolitionist Benjamin Lundy of Bennett's motives in issuing the circular letter, see *Genius of Universal Emancipation* 2 (December 1822): 81-84.

[23] Richard C. Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (May 1964): 143-61, stood out as the lonely dissenter among modern scholars on the Vesey affair before Michael Johnson published "Denmark Vesey." Robert A. Gross, "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, Part 1," *William and*

abundantly clear. To be sure, he engaged in a high stakes political and personal tug-of-war with judges on the first court over the interpretation of the conspiracy, with each side investing honor and reputation in the outcome of the battle for public opinion. Bennett criticized the origin and structure of the first court; its "secrecy and seclusion," which he contended had only intensified the white panic; its handling of the accused; and its judgments of guilt and innocence in certain cases. Whereas the court found evidence of a sophisticated, serious, and mature design to raise a slave insurrection, Bennett stressed that the plot ramified neither broadly nor deeply in Charleston's slave population; the "wicked instigators," although employing "religion, superstition, fear and almost every passion that sways the mind," failed miserably in mobilizing a critical mass of recruits.[24]

Johnson revels in this disparagement of the plot, but, for understandable reasons, omits any mention of the prejudices that precluded Bennett from crediting slaves with the capacity to go much beyond bluster and loose talk to stage a serious revolt. In the circular letter of August 10, Bennett stated:

> When we contrast the numbers engaged with the magnitude of the enterprize, the imputation of egregious folly or madness is irresistable [*sic*]. . . . Servility long continued debases the mind and abstracts it from that energy of character, which is fitted to great exploits. It cannot be supposed, therefore, without a violation of the immutable laws of nature, that a transition from slavery and degradation to authority and power, could instantly occur.[25]

Mary Quarterly 58 (October 2001): 913, appears to be one of many scholars misled on this point by Johnson's essay. Even Edward A. Pearson, whose "unrelenting carelessness" in *Designs against Charleston* was exposed by Johnson, conceded far too much in trying to defend his work, saying that "Governor Thomas Bennett and William Johnson . . . openly questioned the existence of a conspiracy." They did not. Pearson, "Trials and Errors: Denmark Vesey and His Historians," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 141.

[24] Governor Bennett's circular letter, August 10, 1822, in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly. See also in the same location Bennett's most comprehensive statement on the Vesey affair, Message no. 2 to the Senate and House of Representatives, November 28, 1822. Bennett and the Charleston City Council appear to have been racing to get out their versions of the conspiracy not only to Charleston's citizens but also to a national audience. Bennett's circular letter was printed a few days before publication of Intendant Hamilton's *Account*.

[25] Governor Bennett's circular letter, August 10, 1822, in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly.

In the letter to the Bible Society:

> Attaching to himself Monday Gell, and subsequently Denmark Vesey, who were both inclined to admit the influence of his [Gullah Jack's] supernatural powers, the nefarious project progressed under their patronage. That professors of religion were seduced, was the natural consequence of their being first assailed by the insidious arts of those men .... It was not the religion of these men that they invoked; it was those passions which were unsubdued by her mild precepts, and to suppose that they were invincible to the wicked machinations or evil devices of these men, because they had received some religious instruction, is to estimate human nature beyond the standard which human actions indicate.[26]

In the message to the state legislature:

> The liberal and enlightened humanity of our Fellow Citizens, produce many attachments, that operate as checks on the spirit of insubordination. Their [the slaves'] habitual respect for, and obedience to the authority of their owners; their natural indolence, and want of means and opportunities to form combinations; their characteristic cowardice and treachery, excited by a knowledge of the positive ability of the State, to crush in an instant, their boldest enterprises; are insurmountable obstacles, to the completion of any general effort. Yet late occurrences clearly demonstrate, that such principles are latent in the minds of some of them, and we must admit, that evils limited in their extent and duration, would result from their best concerted schemes, if consummated.[27]

Bennett's nonconformist reading of the evidence, however much it consistently diminished the magnitude and seriousness of the plot, not only granted it an existence, but, as the letter to the Bible Society indicates, actually elevated Gullah Jack, an African-born woodworker and conjurer, above Denmark Vesey as the originator of what Bennett himself called "the nefarious project." Bennett returned to this theme in his November message to the state legislature:

> Their prime mover Vesey has been represented as a man of intrigue, and fitted for command; yet it does not appear, that he ever tested the truth of those assertions, on which mainly depended, the successful result of the enterprize.... for on Sunday [June 16], he is represented shivering with fear, and in a paroxysm of phrenzy accusing Gullah Jack, as his destroyer.

[26] Bennett to Charleston Bible Society, October 1, 1822, Charleston Bible Society Records.

[27] Bennett, Message no. 2 to the Senate and House of Representatives, November 29, 1822, Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of General Assembly.

> It was in vain, that this conspirator [Gullah Jack] sought to encourage and pacify his panic struck leader, with the assurance that he had 250 men, in the adjacent woods. Vesey and his associates doubt the adequacy of this force. It is therefore not only probable, that the attempt would not have been made with 72; but obvious that they do not possess the requisites, for an extensive and deeply concerted scheme of insurrection.[28]

In denying the existence of the conspiracy, Johnson contends that Governor Bennett's dissenting voice along with that of his brother-in-law, Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, so affronted the first court that its judges in concert with Intendant Hamilton and members of the Charleston City Council consciously set out to mend wounded honor by widening the ambit of the investigation and manufacturing conspirators where they were not. "By its actions," declares Professor Johnson, "the court said to Bennett and [William] Johnson, 'You want trials? We'll give you trials!'"[29] While Professor Johnson reduces the Vesey affair to essentially a planter-sanctioned judicial witch-hunt that culminated in "legalized murder," he ignores the converse proposition that Bennett, a wounded master with his own honor to repair, stubbornly turned a deaf ear to evidence that Vesey and his coadjutors were mobilizing the "requisites" to implement a mass uprising.[30] In a letter of September 16 to magistrate Thomas Parker, James Ferguson, a big slaveholder with multiple estates near Charleston, recounted particulars of a visit he paid to Bennett on June 28 to inform him that on at least one of the Ferguson plantations, insurrectionary contagion was afflicting his slaves, "that two fellows were particularly named, and that if he [Bennett] thought proper to have them apprehended, I [Ferguson] would assist personally any officers he [Bennett] might choose to send." Ferguson, putting at risk thousands of dollars of his human property, approached the governor in the hope that he would assert jurisdiction outside the city over the investigation of Vesey's alleged rural recruits. But, according to Ferguson, Bennett reacted dismissively, insisting that "he would not like to take upon himself the responsibility" of pursuing the matter.

Ferguson ended up conducting his own interrogations and eventually, through a ruse, discovered that his trusted slave driver on whom he was relying to elicit detailed confessions from other plantation slaves was himself "as much concerned [in the plot] as any of them."[31] Frank Ferguson,

[28] Ibid.

[29] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 939. For an evaluation of William Johnson's role in the affair, see Paquette, "From Rebellion to Revisionism: The Continuing Debate about the Denmark Vesey Affair," forthcoming.

[30] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," especially 939 and 971.

[31] James Ferguson to Thomas Parker, September 16, 1822, in Killens, *Trial Record*, 18-21.

found guilty by the first court and sentenced to transportation outside the country, testified to Vesey's lead role in the plotting and his attempt to enlist Frank as a kind of recruiting agent in the countryside. Adam Ferguson, another favorite slave on the plantation who was arrested with Frank but later released for lack of evidence, remained with the family and openly spoke about the plot to Samuel Wragg Ferguson, one of James's sons whom Adam would help nurture.[32]

Publication of James Ferguson's letter in the *Official Report* must have bruised Bennett's already battered public image because the governor's August circular letter had pronounced the plot not "alarmingly extensive." Although "it has . . . been stated, that a plantation in St. John's [i.e., Ferguson's plantation] was infected," Bennett admitted, "I do not know on what authority."[33] Ferguson's letter, in effect, called Bennett a liar.

Besides the requisite numbers, Bennett's dissent also deprived the conspirators of the requisite means to carry out a serious revolt. With the exception of about a dozen poles, whose ends apparently were manicured to accommodate pike-heads, investigators failed to ferret out a cache of weapons. Johnson fixes on the absence of "stockpiled weapons" to bolster his argument that no plot existed. He seems oblivious, however, to an obvious criticism: conspirators who were rummaging about to pilfer and then stockpile weapons would have enhanced the risks of detection by authorities alerted to a pattern of thefts. Probably for this reason, most of the major slave revolts in the history of the Western hemisphere have gotten off the ground without stockpiled weapons. Nat Turner and his followers, for example, employed no stockpiled weapons when they killed about sixty whites in the bloodiest slave revolt in United States history. The rebels who rose in 1825 to perpetrate perhaps the largest and most destructive slave insurrection in Cuban history armed themselves without stockpiled weapons. The three largest slave revolts in the history of the British Caribbean—in Barbados (1816), Demerara (1823), and Jamaica (1831)—began with the slaves' arming themselves with makeshift weapons and weapons seized from known places where masters had kept them, not from a weapons cache secreted by conspiratorial slaves.[34]

[32] "Evidence Document B," pp. 143-44, in Governor's Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly; Samuel Wragg Ferguson Memoirs, pp. 13-14, SCHS.

[33] Bennett's circular letter, August 10, 1822, in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly.

[34] Paquette is devoting a chapter to the choice of weapons and their use by insurrectionary slaves in a forthcoming book on the history of collective slave resistance in the Western hemisphere.

As part of their plan to seize weapons warehoused by whites, Vesey and his lieutenants in the first act of their scripted drama intended, it seems, to play white-face, having had disguises prepared for them by an unwitting French barber in Charleston, who fashioned for them "wigs and false whiskers" from "the hair of white persons."[35] When Intendant Hamilton brought the barber to the incarcerated Vesey, he initially gainsaid any acquaintance with the man. But then Hamilton in front of Vesey pulled "the very wig made for Vesey himself, which had such an effect upon him, that he exclaimed 'Good God'—remained silent a moment or two, and then acknowledged that the wig was made for him and that he knew the man."[36]

Bennett inferred from the evidence that Vesey and his followers would strike first at the state arsenal to seize the weapons that they had not stockpiled. Johnson, though silent on the matter of the uncovered disguises, freely admits that the testimony in the manuscript court transcript accuses the alleged conspirators of having trained their sights on arms in ill-secured "city arsenals, guard houses, and stores."[37] Such testimony had so unsettled Intendant Hamilton that in the name of the Charleston City Council he petitioned the state senate in the immediate aftermath of the Vesey affair for a series of measures that would enhance Charleston's security. Because the city was "entirely destitute of a Building capable of affording protection to the arms which belong to it," he proposed that "a Citadel ought to be constructed for securing the arms."[38]

Johnson, however, by cleverly shifting terms from slaves' seizing weapons to their seizing "guns" or "firearms," impugns the official testimony and, by extension, the whole idea of an insurrection by stressing how few slaves could shoot a firearm, as if, after watching an endless stream of white military dress rehearsals on Charleston's parade grounds, slaves were so simple-minded they could not possibly have discerned enough to affix a bayonet to a musket.[39] At any rate, Governor Bennett testified about Charleston's vulnerability to attack in a missive of July 15 to Secretary of

[35] Killens, *Trial Record*, 27-28; John Potter to Langdon Cheves, July 5, 1822, Langdon Cheves Papers, SCHS.

[36] Killens, *Trial Record*, 28.

[37] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 949, 957-58.

[38] Petition no. 02059, n.d., series no. S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly, SCDAH.

[39] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 957-58. Not by coincidence, Charleston City Council in August 1823 passed an ordinance that prohibited slaves or free persons of color from assembling near "military corps, when assembled for training or purposes of interments" unless the persons of color were serving "in the capacity of musicians, pioneers, or servants attending their masters." See *A Collection of the Ordinances of Charleston: from the Twenty-Eighth of September, 1818, to the Twelfth of August, 1823* (Charleston, S.C.: Archibald E. Miller, 1823), 41.

War John C. Calhoun. Describing the state of alarm in the city "consequent on the discovery of insurrectionary movements [*sic*]," Bennett advised Calhoun of several weakly garrisoned forts holding munitions at Charleston harbor. An underwhelming force of "five men," for example, guarded Fort Johnson.[40] Calhoun assented to Bennett's request for a reinforcement of federal troops, but Bennett, in a subsequent letter at the end of July, regretted that more soldiers were not sent, thinking that three companies were needed to overawe "that class of persons who have caused the present excitement."[41]

Governor Bennett might have expected to find an appreciative audience in the Charleston Bible Society for his minimized version of the thwarted uprising. He had, after all, endorsed the Bible Society's mission from the beginning by becoming a benefactor. His pastor, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, as well as friends and associates in various benevolent and charitable causes, sat on the Board of Managers. He had political allies in the Bible Society, the kind of humane, generous, and philanthropic worthies who would have applauded his call in 1821 to reform South Carolina's laws that governed the trial and punishment of slaves.[42] Such discerning, moralistic men, moreover, would hardly have enthused at the prospect of jumping onto some sort of reactionary bandwagon driven by conniving planters who had sought to obstruct the Bible Society's missionary activities with slaves from their inception. In writing to Bennett, however, the Board of Managers of the Bible Society, certainly aware by then of his hostility to the court's proceedings, courteously yet firmly rejected his position: "That the conspiracy was confined to a few, & the Evil, therefore, to be considered as of no great magnitude, as to its Extent, & Probability of Success; though it

[40] Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr. to John C. Calhoun, July 15, 1822, in Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series, 1801-1860, National Archives (microfilm, Hamilton College Library), original emphasis.

[41] Bennett to Calhoun, July 30, 1822, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series.

[42] Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr., Message to the Senate and House of Representatives, November 27, 1821, Governors' Messages, no. 1296, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly. Reverend Palmer and Bennett were particularly close. Bennett's father had designed and built the Circular Church, whose members commemorated his efforts in marble. See Erskine Clarke, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 143-44, and Craig Miller Bennett, "Family Records of Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr.," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 51 (1950): 51-54.

is a position admitted by some liberal Minds, which are inclined to think favourably of mankind; yet to us, it appears to be, at least problematical."[43]

For members of the Bible Society's Board of Managers, the problems with Bennett's position began with what they had already seen and heard during the proceedings. John Bachman, for example, was one member of the Bible Society "in the habit of visiting the prisoners."[44] The first court of magistrates and freeholders relied on a confession, derived in part from him, to impose the death penalty on Bacchus Hammet. Bacchus, a slave porter, disclosed to Bachman how he was first brought to Vesey's house and while there subjected to an impassioned interrogation by Vesey. He prodded Bacchus to square his master's servile treatment of him with what a militant Vesey proclaimed to be God's radical egalitarian message. "Who made his master—God—Who made you—God—And then aren't you as good as your master if God made him & you, aren't you as free, Yes, Then why don't you join and fight your master."[45]

During the summer of 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach, another generous donor to the Bible Society, wrote several detailed letters that tell of her minister's involvement in the Vesey affair. A devout widow and dutiful sister of the Congregational Church long before the ascension of Benjamin Morgan Palmer to its pulpit in 1814, Beach confided to her sister in Pennsylvania a few days after Vesey's execution that her beloved pastor along with ministers Richard Furman and Artemas Boies had visited Vesey and several other alleged principals in the Charleston Work-House.[46] Although the historian Jacqueline Jones recently suggested that Vesey "said nothing to support even the vaguest of charges of the court," Beach learned, probably from Palmer himself, that:

> Vesey & Poyas's fellow [i.e., Peter Poyas, a slave carpenter executed with Vesey] would hear nothing they [the ministers] had to say; they [Vesey and Poyas] said they were condemned [to death] already & it was of no use to say any thing more. . . . [T]hey speak of their cause as one they expect the Lord will assist them in as he did the Israelites from their Masters & speak of their deliverance from the hand of the Philistines. I heard that Vesey said in Jail that it was a Glorious cause he was to die in & the singing of Psalms &c in there the night before [his execution] was carried on to a great extent—he said also that his Spiritual enjoyment never had been as great or greater than that night or the one before it.[47]

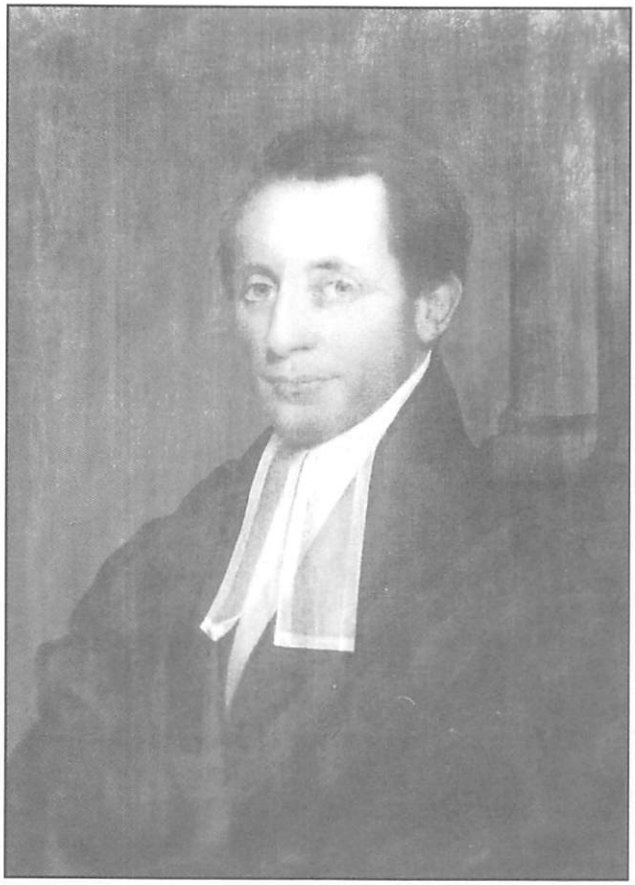
[43] Charleston Bible Society to Bennett, September 23, 1822, Charleston Bible Society Records.

[44] Confession of Bacchus Hammet, n.d., William and Benjamin Hammet Papers.

[45] Ibid., original emphasis.

[46] Beach to Gilchrist, July 5 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers.

[47] Ibid., original emphasis; Jones, et. al., *Created Equal*, 376.



The Reverend Artemas Boies, pastor of Charleston's Second Presbyterian Church in 1822. Courtesy of the First Congregational Church, South Hadley, Mass.

Neither the first court's *Official Report*, James Hamilton's *Account*, nor the manuscript court transcripts in South Carolina's state archive offers a whit of testimony from Vesey's own lips. Vesey died, in the words of his judges, "without confessing anything."[48] For portrayals of Vesey's character, historians must rely on the transcribed voices of his alleged collaborators. Johnson trumpets the archived manuscript court transcript as the "central narrative" for understanding the Vesey affair. Yet he derives little from it in his revisionist essay to portray the man whom he proclaims to be entirely innocent of the government's charges other than to say that Vesey was a

[48] Killens, *Trial Record*, 17.

graying (in his fifties), literate black man who talked too much and got himself in trouble with authorities by the "intransigent flaunting" of such "heresies" as racial equality and emancipation. "The liabilities of the testimony in the court transcript," says Johnson, "make it impossible to be certain about what Vesey said or believed."[49] Johnson does, however, have a "take" on Vesey, which he provided to a reporter and which runs as a kind of hidden transcript of its own in the prize-winning essay. Vesey "is a guy who thinks slavery is wrong, he hates white people, he thinks blacks should be equal to whites, and he won't shut up about it. He's endangering the black people and scaring the pants off the white people. And so he made himself a target."[50] The problem with this characterization of Vesey as an angry, bitter, and confrontational black man is not the want of evidence to reasonably sustain it, but the fact that Johnson reached it at all, for to get there he must credit words in the trial record that form part of a sentence or passage he is elsewhere discrediting. In so doing, Johnson allows Vesey militance, but denies him the capacity to act upon it.

Examine, for instance, the transcribed voice of William Paul:

> I have often heard him [Vesey] speak of the rising—He said he would not ~~like~~ [*sic*] like to have a white man in his presence, that he had a great hatred for the Whites & that if all were like him they would resist the whites—He studies all he can to put into the heads of the Blacks to have a rising against the Whites & tried to induce me to join.[51]

Or that of Rolla Bennett:

> He [Vesey] replied we are made free, but the White people here won't let us be so—and the only way is to raise up & fight the Whites. . . .Vesey told me he was the leader in this plot . . . . Vesey said we were to take the Guard house & Magazine to get arms that we ought to rise up & fight for our liberties against the whites[.] [H]e was the first to rise up & speak & he read to us from the Bible how the Children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage.[52]

Or that of Frank Ferguson:

> I have heard him [Vesey] say, that the negroes' situation was so bad that he did not know how they could endure it and was astonished that they did not rise and fend for themselves. . . . that they were free & must rise and

[49] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 969-71.

[50] As quoted in Homewood, "Sleuthing Prof."

[51] Document B, Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly, p. 152.

[52] Ibid., 164.

> fight for themselves—that they would take the Magazines & Guard houses and the City and be free.[53]

Or that of Bacchus Hammet:

> Bacchus asked about arms.... Denmark Vesey recommended them to look through town for the Stores that had the most guns.... Denmark took him Bacchus one side, and said we shant be slaves to them damn rascals any longer—We must kill every one that we can get hold, and drive the rest out of the City.[54]

These examples from the manuscript court record can easily be multiplied. Joe LaRoche even pointed out that Vesey, like his executioners, could reference Aesop if needed to score a moral point with the slaves.

> I [LaRoche] was one day on horseback when I met him [Vesey] on foot, he asked me if I was satisfied in my present situation—if I remembered the fable of Hercules' waggon that was stalled, when he began to pray & that God said you fool, put your shoulder to the wheel, whip up the horses & your waggon will be pulled out, that if we did not put our hand to the work, & deliver ourselves, we would never come out of Slavery.[55]

Here a rousing Vesey maintains to one of Charleston's slaves that God helps those who help themselves. Thus Mary Beach can be forgiven for thinking that the "Glorious cause" for which Vesey fully intended to die was black deliverance from white supremacy through the use of collective violence. But Johnson, straining to grant her reporting any accuracy despite the demonstrable quality of her contacts, has a different interpretation. The "Glorious cause," he contends, had nothing to do with an insurrectionary movement, but rather with Vesey's "affirmation of his religious faith in the lions' den of persecution and suffering."[56] To answer critics, Johnson rather quickly puts Vesey through a remarkable jailhouse conversion, transforming him while behind bars from a brooding militant into a black quietist.

Unlike Vesey, Rolla Bennett, one of the three slaves owned by Governor Bennett who accompanied Vesey to the scaffold, opened up to Benjamin Morgan Palmer while in jail. Rolla had worshipped with Mary Beach, his

[53] Ibid., 166.

[54] Ibid., 171-72, 174.

[55] Ibid., 155. Interestingly enough, in proclaiming that "Abolition is the plain open road to Revolution—bloody Revolution!," the rebellious editor of the *Southern Agriculturist* referred his fellow white South Carolinians to the fable of Hercules and the Wagoner. *Southern Agriculturist* 11 (September 1838): 459.

[56] Michael Johnson, "Reading Evidence," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 195-96.

master, and his family in Palmer's Circular Church. According to Beach, Governor Bennett would not admit Rolla's guilt in the insurrectionary plot until he had "heard it from his [Rolla's] own lips that he had been engaged in it." Rolla, who had confessed his involvement in the insurrectionary plot to a white Methodist preacher named D. Hall, also confessed his "sin" of complicity in jail to Palmer, albeit with the qualification that he "had felt so much about it that he resolved to leave the City before the awful event took place as he could not bear to commit Murder & laid the blame on Vesey."[57]

Whether Governor Bennett ever truly recognized that the spirit of servile rebellion had infiltrated his own household remains an interesting question. The court, of course, answered it for him by dispatching Rolla, Ned, and Batteau Bennett to the hangman's noose. Professor Johnson, in his review essay, acknowledges the executions, yet also contends that the governor, unwilling to risk publicly his reputation by appearing to be a special pleader for the lives of his slaves, delayed in venting his mushrooming criticism of the first court until after they were executed.[58] For consistency of argument Johnson must believe in their innocence and implies that the governor held the same view. But did he? Although Governor Bennett groused to others about an obstructionist court that was blocking access to his incarcerated slaves, he did ultimately communicate with them and on July 1 wrote the magistrates as an "individual incurring a severe and distressing loss," pleading for the "mitigation of punishment" of Batteau Bennett. The governor maintained that "if" Batteau were guilty of involvement in the insurrectionary plot, his culpability, based on the testimony of two witnesses that Batteau tried to recruit them, should not translate into capital punishment.[59] The court, however, no doubt to the governor's great chagrin, turned down his plea for leniency. The letter said nothing about Rolla and Ned, but in the official circular letter of August 10, Governor Bennett declared that on June 25 "positive proof" of Denmark Vesey's role as the "instigator and chief" of the conspiracy "grew out of the confession of one of the convicts."[60] Inspection of the manuscript court transcript clearly establishes the identity of this witness: Rolla Bennett.[61]

Few whites in Charleston during the summer of 1822 would have looked on the government's crackdown on the city's colored population

[57] Beach to Gilchrist, July 5, 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers.

[58] Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 938.

[59] Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr. to Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, July 1, 1822, in Killens, *Trial Record*, 48-49.

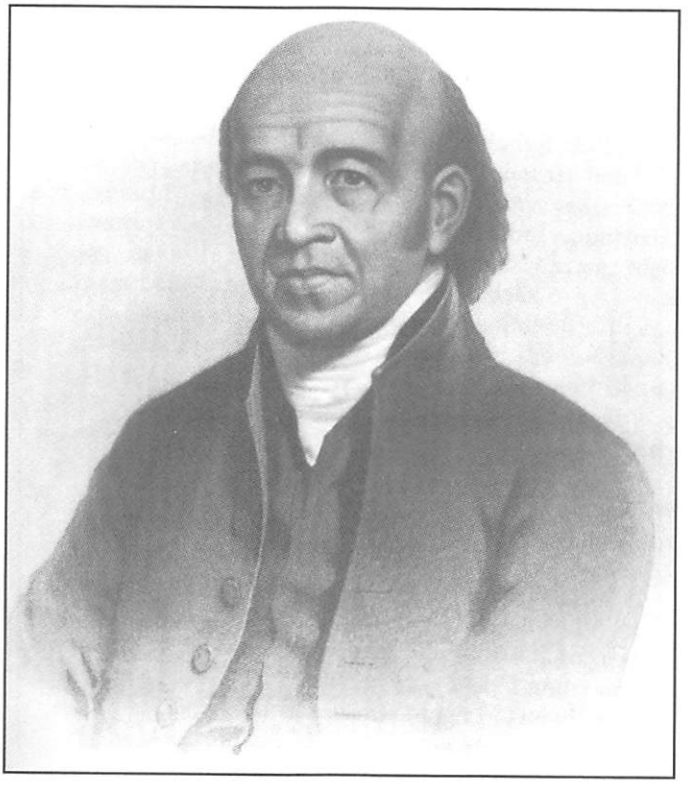
[60] Bennett, circular letter, August 10, 1822, in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly.

[61] See "Evidence Document B," p. 164, in Governors' Messages, no. 1328, series no. S165009, Records of the General Assembly.

with greater suspicion than the Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer, the governor's own pastor and the Senior Vice-President of the Charleston Bible Society. Palmer had earned the reproach of hard-line lowcountry planters for spearheading efforts to promote the religious instruction of slaves in Sunday Schools and other places. He and his fellow ministers in the Bible Society had succeeded in loosening constraints on the religious activities of slaves and in building bridges of Christian fraternity with religious leaders of African descent. The number of persons of color in and around Charleston reading the Bible, teaching it, attending classes, and assembling independent of white authority ostensibly for spiritual purposes had noticeably risen in the years before the Vesey affair.[62] Unlike the majority on the court of magistrates and freeholders, Palmer cheered this progress, openly befriending Morris Brown, the free mulatto shoemaker who had become deacon of Charleston's African Methodist Episcopal Church. In fact, when Brown and other free-colored notables petitioned the state house of representatives in 1820 for permission to open an AME church outside the city on Charleston Neck at Hampstead to accommodate an expanding congregation, they solicited support from sympathetic whites. Of the thirty-two white signatories to the petition, Palmer topped the list, followed by five other Protestant ministers, among them Artemas Boies and three fellow Presbyterian ministers.[63] Daniel Alexander Payne, the first official historian of the AME Church and a native of Charleston, knew Palmer well and called him a "sainted" figure. In acknowledging the existence of the Vesey plot, Payne learned details from Morris Brown, who was certainly in advantaged position in 1822 to determine upon investigation whether some in his flock had gone afield to organize an uprising. Payne

[62] See the famous Unitarian minister Abiel Abbot's revealing description of black attendance in Palmer's Circular Church in 1818 in "Abiel Abbot Journals," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 68 (April 1967): 70. See also "Religious Communications," *Christian Observer* 19 (April 1820): 217-19, and *Boston Recorder*, May 4, 1822.

[63] See petition no. 1893, n.d., series no. S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly, SCDAH. Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 317, transcribes a few lines from the petition, which he erroneously dates 1818. Since Artemas Boies signed the petition, and he did not become pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church until 1820, that year is the most likely date of the petition. Morris Brown also knew Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and obtained his signature on a petition to the state House of Representatives in support of the purchase of land for an AME Church burial ground in the Charleston suburb of Wraggborough. See petition no. 3997, n.d., series no. S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly. Although this petition to the state legislature is undated, the leaders of the AME Church petitioned the Charleston City Council in 1817 for permission to establish a cemetery in an area called Carts Lot on Boundary Street. See *Charleston Courier*, January 29, 1817.

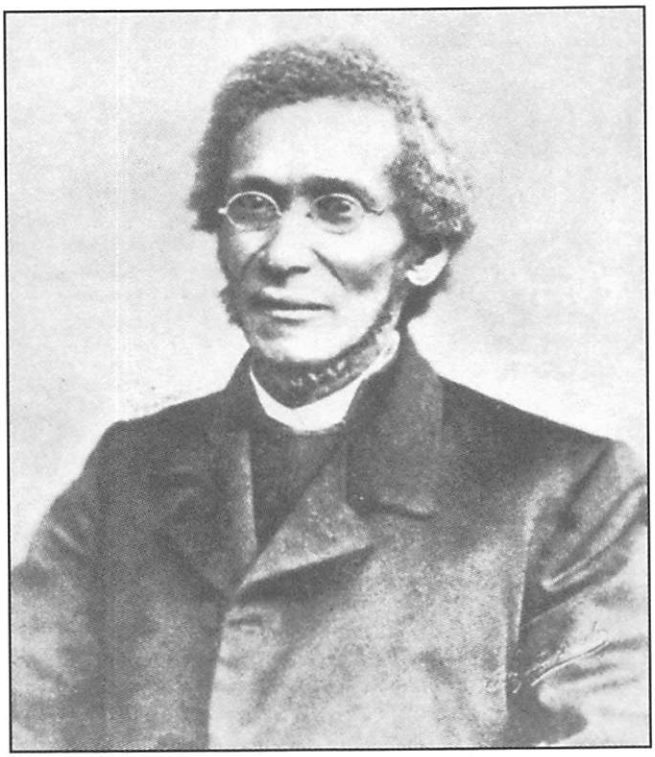


The Right Reverend Morris Brown, second bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. From *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1891) by Daniel A. Payne.

also remembered that with the destruction of Charleston's AME Church as a consequence of the conspiracy, a rush of black Methodists had taken refuge in Palmer's Circular Church and in Arthur Buist's First Presbyterian Church.[64]

In June 1820, the *Panoplist*, a Boston-based missionary journal, unintentionally elicited a glimpse of the religious situation for slaves in

[64] Daniel A. Payne, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Sherwood & Co., 1866), 23-24; idem, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888), 19, 34-39, 94-95; idem, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891), 45. Payne was also befriended by John Bachman. On the connection between Brown and Payne and their understanding of the Vesey plot, see Paquette, "From Rebellion to Revisionism," forthcoming.



The Reverend Dr. Daniel A. Payne, sixth bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. From Payne's *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888).

Charleston. After learning of the passage in Virginia of a law that prohibited their religious instruction, the editors, in a fit, fired a broad-blanket attack on the slaveholding South.[65] White Charlestonians shot back, accusing the editors of acting more under "northern than Christian influence." Slaves in Charleston, one minister observed in a letter that was excerpted in the November issue, were enjoying greater religious freedom than ever before and attending Protestant churches of various kinds in increasing numbers. Missionary work was advancing, but it had to do so "in a quiet, retired way, and diffuse itself like leaven" so as not to excite planter opposition. The unidentified minister, quite possibly a Presbyterian officer in the Charleston

[65] "On the Condition of the Blacks in This Country," *Panoplist, and Missionary Herald* 16 (June 1820): 241-45. On the impact of this editorial in Charleston, see Elizabeth A. Yates to Senator Harrison Gray Otis, September 30, 1820 (typescript), Yates Papers, SCHS.

Bible Society, alluded to the phenomenon of the "African Society," a church "consisting chiefly, if not exclusively of Methodists, with one or two free blacks at their head." Its congregants had been "for some time engaged in building, for themselves exclusively, a place of worship. They obtained, as I understand, the countenance of the Governor" [i.e., in 1820, John Geddes], but he had reneged on his promise and put a hold on any further construction. "You will not be surprised," the minister explained, "at the jealousy of people against religious meetings, consisting entirely of blacks, and particularly where the worship is to be conducted by them . . . [for] most of the incipient schemes of insurrection, &c. that have been detected, have taken place at professedly religious meetings."[66]

A South Carolina planter "whose character is distinguished for amiableness and piety" also informed the *Panoplist* of a burst of religious activity among the slaves and free persons of color in Charleston's Sunday Schools. "[T]here are very many schools in our city, conducted by colored teachers . . . who read the Scriptures and other religious books to their fellow servants, and are daily teaching them to read." The planter praised his countrymen for these improvements but not without apprehension about the pace of change: "[S]ubordination is losing ground too fast for their [the slaves'] own happiness, and the safety of our domestic policy. There have been recent instances of unprovoked attacks from some of them, on respectable citizens peaceably walking our streets, and the perpetrators sentenced to severe punishment by our laws."[67]

In retrospect, these unnamed correspondents, with their fingers on the pulse of religious life in Charleston, look less like advocates of measured spiritual progress for slaves than harbingers of the trouble to come for black preachers and their white allies. Even before the November issue of the *Panoplist* was published, other white Charlestonians had rallied to combat the "existing evils" of an independent African Church, frequented by mobile and literate persons of color who were beginning to harvest souls from the planter's fields. In mid-October more than 140 citizens, the majority of them planters, petitioned the South Carolina state legislature to clamp down on the migration of free people of color into the state and the meetings of religious blacks without white supervision. In schools and less formal gatherings, "Negroes and coloured people and in some instances . . . white persons of this state" were teaching slaves how to read and write, an "evil . . . of the greatest magnitude." The petitioners also accused northern abolitionists of funding the African Church and directing missionaries from Philadelphia to Charleston with the "avowed purpose of

[66] "On the Condition of the Blacks in This Country," *Panoplist, and Missionary Herald* 16 (November 1820): 482, original emphasis.

[67] Ibid., 482-83, original emphasis.

educating our Negroes."[68] A substantial majority in the South Carolina legislature, having previously determined that free persons of color were an increasingly dangerous element within the slave society, passed a law in December that prohibited private manumissions—thereafter slaves could only be freed by an act of the state legislature. Another provision of the bill satisfied one of the demands of the petitioners by forbidding "any free negro or mulatto" from migrating into the state.[69] In a similar vein, less than a month later, the Charleston City Council ordered the city marshal to inform all "ministers of the gospel and others, who keep night and Sunday schools" for the education of slaves that such activity was against the law, and henceforth it would be stringently enforced.[70]

The Charleston Bible Society would have had many of these planter petitioners in mind when they entreated Governor Bennett in September 1822 to use his executive influence to interdict proposed legislation that would have prevented slaves from reading the Bible. Many of the signatories to the 1820 petition had ties of blood and friendship to the magistrates and freeholders who convicted Vesey, but only one, Robert Turnbull, the "hottest of the Hotspurs" during the Nullification crisis, would actually serve on the first court.[71] Mary Beach remembered that before the uproar over Vesey, Turnbull had clashed with the Reverend Mr. Palmer because he "had given some black man a ticket as a class leader or something of the sort."[72] Palmer faced withering criticism from Turnbull and his faction during the Vesey affair, for early into the investigations, George Wilson, a slave who in 1822 ranked in Palmer's church as the preeminent class leader of persons of color, provided city officials with vital testimony that confirmed the existence of the conspiracy and inculpated as principals "some of the coloured members" of the Circular Church. At some point during the summer of that year, one might logically conclude, Palmer would have approached Wilson for information about Palmer's inculpated congregants.

If Palmer, with his impressive history of Christian fellowship with Charleston's black community and of struggle against the more reactionary elements in Charleston's white community, had any sustained doubts

[68] Petition no. 143, October 16, 1820, series no. S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly.

[69] Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 10 vols. (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston, 1836-41), 7: 439.

[70] *Niles' Weekly Register*, April 21, 1821.

[71] The description of Turnbull is in U. B. Phillips, *The Course of the South to Secession*, ed. E. Merton Coulter (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1939), 104. See also, Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 126-28; and Caroliniensis, *A Series of Articles Discussing a Pamphlet Entitled "The Opinion of the Hon. William Johnson..."* (Charleston, S.C: A. E. Miller, 1824), especially 45, which is usually attributed to Turnbull.

[72] Beach to Gilchrist, July 5, 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers.

about the existence of an insurrectionary conspiracy, no source has survived to reveal them. To the contrary, Palmer, like Governor Bennett, had come to painful grips with the frozen serpent. The arrest of Billy Palmer, a family slave owned by Job Palmer, the reverend's father, rocked communicants in the Circular Church, Mary Beach among them.[73] Hardly the petty gossip Professor Johnson would like her to be, she knew Billy and was certainly well positioned to ascertain her pastor's and his father's turn of mind. She reported that despite initial disbelief about the cause of the government's actions, both father Job and son Benjamin became "fully convinced" of Billy's guilt in the plot.[74] Frederick Dalcho, an Episcopalian minister in Charleston, in speaking of the Vesey affair, alluded to his colleague's grief about Billy. "I sympathize, most sincerely, with the very respectable and pious Clergyman [i.e., Palmer] whose heart must still bleed at the recollection, that his confidential class-leader, but a week or two before his just conviction, had received a Communion of the Lord's Supper, from his hand. This wretch had been brought up in his Pastor's family, and was treated with the same christian attention, as was shown to their own children!"[75]

While Billy endured months in the Charleston Work-House, his death sentence eventually commuted to transportation by Governor Bennett, Benjamin Morgan Palmer sounded very much in tune with the Bible Society's letter of September 23, for on the Sabbath before it was sent to the governor, the reverend preached a memorable sermon on "the case of servants" in which he extrapolated on the meaning of "the late iniquitous and murderous plot."[76] Standing tall in the Circular Church and sounding almost defiant in the face of vicious personal attacks from elements of the planter class for his ministrations to the slaves, he admonished Charleston's servants in attendance by dwelling on the apostle Paul's familiar injunction in Colossians, "servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh," and the related story of the runaway slave Onesimus in the book of Philemon. Palmer then shifted directions to locate part of the blame for the existence of the conspiracy on irresponsible and irreligious masters who

[73] [Hamilton], *Account*, 8; Circular Congregational Church (Charleston, S.C.), Membership records, vol. 2, 1814-1836, Benjamin M. Palmer's Pastor's Minute book (typescript), SCHS. According to these records, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach owned a slave named Betty who was baptized by George Wilson.

[74] Beach to Gilchrist, July 23, 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers.

[75] Dalcho, *Practical Considerations*, 37.

[76] Benjamin M. Palmer, *Religion Profitable: with a Special Reference to the Case of Servants* (Charleston, S.C.: J. R. Schenck, 1822), 16; Killens, *Trial Record*, 141. See also Arthur Buist, *A Sermon Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church on Thursday, No. 7, 1822 Being the Day of Thanksgiving, Humiliation & Prayer* (Charleston, S.C.: Wm. Riley, 1823), especially 19-20.

had allowed their slaves to become corrupted: "[I]f those who have uttered their vociferations most loudly and issued their rage and blasphemy against religion, its professors and its ministers, most copiously during the late disturbances [i.e., the Vesey affair] would employ but half their noise and half their strength and zeal in tracing out the source and drying up the streams of moral corruption in the midst of us ... there would be much less occasion for religion to be blamed and abused for things, with which it has nothing to do, other than to condemn them utterly."[77] As Palmer continued to hammer home this message to the planting class in his sermons, Mary Beach, who wished the good reverend would have exercised a bit more restraint, nonetheless described him "as fearless in the Pulpit as [Martin] Luther."[78]

Painstaking research in evangelical newspapers or journals may one day reveal what Benjamin Morgan Palmer heard from Vesey and other conspirators during their confinement. In 1837 William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* repeated a story allegedly told by Palmer about a "pious black" inculpated in the plot who was asked to "repent of this great sin." According to the *Liberator*'s retelling of Palmer's story, the incarcerated slave snapped back: "'Sin, what sin? You applaud the leaders of the American Revolution, who resisted a small tax on tea; and rather than pay it killed tens of thousands, but what was that tax to our sufferings? Washington was a white man and you idolized him; but I, alas, am a black man, and you hang me for the very act you applauded in him.'"[79]

Nothing in the biography of Benjamin Morgan Palmer or, for that matter, those of Furman, Bachman, Boies, Buist, and other ministerial members of the Charleston Bible Society's Board of Managers, suggests characters who during the summer of 1822 would have simply rolled over in ovine acquiescence to the machinations of government officials and gentleman planters bent on personal and political gain from the fabrication of a plot that the ministers knew to be false or wildly exaggerated. Nor would these clergymen, who had courageously opened their arms to religious slaves, have cowered in fear about the prospect of deploying exculpatory evidence, had they possessed it, to dissipate a gathering white storm that threatened to crash a wave of repression on Christianized blacks to whom the Bible Society's ministers had devoted years of delicate shepherding. Given the mission of the Bible Society, its appeal to Bennett

[77] Palmer, *Religion Profitable*, 17

[78] Beach to Gilchrist, October 7, 1822, Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach Papers. On Palmer's moral tenacity, see the tribute paid him on his death by the Charleston Union Presbytery and published in *Charleston Mercury*, October 16, 1847.

[79] [Boston] *Liberator*, August 25, 1837.

makes little sense unless the Board of Managers, reading the evidence at its disposal, determined as honest men in good conscience that its old friend and brother-in-Christ had misconstrued the insurrectionary plot by downplaying it.

Appendix: Letters on the Vesey Affair[1]

1. A draft letter of the Board of Managers of the Charleston Bible Society to Governor Thomas Bennett, Jr.

Charleston, September 23rd 1822

Sir

As Individuals, deeply concerned, and as the Board of the Charleston Bible Society, to whom our Constituents have confided an important Trust, analogous, in its nature & design, to the great Principles & interests of Religion, Morals, Government & Social Happiness at large, our Attention has been turned with Seriousness to the recent merciful Interposition of Divine Providence, by which the Inhabitants of this City, and, [not im] probably, of a great part of the State, have been preserved from the Execution of a ferocious, diabolical Design, which privy Conspiracy had formed, in the Councils of Domestic Barbarians, among us: A Design fraught with every Principle of premeditated Wickedness, and calculated to open, in an unexpected moment, on the astonished view of our unsuspecting Citizens, and to bring home to their tortured feelings horrid Scenes of Anarchy, Desolation, Violence and Massacre. And, in the Contemplation of this Subject, we have been induced to conclude, conscientiously, that it is incumbent on the Citizens of this State, at large, to make grateful acknowledgments to our Heavenly Preserver, by a Strong Expression of their Sentiments & Feelings, for the signal Display of his Goodness & Mercy toward them, made on this memorable occasion.

We therefore take the Liberty of recommending, to your Excellency, the Exercise on this occasion, of that discretional Power, which by common consent & usage, if not by Law, is vested in you, as our Chief Magistrate, in favour of Religion; by appointing, at some proper time, a Day of Public Thanksgiving to Almighty God, for the Instance of his Goodness here recognized. And that it be recommended to our Citizens throughout the State, to be observed by them in the Manner which becomes a People who acknowledge God's superintending Providence, feel their obligations to his

[1] Square brackets [ ] indicate insertions by the authors of the letters. Angle brackets < > indicate insertions by the authors (Paquette and Egerton) of "Of Facts and Fables." We wish to thank Nicholas Butler, archivist at the South Carolina Historical Society, for his help in transcribing the originals.