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Playing Hell in Charleston

Daniel Payne, Clementa Pinckney and the fight against White Supremacy

-By Susanna Ashton

Those men and women people massacred while studying the Bible the other night in the Emanuel A. M. E. Church were, in their own way, raising hell.

That phrase might seem ill conceived or even disrespectful but it can be invoked here to honor their courage and the A. M. E Church's long tradition of challenging white supremacy. Their private prayer this week was political simply because their mere existence challenged racial power. There is a long contextual history of race violence in America which gives us tools to see this event clearly but even more than that, there is a history that is deeply specific to both place and to that phrase.

Daniel Payne was a young free man of color in Charleston who quietly started a school with three free black children during the day and, even more quietly, with three enslaved adults in the evening. His school grew to more than 60 students by 1834 and included classes in mathematics, geography, history, grammar, drawing, and physical education.

Payne sought to teach the natural sciences and encouraged children to collect and dissect small creatures under his guidance. With singularly bad luck, some of his young students were noticed wandering onto a snake-infested plantation owned by the Kennedy family. Young Dr. Lionel C. Kennedy and his father, Judge Lionel H. Kennedy, interrogated the children not only about their snake hunt but also about what they were taught in school.

As Payne recounted in his memoir, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, upon hearing their answers, the young Dr. Kennedy remarked, "Why, pa, Payne is playing hell in Charleston."

What exactly was the threat that those children with their lidded glass jar for snakes represented? Quite simply, they and their teacher, Daniel Payne were "playing hell" because they threatened white supremacy.

The older Kennedy had been thrust into prominence in 1822 when he served as a judge in the infamous Denmark Vesey case that saw 67 men convicted and 35 men put to death for attempting to raise a slave insurrection in Charleston. Denmark Vesey, a literate free man of color had been, not incidentally a founding member of the AME congregation in Charleston.

Thus in sending his students near the Kennedy plantation, Payne had attracted attention of a man who remembered well the threat that organized religion and education among people of color represented to slave holders and white supremacists. Prohibitions against the A. M .E. Church in Charleston were enacted almost immediately after the Vesey insurrection and the congregations had to go underground, but no one had fully addressed the lingering threat that education in the city might represent.

Thus, perhaps to no one's surprise, it was Judge Kennedy who, angered by Payne, used his influence in the State legislature to help draft the 1834 prohibition against teaching any black person whether slave or free, to read or write. Kennedy himself helped draft a revision to an earlier 1740 statute against teaching slaves to read but now broadened its racist mandate and increased the penalties. A white teacher might face up to 6 months imprisonment and a \$100 dollar fine. A free person of color would face up to 50 lashes and a \$50 fine. The law evidently didn't need to specify the degree of consequence facing an enslaved person found teaching.

Payne was immediately forced to shut down his school. Fearing for his life, he swiftly fled the state and found refuge in religious studies first in Pennsylvania.

Payne wrote in his memoir: "I began to question the existence of the Almighty and to say, if indeed there is a God does he deal justly? Is he a just God? . . . If so, why does he permit a handful of dying men thus to oppress us?"

What's significant here is that he knew the legislation was both directly pointed at him, and yet that it was also strategically, systematically and broadly constructed in a climate of hatred and oppression. Certainly it was his school that was the most prominent target. But the oppression was collectively directed and designed to terrorize people into submission.

The man who attacked the men and women of the Emanuel AME Church of Charleston, only a few blocks away from where Daniel Payne's school had been, was certainly an individual deranged by hatred. But his was not an individual act. It was not an isolated act of violence. It was an act of evil in a context of racialized terrorism. It was an act that was not directed at those individuals because those men and women themselves lived in a broader context. It was an attack on, among other things, Payne's notion of a just God.

Daniel Payne, to the frustration of his foes did not disappear. Fuelled by fury over injustice and a ferocious dedication to education, he rose to prominence in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the North and became a Bishop by 1852, not incidentally along the way founding Wilberforce, the first black-run university in the United States. Although often ill and heavily burdened with responsibilities, when the Civil War ended, and the ruins of the South still smoldered, Payne could not resist the pull back to Charleston.

In 1865, therefore, he and nine other missionaries sailed to South Carolina to re-establish the presence of a Southern Black Church conference, one which could meet openly, lead the community and provide the spiritual, educational, and logistical support to those recovering from lives in bondage. Although he was one of the most frail of the delegation, his brave and hope-filled return to South Carolina some thirty years after his flight, held a special resonance for both his church and for the people in Charleston. Bishop Payne was only able to stay in South Carolina for a few months, but upon his return to Wilberforce he was greeted there by the ruins of a campus burned down on the night of President Lincoln's assassination. While the arsonist was never found, it was an attack generally understood as a political act by a white supremacist.

State Senator Clementa C. Pinckney, the assassinated pastor of Emanuel A.M.E. Church spoke about his church's special history in terms of its relationship with the State. When Bishop Payne first dispatched representatives to the South Carolina Sea Islands in 1863 (before the official delegation of 9 arrived in 1865), they sailed first to Hilton Head where the Union army officials resided in a garrison, to make sure they would have the cooperation, blessings, and partnership to begin their work in Charleston.

And thus, as Senator Pinckney put it in a 2013 speech to a Civil Rights group, the history of the re-established A. M. E. Church in Charleston had to be understood as having an especially tight commitment to civic relations and a just government. "state policy and federal policy, closing and reestablishing a church,something [like that] that hadn't really ever happened since the Holy Roman empire."

Pinckney understood that his church was inherently connected to its community, just as almost any church might claim, but that the Emanuel AME church in South Carolina had an especial historical legacy and responsibility "in its ministry and its calling to be fully integrated and fully caring about the lives of its constituents and the general community." Pinckney saw the church's historical rooting in a state and federal frame as a source of unique strength. It meant that what happened there, both the love and the struggles were all intrinsically political. For as he said in his speech, "this is not necessarily unique to us. It's really what America is all about."

The attack on the Emanuel A.M.E. Church was terrorism not unlike what Bishop Payne fled from. As Pinckney told visitors, "Our Church is not a museum. It is a place of change." And that promise of change is something that still shakes the white status quo to its core.

With his pastoral work and his political advocacy, Pinckney was playing hell or perhaps raising hell in Charleston, too. --albeit doing so with love. Playing hell is to advocate change both today and back in the 1830s. And the assassinations inside that church demonstrate that white supremacists knew exactly what that meant.

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