

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Virgin Islands Native A Founder Of AME Church Where Recent Massacre Occurred

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ST. THOMAS -- The historic Charleston, South Carolina A.M.E. Church where nine people who gathered for Bible study were murdered on Wednesday night by a white gunman now identified as Dylann Roof, was co-founded by a U.S. Virgin Islands native, according to information [gathered from Wikipedia](#).

The AME Church was the first independent black denomination in the nation, and was closed twice by city officials for violating slave laws related to the times and purpose of gatherings. It was supported by white clergy in the city and rapidly attracted 1,848 members, making it the second-largest AME congregation in the nation at the time.

Denmark Vesey, known as Telemaque while enslaved, was a St. Thomas native born in 1767, who was brought to the U.S. by slave trader Captain Joseph Vesey at age 14. A skilled carpenter, Vesey had won a lottery and purchased his freedom at age 32 in 1799. He had a good business and a family, but was not able to buy his wife and children out of slavery, according to the Wiki page.

The realization that his family would not be free from their masters infuriated Vesey, and he planned a slave rebellion.



Denmark Vesey

Born: 1767, Saint Thomas

Died: July 2, 1822, Charleston, South Carolina, United States

He and another carpenter named Peter Poyas, plotted to kill the city's white inhabitants, light its buildings on fire and escape to Haiti by boat. Vesey had even reached out to Haiti's leaders hoping to gain military aid; but the plan ultimately fell apart when a slave revealed Vesey's plans to his master.

If Vesey's plans had been successful, it would have been the most violent slave revolt on American soil, writes David Robertson, author of *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion And The Man Who Led It*.

Vesey's plans included enlisting the help of about 9,000 slaves to fight for him. According to Robertson, the plans "could not have progressed as far as they did without the organization and membership of the African Methodist Episcopal Church." After Charleston's leaders closed the church's doors in 1818, Vesey persuaded many of its congregants to join him.

Vesey also knew the Bible very well, as he would preach often to the slaves he enlisted; read the Old Testament and believed that African Americans were the New Israelites; and that their enslavement would lead to punishment of death.

In 1861, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a staunch abolitionist and minister from Cambridge, Mass., called Vesey's revolt attempt "a wild enterprise," adding that he could not understand the free slave's decision because he had gained his freedom, was "comely, wealthy, and enjoyed every comfort compatible" with his situation.

These days, however, following the massacre of the nine black congregants in the Emanuel AME church, many are evoking Vesey's name on social media.

"No wonder Denmark Vesey planned a slave revolt. He was tired of black people being enslaved and persecuted," said Anthea Butler [via a tweet](#).

"Too bad we helped stopped it. History would have been different if he'd succeeded," another person [responded](#).

During the American Civil War, abolitionist Frederick Douglass used Vesey's name to recruit African Americans for the United States Colored Troops, especially the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. What became known as the Denmark Vesey House in Charleston was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Three books were published on Vesey and the rebellion in 1999, reviving interest in his life and actions. In 2014 a statue in honor of Vesey was erected in Charleston.

Feature Image: Cindy Samaroo pays her respects in front of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church after a mass shooting at the church that killed nine people of June 19, 2015.

Image Credit: Getty Images.