Commemoration and Controversy: The Memorialization of Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina

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COMMEMORATION AND CONTROVERSY: THE MEMORIALIZATION OF
DENMARK VESEY IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Schools of
Clemson University and College of Charleston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Historic Preservation

by
Sarah Katherine Dykens
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The commemoration of contested historical figures is a topic that is increasingly addressed by preservationists, historians, and those in local government. One such figure is Denmark Vesey, whose failed slave insurrection plot in 1822 forever altered the social and physical fabric of the United States. The ways in which this polarizing figure has been memorialized in Charleston, South Carolina, speak to the multivalent nature of Vesey himself as well as the shifting and complex racial politics in Charleston. In studying the four major commemorative efforts for Vesey that exist in Charleston, this thesis sheds light on the ways in which this sort of memorialization is navigated and provides guidance for those interested in producing a richer and more complete historic dialogue.

The first two commemorative efforts discussed are the nomination of the Denmark Vesey House as a National Historic Landmark and the installation of a portrait of Vesey in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. These both occurred in 1976. The strife and inaccuracy that accompanied their production reflects a growing awareness of the need to honor figures such as Vesey coupled with a lack of experience in doing so. It also reveals the conflicted feelings of the public towards Vesey.

The installation of a sculpture at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church as a component of the 1991 Spoleto Festival exhibition *Places with a Past* reveals an era which saw the need to balance out the rosters of history, working to include hitherto underrepresented figures. Finally, the placement of the Denmark Vesey Monument in Hampton Park in 2014 shows a willingness to accept a figure such as
Vesey into the established commemorative canon. While the monument’s long journey to completion sometimes resulted in public discord, its final acceptance can serve as a model for other communities which struggle similarly with controversial historic figures.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In 1822 a slave rebellion rocked Charleston, South Carolina, to its core. The discovery of a planned slave uprising with conspirators reaching into the most trusted staff of the Governor altered local, regional, and national racial dynamics for years to come. The rash of executions that followed in the wake of the failed uprising were so brutal that eventually many of the whites, even those who had initially cried out for justice and retribution, found themselves disgusted. At the center of this turmoil was Denmark Vesey, a complex man who has been seen variously as a heroic freedom fighter, a violent and brutish villain, a man merely the product of his times, and even as one wrongfully accused. The ways in which this polarizing figure has been memorialized in Charleston speak to the multivalent nature of Vesey himself as well as complex racial politics in Charleston. How Charleston has navigated the memorial process for Vesey and its ramifications for preservationists in particular is the topic of this thesis.

The ways in which controversial historical figures and events are remembered form an area of study that spans a variety of disciplines. Examinations of the memorialization of these complex or contested historical moments occur under the auspices of psychology, architectural history, sociology, and philosophy, among others. As a group that is collectively invested in the importance of remembering from and retaining physical elements of the past, historic preservationists are also uniquely qualified to comment on the issues that surround memorialization. In fact, if the retention and protection of built and cultural history is the purview of the historic preservationist,
then memorialization ought to be an area of great importance to the preservation community. This is particularly true for controversial figures and events which are often poorly represented. However, in many instances the memorialization of these complex historic entities remains unexamined by historic preservationists.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the case of Denmark Vesey forms an ideal opportunity for the involvement of preservationists in the study of memorialization. Denmark Vesey was a free black man living in Charleston who purchased his freedom after winning the East Bay Street Lottery. While Vesey gained relative personal freedom with his manumission, he continued to chafe against the injustices of slavery and exhorted enslaved African-Americans to acknowledge the fundamental wrongs of their condition.

As is the case with many of the enslaved that were not born in the United States there is no record of when or where Denmark Vesey was born. However, it is probable that he was born on the island of St. Thomas or in Africa. He was purchased at roughly the age of fourteen by Joseph Vesey, the captain of a slaving vessel, in 1781. During the journey from St. Thomas to Saint Dominique he came to be called Telemaque, and was singled out be the captain for preferential treatment. This did not prevent Joseph Vesey from selling Telemaque in Saint Dominique for use as a laborer on a sugar plantation. This work was brutal and often fatal. Telemaque was able to escape this fate. He

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developed epilepsy, and Joseph Vesey was forced to repurchase him. Interestingly, after being repurchased by Joseph Vesey, Telemaque never experienced another recorded epileptic episode.⁵

After spending a year as Joseph Vesey’s cabin boy, Telemaque was brought to Charleston, South Carolina. Joseph Vesey elected to trade his life as a ship’s captain for that of a chandler, dealing in goods such as food and shipping supplies. A great deal of his business remained in trading slaves.⁶ For an enslaved person, Charleston was a remarkably different environment than the Caribbean. The method of control for slaves in Charleston was complex, and depended more heavily on psychological constraints than the crushing brutality of the Caribbean.⁷ Telemaque encountered a society which gave him the chance to grow his unique skills. He prospered in this environment. Using his literacy, skill with languages, and native intelligence to build his business acumen, he became an essential right hand man to Joseph Vesey.⁸

During this period, Telemaque came to be known as “Denmark” by his friends.⁹ Despite being a slave he retained an imperious attitude and preferred to avoid the company of slaves who seemed truly happy to live in shackles. Joseph Vesey valued this independence, often leaving Denmark in charge of his King Street business while he spent time on his mistress’s plantation.¹⁰ However, Denmark continually chafed against

the idea of being enslaved. When he won $1,500 in the East Bay Lottery, his first thought was to purchase his freedom.\textsuperscript{11} Joseph Vesey manumitted Denmark in exchange for $600. Denmark retained the name Vesey, and set out to make his way in Charleston as a free man.\textsuperscript{12}

Denmark Vesey came up against heavy odds as a free black man in Charleston. His attempts to purchase the freedom of his wife, Beck, and their children failed.\textsuperscript{13} He also found that he still did not have the level of freedom or equality that he wanted. Many members of the free African-American community in Charleston worked to ingratiate themselves with white Charlestonians rather than associate with the enslaved.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, free African-Americans paid excessive taxes and fines, an injustice which Vesey attempted to skirt by way of making himself scarce whenever an official such as a tax collector or census taker was expected at Vesey’s residence on Bull Street.\textsuperscript{15}

Unable to ignore the continuing plight of enslaved people, including his own children, Vesey fought slavery and the poor treatment of African-Americans on a number of levels. He personally set an intentional example behaviorally: he refused to interact with whites in a subservient way and was considered arrogant. He chose to dress in fine clothing, which was in itself a continual if silent statement of protest in an era when most

\textsuperscript{11} John Lofton, \textit{Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter} (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1964, 2013), 75.
\textsuperscript{14} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 76.
\textsuperscript{15} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 87-98; 98.
African-Americans were forced to wear specific clothing to distinguish them from their free, white counterparts.\textsuperscript{16}

Vesey also worked to rally enslaved African-Americans to his cause. This was accomplished primarily through his work with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, during weekly Bible study meetings that he hosted. Vesey was a fervent Christian with a unique interpretation of Scripture. Relying heavily on the Old Testament, Vesey argued that it was the right and even the responsibility of enslaved people to rise up against their oppressors.\textsuperscript{17}

As the local authorities acted more aggressively, including preventing the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church from meeting, Vesey started to see the situation for African-Americans as increasingly dire. Eventually Vesey used the Bible study meetings held at his house to plan a slave uprising. Vesey’s plot, which he supported with his religious beliefs, was a violent one.\textsuperscript{18} Vesey planned to seize control of the governmental weapon stores in Charleston and intended to accomplish his aims through the murder of anyone who stood in his way.

The insurrection Vesey planned would be accomplished in stages. First, a core group of rebels, disguised as white men in wigs and armed with spears made in secret by skilled African-American artisans, would take whites by surprise and gain control over the state arsenal.\textsuperscript{19} At this point the second phase of the insurrection would begin. While

\textsuperscript{17} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 124-125.
\textsuperscript{19} William W. Freehling, \textit{The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War}, 41-42.
he reportedly had thousands ready to participate in this stage of the plan, Vesey also felt that many more enslaved blacks would rise up with him and his followers.\textsuperscript{20} Those that did not would be killed along with whites. He anticipated eventually hijacking a large vessel and sailing for Haiti where all those that participated in the uprising would find freedom.\textsuperscript{21}

Denmark Vesey’s plan was foiled when one of the slaves approached about the insurrection, Peter Prioleau, informed the man who owned him, who went to Charleston’s intendant James Hamilton.\textsuperscript{22} While the conspirators Prioleau accused, Peter Poyas and Mingo Harth, so believably denied the allegations that they were released, another slave that had been arrested admitted to the existence of the plot.\textsuperscript{23} Vesey’s plan fell apart, and a rash of arrests began as Charleston, in a panic, was patrolled by armed white men.

The conspirators’ trials were all that anyone could speak of in Charleston for months, but were closed to the public. While this caused concern to some, such as Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, the vast majority of white Charlestonians approved of the trials and were out for blood.\textsuperscript{24} Over a period of two weeks, a total of thirty five accused conspirators were killed. Thirty seven people were transported out of the United States.\textsuperscript{25}

The Denmark Vesey insurrection plot and its aftermath proved to be highly traumatic for Charlestonians. The willingness of the conspirators, some of whom were

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 151-152.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 138, 147.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 156.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 158-159.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 178.
\end{itemize}
trusted household servants, to take violent action against their masters shattered the illusion of mutual agreeableness that had characterized paternalistic master and slave relations in Charleston.\textsuperscript{26} The inherent tension of having an enslaved majority population was thrown into sharp relief, and whites lived in great fear. Whites were reminded that they were both beholden to and in some ways at the mercy of their slaves, upon whom they depended. Simultaneously the aggressive sentiments expressed by some slaves towards their masters dispelled the commonly held belief that enslaved blacks felt only gratitude towards their masters. Enslaved peoples’ testimony revealed that slaves were not obedient children but were rather adults capable of agency and possessing a complex set of emotions including bitterness and hatred.\textsuperscript{27}

The backlash against this shocking blow to the foundation of the paternalistic racial status quo in Charleston was violent, hysterical, and ultimately tragic. The trials of the conspirators culminated with a series of executions that were eventually deemed excessive by even most of the fearful white Charlestonians. When all was said and done, the body count was thirty-five, and the majority of citizens had become repulsed and embarrassed by the excessive response.\textsuperscript{28} The entire incident was perceived as a deeply painful reminder of the ugly realities that lay behind the veneer of paternalism.\textsuperscript{29} While its effects were profound, there was a strong desire to minimize or even forget the event.

\textsuperscript{26} William W. Freehling, \textit{The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War}, 43.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Joseph Kelly, \textit{America’s Longest Siege: Charleston, Slavery, and the Slow March Toward the Civil War} (New York: The Overlook Press, 2013), 162.
Today, Vesey remains a complex touchstone in race relations as a figure combining both a sense of heroic agency and brutish violence. That Vesey was a trailblazer in the fight for African-American freedom cannot be denied. However, a debate continues regarding whether Vesey ought to be lionized for his goals or castigated for his methods. Denmark Vesey has been something of a polarizing force in Charlestonian racial politics, and attempts to memorialize him have often resulted in strident debate. It should come as no surprise that various efforts to memorialize this complex figure in Charleston range widely and have shifted through time. In examining four of these memorials, the thesis sheds light on how Vesey is memorialized in Charleston as well as the roles and responsibilities of preservationists in this arena.

The first memorial discussed is the house at 56 Bull Street, which is a National Historic Landmark. This house was thought to have been the residence of Denmark Vesey. Had this been the case, the house could have potentially been an excellent opportunity for memorialization—Vesey held the Bible study meetings where he recruited the majority of his co-conspirators at his house, and also planned the insurrection there. However, the use of the freedman’s cottage at 56 Bull Street as an effective memorial for Vesey is problematic. It is almost certain that Vesey never lived in the house. Not only was Vesey’s house in a slightly different location, but the house at 56 Bull Street post-dates 1822, the year Vesey was executed. This thesis explores how the house came to be listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1975 as well as why it remains so despite evidence of the listing’s inaccuracy. The treatment and use of the site
is also considered. Currently, the house is underutilized as a historic resource. It is in use as a rental property and is mentioned in very few guide books.

Dorothy Wright completed a painting commemorating Vesey which was placed in the Gaillard Auditorium in 1976. This painting was the source of a great deal of controversy. Spurred on by biased and inflammatory news coverage, the painting was even subject to theft. After the mayor announced that a replacement would be commissioned and paid for, the painting was returned, although it was hung higher on the wall and fastened more securely. As there is no record of Vesey’s appearance, the painting features Vesey from the rear, speaking to a restrained-looking audience from a pulpit. While for many years the painting served as an unassuming but effective homage to Vesey, it may currently be under threat. This is something of a pivotal time for the painting, as a new Gaillard Auditorium is in the process of being built. It is unknown whether the painting will be rehung in the new auditorium.

The Emanuel A.M.E. Church on Calhoun Street in Charleston contains a third memorial. While the A.M.E Church was forced to discontinue meeting in the wake of the insurrection plot, this church rightly considers itself to be the heir of Vesey’s congregation. The Ronald Jones sculpture commemorating Vesey is the product of a larger 1991 exhibition, *Places with a Past*. It is an accurate rendering of a historic stereograph in marble featuring two young boys posed to resemble the cherubs in Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*. The sculpture’s place within the exhibition as well as the corpus of Jones’s work is examined.
The most recent instance of memorialization that is discussed is a statue erected in Hampton Park in February 2014. A group of activists and professors worked for almost twenty years in an effort to bring this memorial to fruition. The location of the memorial was changed during the years leading up to its placement in Hampton Park. Much like the painting in the Gaillard, the construction of this statue created a great deal of controversy in the Charleston community. Additionally, this statue is an interesting case because it represents a full-length view of Vesey, despite the lack of evidence regarding his physical appearance. The dynamics that led to the installation of this statue as well as its design are explored.

These four instances are by no means an exhaustive list of the ways in which Vesey has been commemorated in Charleston. For example, a 1943 charcoal and gouache portrait of Vesey by Charles White is in the permanent collection of the Gibbes Museum. In 1976 “Denmark Vesey’s Rebellion,” a public television special, was filmed in Charleston. The program did not air until 1982. A play, “Denmark Vesey: Insurrection,” was produced as a component of the annual Piccolo Spoleto Festival in 2007. On a more scholarly note, the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World Symposium series devoted an entire week to the discussion of Vesey in 2001.

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However, the four commemorative examples studied in this thesis, the house on Bull Street, the painting in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium, the statue at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, and the monument in Hampton Park, represent by far the most significant works in Charleston.

Studying these four commemorations of Vesey is an important step in the process of understanding how Charleston is working towards achieving a more racially balanced historical perspective. Public displays such as these are a key component in creating a physical and cultural fabric that is inclusive, but they also can prove to be divisive, particularly during the period leading up to and directly after their installation. Studying these four instances of the memorialization of Denmark Vesey in Charleston helps shed light on how the memorialization of a contested figure is navigated. Additionally, an analysis of the different ways these memorials came into being as well as popular reactions to them provides a lens through which to examine the arc of racial understanding in Charleston. These insights will benefit preservationists interested in supporting a more well-balanced and diverse historic narrative as well as anyone who is interested in studying the commemoration of these sorts of complex historic figures.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODODOLOGY

Memorialization of Denmark Vesey has taken many forms in Charleston. As these memorials were erected at different times and by varying groups of people, the methods by which they were studied were similarly varied. However, much of the research for this project was accomplished in fairly traditional ways. The South Carolina State Archives contain records relating to the Denmark Vesey trial, including two sets of transcriptions of the original trial records. Of the books that have been published about Vesey, Douglas Egerton’s *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* was the most heavily relied upon for biographical material.

The first instance of memorialization studied was the Denmark Vesey House, a National Historic Landmark located at 56 Bull Street in Charleston. A good deal of information regarding the National Historic Landmark nomination of the house at 56 Bull Street is located in the South Carolina State Archives in Columbia. The research that indicates the inaccuracy of the listing of the house can be found in the state archives as well.

The historic research that backed up the nomination was conducted by Elias Ball Bull. Although he is no longer alive, his papers can be found in the South Carolina Room of the Charleston County Public Library. Additionally, there has been some sporadic news coverage of the house over the years. For example, there was a failed effort to purchase the house for use as a museum in the 1990s. This resulted in a brief
resurgence of interest in the house in the local news as well as some commentary from local figures.

The second commemoration of Vesey that is discussed is a painting by Dorothy B. Wright which was hung in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium in 1976. Information regarding the process leading up to the installation of the painting was obtained primarily from City Council and Auditorium Committee meeting minutes accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Division Office. Further information was found in the archives of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston. The City of Charleston Records Management Division also has a vertical file on the portrait. A great deal of the material for this chapter came from news sources, most notably what was then *The News and Courier*, the predominant Charleston newspaper. The painting is currently in storage in the offices of the Old Slave Mart Museum.

The sculpture in the alcove of the Emanuel A.M.E. Church was installed as part of a 1991 Spoleto Festival exhibition, *Places with a Past*. This exhibition was accompanied by a full-length book under the title *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival*. The exhibition was also featured as an important milestone in the development of culturally-oriented site-specific art exhibits in *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History, 1962-2002*. Much of the information regarding the installation and analysis of the painting came from the extensive Spoleto Festival archives located in the Special Collections of the Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston. Additional information was obtained from the archives of the
Emanuel A.M.E Church itself, as well as from the City of Charleston’s Board of Architectural Review office. News sources were consulted as well.

Research into the construction of the statue in Hampton Park involved a study of the local newspaper archives, specifically those of The Post and Courier, beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing until the beginning of 2014. There was a great deal of controversy regarding the statue and many conversations occurred in the local news. Additional research on this front involved the archives at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, at the College of Charleston. Records of the City Council as well as the Arts and History Commission were accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Division Office, and from Vanessa Turner Maybank, the Clerk of Council for the City of Charleston. Records from the Wagener Park Terrace Neighborhood association were obtained from a member of the organization. Extra assistance with this portion of the project came from Curtis Franks, one of the founding members of the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee, the group that made the monument.

In addition to site-specific research needs, there are some more general types of analysis that were applied to the four instances of memorialization. This involved an analysis of the symbolic ramifications of each memorial. This followed a basic rubric laid out by thinkers such as Kirk Savage, who analyzes memorials both sociologically and semiotically. The two prongs of this approach are complimentary. Thorough historical research provides the unique cultural context for the analysis of the memorial, while the examination of the memorial via iconographic methods helps elucidate the
meaning of the memorial in the context of other commemorative art. The use of symbolic visual language in commemorative art is an extremely well-established tradition and its study has long been conducted under the auspices of art history, among other disciplines. All four of the memorials under study have been examined via iconographic and semiotic methods.

In some instances, as in the statue in Hampton Park and the alcove in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, the memorials are fairly traditional and their symbolic elements were discussed in the context of other art. In other instances, such as the house at 56 Bull Street, an analysis of the building itself as a symbolic element was undertaken. The tools for these sort of analyses are primarily secondary source materials, many of which are discussed in the literature review. A detailed physical description of each memorial is an important component of the analysis, and therefore the text is accompanied by photographs taken by the author.
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW

Americans have erected monuments and memorials to honor stalwart citizens and singular events for more than two centuries. Monuments honoring George Washington, the nation’s first president, appeared not long after his death in 1799. Tens of thousands of Americans and international tourists have already visited the 9-11 memorial in New York since its opening in the summer of 2014. Scholarly investigation of American monuments, and their place in the public expression of chapters in the nation’s historical narrative are, however, more recent.

Events and the scholarly exploration of the cultural and historical meaning of the monuments that commemorate them have for the most part followed parallel tracks. And that means that the exploration of the scholarly literature that pertains to every event and every personality memorialized in the U.S. falls into two distinct categories. There is, on the one hand, the historical scholarship about the event itself. On the other hand, there is a growing literature that explores the act and significance of commemoration. As such, this literature contains two sections. The first deals with the literature regarding the study of memorialization. The second addresses the literature regarding the historical figure of Denmark Vesey himself.
MEMORIALIZATION

Scholars have undertaken the study of memorialization in a variety of fields and in the United States over a period of time extending back for at least fifty years. While this necessarily has resulted in a variety of analyses from disparate voices, there are certain commonalities which can be traced throughout much of the literature. This is particularly true in literature dating from the 1990s onward, when interest in the study of memorialization came into its own, both in terms of the quantity of work produced and in the quality of scholarship. From the very beginnings of the study of commemoration, the literature tends to utilize the case study as an analytical tool with a great degree of frequency.

Most of the literature reviewed included an explanation of the history and politics behind a particular memorial or group of memorials. Typically the analysis then diverged in one of two main directions: a discussion of the aesthetics of the memorial and its semiotic implications, or a deeper historiographical and sociological analysis. There are some exceptions to this rule: for example, thinkers like Michel Foucault often tend to operate on a much more abstract and theoretical level, and may address issues regarding memory and history without the use of concrete examples. While this sort of abstract thinking often served as a useful motivational point for those writing about memorialization, these purely philosophical texts will not be addressed in this literature review. Additionally, as this thesis deals with the memorialization of a man who planned a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, the scholarship discussed will focus on
African-American history and the South, particularly as the overall body of material becomes increasingly broad over time.

There is a relatively high degree of consensus among scholars who have addressed memorialization in many aspects. An understanding that a memorial, by definition, is meant to communicate something which necessarily differs from pure reality seems to have been understood by analysts early on; however, the desire to probe this fact did not occur until the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, the consideration of memorials as contested spaces did not appear in the literature until the 1990s boom in publication, which saw not only a major increase in the interest of scholars in memorialization, but also a shift in the tenor of the literature. The years from roughly 1995 through 2005 saw a great deal of interest in the intersection of memorials and the “other” as opposed to earlier analyses which often neglected the disenfranchised in favor of supporting a consensus opinion. The later 2000s through the present day represented a continuing increase in the level of discourse regarding this topic and a refining of the social analyses involved as well as a general trend towards a higher degree of collaboration and professionalism, although the basic ideas behind the work have not shifted dramatically since the late 1990s.

An excellent example of the early tenor of the analysis of memorialization lies in the article “Smoke Rings,” written by Clifford Lord and published in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* in 1957. This article does not necessarily provide a key contribution to the discourse of memorialization and it might even be considered a “fluff piece” by some, as it addresses the history of the Territorial Supreme Court Building in Wisconsin
in a patently propagandistic way and culminates in an appeal for money to construct an
extension to the building. However, it is noteworthy for its description of the building,
which it also calls a “shrine,” as “a monument to the immediate establishment of law and
order and a monument too to the speculator who has meant so much in the establishment
of the America we know today.”  

Clearly Lord acknowledges the use of such symbolic
structures as a means to an ideological end, and he endorses the use of them as such.
While the space for a discussion regarding the impact of the “immediate establishment of
law and order” in the then-frontier land of Wisconsin on the disenfranchised and seems
obvious to the modern reader, Lord’s naïve endorsement of these aims is complete and is
typical for the time.

Often early analyses of memorialization focused on the most famous memorial
locations and spoke with the collective rather than acknowledging various opinions. For
example, Alan Havig addresses the issue of memorialization on the National Mall in his
Roosevelt, 1919-1967.” An examination of Havig’s essay is particularly instructive due
to his choice of material. Kirk Savage, who writes prolifically on memorialization,
addresses the same location in his recent book Monument Wars. Havig’s work is far
more sophisticated than early examples such as “Smoke Rings”. His analysis not only
involves historical background, it delves into the aesthetics and symbolism of the
monuments. Havig’s topic, which is the 1920s debate between memorializing Jefferson

35 Alan Havig, “Presidential Images, History, and Homage: Memorializing Theodore Roosevelt, 1919-
or Roosevelt on the National Mall, is thoroughly addressed, but his analysis lacks the psychological depth that is apparent in Savage’s more recent work. While Havig addresses the debate factually, Savage chooses to consider the ramifications of the National Mall through lenses such as the racial strife of the 1960s. This differing focus is indicative of the changes in the analysis of memorialization over time.

The 1990s saw a great boom in the amount of literature devoted to the analysis of memorialization. Certain themes remained consistent, while a new concern with contested histories and spaces began to emerge. A fine example of this shift in thought is Diane Britton’s 1997 essay “Public History and Public Memory,” in *The Public Historian*. Britton’s writing is very much of her time—she references the Oregon Trail computer game as well as *Star Trek: First Contact*, a movie which had recently come out, as examples. Britton reflects the consensus view regarding the subjectivity and inaccuracy of historic memory: “the lines between memory and history are blurred… our culture promotes a sense of the past that clashes with what historians have documented to be true.” However, Britton also indicates an interest in what other public historians of her era were beginning to focus on: who creates and therefore controls collective historic memory?

Diane Britton expresses an interest in the analysis of contested memorials specifically. For example, she discusses the preservation issues surrounding the Historic

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37 Diane F. Briton, 14.
38 Diane F. Briton, 13; see also AHA Perspectives for session of annual meeting entitled “Who Owns History”
Elm Street Bridge in Toledo, Ohio. This bridge was the site of an important labor dispute in 1934 which resulted in the deaths of workers; it remained a source of bitter memories for many residents.\textsuperscript{39} Addressing these sorts of contested spaces, particularly with regards to Holocaust memorialization, came very much into vogue in the 1990s. The growth of this body of literature roughly coincided with the growth of the number of Holocaust memorials in the United States.\textsuperscript{40}

That the literature so closely followed on the heels of the memorialization in question is somewhat different from the pattern previously seen. In earlier years, there was a lag between the time during which the memorials were being erected and the time during which they were analyzed. The reasons behind this are not particularly clear. The fact that the Holocaust was so thoroughly popularized during this era, not only through official memorialization but through other media such as the film \textit{Schindler’s List}, may have served to place it front and center in the minds of historians. Additionally, the field of memorialization research was growing at this time, and was certainly more robust than it was previously. Whatever the reason, the research quickly followed the memorialization. This has remained a trend, with new memorials being analyzed promptly today.

In \textit{Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves}, Kirk Savage delves into the issue of how those in power control the perception and dissemination of history. Savage expanded his PhD thesis into \textit{Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves} in 1997. He continues to be a widely

\textsuperscript{39} Diane F. Briton, 17
\textsuperscript{40} Anson Rabinbach, “From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg,” \textit{History and Memory} 9, no. ½ (Fall 1997): 226-255.
referenced authority on the memorialization of contested spaces. In *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, Savage makes the leap from acknowledging that memorialization is subjective to asserting that the very intention of memorialization is to shape collective memory: “the impulse behind the public monument was an impulse to mold history into its rightful pattern.” Thus, Savage elucidates that the purpose of memorialization is at its core propagandistic. Furthermore, he posits that the mere act of commemoration tends to lead toward conflict. In this way, all public memorials can be seen as contested spaces. The examination of how these memorials breed conflict and the people for whom they create difficulty is the fodder of much current scholarship on this subject today.

Savage is particularly useful due to his multifaceted approach to his research. While many authors seem to address their subject either exclusively from a historical perspective or mainly from a semiotic one, Savage uses both techniques. His analysis of the meaning of certain common design tropes, such as the equestrian statue, is a welcome addition to the canon of literature on modern memorialization. While the symbolism of various statue designs is discussed by other scholars in detail, it is often in the context of Classical forms. Rarely does an author combine a thorough analysis of forms with a historical perspective as Savage does.

A great deal of literature has been produced regarding the memorialization of the Civil War, which partially stems from the fact that there is a great deal of

memorialization of the Civil War in general. There is much consensus regarding the prolific nature of Civil War memorialization. Most authors who address the subject feel that Civil War memorialization far outstripped that of other wars, began fairly soon after the war ended, was comparatively widely dispersed, and peaked sometime around the turn of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{43}

In fact, the analysis of Civil War memorialization began fairly early, with Oscar Handlin addressing the issue in 1961. Writing on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the war, Handlin reviews the fascination with the war. He also highlights a key focus of the work of many authors that address the issue of memorialization: the inherent disconnect between memory, particularly collective memory, and reality.\textsuperscript{44} However, this early work does not address some of the deeper issues which later writers focus on, such as why the Civil War was so heavily memorialized and the ways in which race played a role. There is a sharp contrast between this early work, which does not address race at all, and later writing on Civil War memorialization, which often focuses heavily on race.

For example, Paul Shackel deals with what he believes to be the inherent racial conflicts created by the memorialization of the Civil War in \textit{Memory in Black and White}:


\textsuperscript{44} Oscar Handlin, 135.
Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape.\textsuperscript{45} This volume dates from 2003, which places it chronologically somewhat between the era of expansion and solidification of the 1990s and the refining and professionalizing that typified the later 2000s. In this series of essays, Shackel examines sites owned by the National Park Service through the lens of race and memorialization. Certain themes are familiar: Shackel discusses the subjective nature of how people experience memorials and the various ways in which power is expressed through the creation and maintenance of these memorials. He also concerns himself with the racial history of the memorials, tracing the racial experience of the various sites through history in a way that is informative and useful.

Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory is a multi-authored collection of essays published the same year as Memory in Black and White. The title to this volume is somewhat deceptive, as it addresses issues of race as well as gender. That the work deals so heavily with race yet does not acknowledge this in the title is noteworthy: analysis of Civil War memorialization has moved from a complete lack of racial discussion to a place where it is so assumed as to be considered unnecessary to mention. However, the intersection of race and gender provides fertile territory for unique and fresh research. For example, Micki McElya’s essay “Commemorating the Color Line: The National Mammy Monument Controversy of the 1920s” deals with the now strange seeming desire to build a monument to the

\textsuperscript{45} Paul A. Shackel, Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003).
“faithful colored mammies of the South” in Washington, D.C.⁴⁶ Stories such as this have not necessarily been told in other volumes, perhaps because many memorial statues feature dominant male figures.

Like *Memory in Black and White*, the authors rely heavily on the use of primary source material and historical information for their analyses, with less attention paid in general to an aesthetic analysis of the monuments under study. *Monuments to the Lost Cause* is also useful in that it deals heavily with the influence of organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Daughters of the War of 1812.⁴⁷ These women’s groups often played pivotal roles in the construction of memorials, and an in-depth analysis of their internal organization and philosophical position proves quite useful. That this well-edited volume contains the work of multiple authors from a variety of disciplines speaks to not only an increasing volume of interest in this field but also to a level of collaboration and professionalization as well.

Thomas J. Brown’s slim 2004 volume *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* is somewhat less sophisticated in its analysis than other contemporary works.⁴⁸ However, it is noteworthy because it provides an interesting assortment of primary source material such as orations and poems that help give historic context to the memorials of the Civil War. Additionally, it

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⁴⁷ Catherine W. Bishir, “‘A Strong Force of Ladies’: Women, Politics, and Confederate Memorial Associations in Nineteenth-Century Raleigh,” in *Monuments to the Lost Cause*.
contributes some to the relatively slim selection of memorial analyses that focus on semiotic and symbolic aspects of statues. Interestingly, Brown posits that monuments will increasingly be replaced with film media such as movies; this conclusion is directly countered by the Holocaust historian Anson Rabinbach, who argues that film corrupts our ability to properly memorialize.49 The importance of modern media to the discussion of contentious issues such as memorialization is increasingly worth paying attention to, particularly in this age of YouTube-like online soapbox opportunities. In other respects, however, this book is less helpful, presenting little in the way of novel research or conclusions.

Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape is Kirk Savage’s latest contribution to this body of literature. In this work, Savage directs his attention to the ionic memorials of Washington, D.C. Savage traces the experience of memorials through time, and argues that the public at large has developed a more nuanced understanding of memorials much in the same way that scholarly analysis has evolved.

As in his earlier works, Savage combines historical and sociological research with a deep aesthetic analysis of the monuments in question to great effect. He is at his best when examining the physicality of monuments in this way, and some of his work is quite novel. For example, he asks readers to consider the slight strain necessitated by the pose in which Lincoln sits in his memorial and argues, “even though it will not occur to most

49 Thomas J. Brown, p. 6; Anson Rabinbach, “From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg,” History and Memory 9, no. ½ (Fall 1997): 226-255, 228.
viewers to identify with Lincoln at a muscular level, the statue beckons them nonetheless to make sense of its interior complexity, its restless repose.” The subtlety and uniqueness of some of Savage’s conclusions sets him somewhat apart from others in this field, although consensus regarding the use of the monument as an ideological tool as well as its sometimes divisive nature remain consistent.

*Commemoration in America: Essays on Monuments, Memorialization, and Memory* is a recently published collection of works by a variety of scholars, primarily from fields such as architectural and public history. This volume expands the study of memorialization to include subjects that might not normally be considered under the rubric of the memorial, particularly since it “monument” and “memorial” are often conflated. For example, Mark Peterson discusses the importance of writing as a form of memorialization in his essay “Stone Witnesses, Dumb Pictures, and Voices from the Grave: Objects, Images, and Collective Memory in Early Boston.” While this subject has been addressed from a literary perspective, Peterson explores it while firmly grounded in an architecturally and sociologically analytical context. Other essays break truly unique ground, such as Thomas J. Campanella’s “As a Witness upon the Field of History’: The American Elm as Commemorative Vessel in Nineteenth-Century New England.”

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52 See Michael North, “The Public Monument and Public Poetry,” *Contemporary Literature* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1980) for an example of the analysis of literature as memorializing tool.
Familiar topics include the intersection of race and memorialization in the American South and the growing body of memorials in general in recent years.\textsuperscript{53}

In general, the variety and quality of the works contained within this volume speak to a continuing interest in analyzing memorialization on the part of historians. That the work represents a revisiting of a topic addressed at a symposium ten years previous indicates that the field of study is both robust and has become somewhat stable since its rapid early development in the 1990s.

BIOGRAPHY OF DENMARK VESEY

The biographical treatment of Denmark Vesey is dominated by a few well-respected works. While references are made to Vesey in a number of texts, the two most useful biographies are *Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter*, by John Lofton, and *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, by Douglas R. Egerton. The chronology of Vesey research is interesting: Lofton’s book was published in 1964, and very additional biographical contributions were made in the next forty years. Then, in 1999, three separate books on Vesey were published. Additionally, a long-standing and heated conflict exists between two camps of Vesey historians. This schism dates to 1964, and involves a debate regarding whether the conspiracy actually existed at all.

In 1964, John Lofton published *Insurrection in South Carolina*, which was renamed *Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* for its 1983 reprint edition.\(^{54}\) This exhaustive work was the first biography written about Vesey in modern times as well as the first book that aimed for impartiality. In fact, it is still considered by many to be the standard reference material to be used when researching Vesey.\(^{55}\) Lofton traces Vesey’s life from the Caribbean to South Carolina, analyzes the religious overtones of Vesey’s message, and details the trial, as well as discussing the insurrection’s broader social context and ramifications. Lofton argues that the “social

\(^{54}\) John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1983).

trauma” and anger that resulted from the trial of Vesey and his co-conspirators resulted in a more aggressive stance towards the treatment of blacks in South Carolina, which in turn placed the state on an anti-nationalist path.\footnote{Lofton, 210-211.}

Lofton’s work has been criticized both for being too sympathetic and for being too unsympathetic towards his subject.\footnote{Lofton, p. v.} It is likely that this criticism stems primarily from the contentious nature of Vesey himself, as Lofton in most instances maintains a distance from his subject that later authors often fail to do. While he describes Vesey in terms that are at times subjective, he does so in instances when Vesey’s demeanor is relevant and reasonably well documented. For example, Lofton describes Vesey as “immovable” and “imperious” during his trial; as the records of the trial exist, Lofton has a basis for these claims.\footnote{Lofton, 160.}

The 1970s saw the publication of several useful compilations of primary source material, such as \textit{The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey}, which has been an invaluable resource to historians.\footnote{John Oliver Killens, ed. \textit{The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).} In addition to the trial record, \textit{Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822} was published in 1970. Its editor, Robert Starobin, contributed some original material for to the work, but it was most useful due to its primary source content. For example, Starobin included manuscript confessions of some of the accused co-conspirators as well as letters from Vesey’s era and accounts of contemporary historians.\footnote{Robert Starobin, ed., \textit{Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822} (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970); B.F. Jones, The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey by John Oliver Killens; Denmark Vesey: The Slave}
The second major boom in Vesey biographical publication came in 1999, when three works were published almost simultaneously. One of these, Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822, was a compilation of the trial record. However, it also contained a lengthy introduction written by the editor of the volume, Edward A. Pearson, which covered a variety of topics ranging from the unique ways in which slaves that hired out their labor operated to the details of how the local chapter of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of which Vesey was a member, was harassed by whites, and how this likely contributed to the insurrection.61 Unfortunately, in transcribing two different versions of the trial records, Pearson accidentally conflated the two records, making his work on the trial record itself less than reliable.62

David Robertson’s Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of America’s Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It was also published in 1999, and is fairly popular, due to its readability.63 In many ways this seems to be a book that is geared towards a wider audience; it is fairly short, has a strong narrative thrust, and does not shrink away from the personalization and even lionization of Vesey. It is interesting to note that this volume was published by a major commercial publishing house rather than an academic one. Robertson’s work is unique in that it deals more thoroughly with the

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components of Vesey’s life in South Carolina than other sources. However, it suffers from inaccuracies and inadequate footnotes for scholarly use. Robertson has been criticized as being “careless with facts,” as well as for using a heavily edited version of the trial record rather than examining the record itself.64

The third volume published in 1999, Douglas R. Egerton’s *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, is in many ways the strongest of the group. Egerton’s work is similar to Robertson’s in that it is of an approachable length. Egerton also does not always maintain a level of objectivity with regards to his subject, and is clearly impressed with what he perceives to be Vesey’s better qualities, such as his sharp intelligence.65 However, Egerton’s work does not suffer from the lack of scholarly rigor that Robertson’s does, and contains ample footnotes that demonstrate that Egerton draws from a wealth of material. In general, this book contains much of the accepted canon of other Vesey biographies, although Egerton is able to compile some new information on Vesey’s early years in the Caribbean. This text is considered by some to be the new standard biography of Vesey.66

In addition to this accepted canon of biographical material, there is a deep schism in the opinions of Vesey historians that dates back to 1964. In this year, the same one in which Lofton’s biography was published, Richard C. Wade published an article in the *Journal of Southern History* in which he cast doubt upon the claims that a true conspiracy

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existed in the first place. Wade claimed that the conspiracy was “probably never more than loose talk” that was continually made to seem more serious than it actually was due to the hysteria that followed the arrests. Wade cites as evidence irregularities in the transcription of trial records, the attitudes of well-connected contemporaries directly affiliated with the trials, such as Governor Thomas Bennett and Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, and the fact that a weapons cache could never be found.

While Wade’s argument was widely seen to be overstated, it reemerged in the years after the 1999 publication of the three volumes. Historian Michael P. Johnson, while reading the three works in preparation for the publication of a book review, supported Wade’s conclusions in his “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators.” Johnson’s arguments were the dearth of evidence and the manipulation of trial records. Johnson felt that rather than a conspiracy involving a real slave insurrection, a different kind of conspiracy had occurred. He argued that the Charleston power elite were concerned about the rise of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and wished to quash it. As Johnson, a well-respected Vesey historian, knew the impact that his work would have on others, an offer of space for rebuttal was made by the William and Mary Quarterly. Edward Pearson, Robert Paquette, James O’Neil Spady, and Douglas Egerton

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68 Wade, 150.
69 Wade, 152, 155.
71 Johnson, 969.
all submitted replies. This is a debate which continues to split Vesey scholars to this day. While the majority of scholars feel that there is strong evidence for a true conspiracy towards insurrection, a vocal minority continues to question the validity of any conclusion reached by a biased and corrupt trial.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE DENMARK VESEY HOUSE

Figure 4.1: The Denmark Vesey House, 56 Bull Street
While Denmark Vesey planned the insurrection, he lived on Bull Street. Trial records indicate that he lived on the block between Pitt and Smith Streets, closer to Smith Street than Pitt. While Vesey typically worked hard to avoid census workers and tax collectors, he was recorded in the 1822 Charleston City Directory as living at what was then 20 Bull Street—the only known record of this kind for Vesey.

![Figure 4.2: 1822 Charleston City Directory featuring Denmark Vesey](image)

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73 Denmark Vesey House historical references, Denmark Vesey House vertical file, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).

74 1822 Charleston City Directory, accessed at South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library.
Much of the work of the planning for the insurrection occurred at Vesey’s home, the location of the Bible study meetings where Vesey recruited followers, and where core organizers dealt with the logistics of the insurrection. Therefore, it is understandable that Denmark Vesey’s house would be a prime location for his commemoration in Charleston. In fact the house proved to be the location of the first instance of Vesey’s commemoration in Charleston. The nomination of his house at 56 Bull Street to the National Register of Historic Places and as a National Historic Landmark occurred in 1976.

The nomination of the Denmark Vesey House, however, is based on a series of falsehoods and misinterpretation of relevant data. Research indicates that it is unlikely that this was ever Vesey’s house. Navigating this inaccuracy has been problematic, as there is no visible alternative to the symbolically apt freedman’s cottage at what is today 56 Bull Street. The house remains on the National Register and although it is underutilized as a historic site it is still referenced in some literature about Vesey. It is currently the only National Historic Landmark in Charleston that is available for rent.

The house at 56 Bull Street is a modest, one-story building oriented perpendicularly to Bull Street. It is lacking in ornate detailing with a porch that extends along the length of the west façade of the building and a parapet which conceals the shed roof on the south façade, where the building faces Bull Street. The house is covered with wooden clapboards. The National Register Nomination describes the building as Greek Revival in style, but this designation is made in large part due to the design of the
columns which support the piazza. These columns are likely not original to the house and show signs of having been shortened and reused.

The house was constructed in multiple stages, with the earliest portion of the building located in the south portion of the lot, facing Bull Street. This initial building was quite small, containing only two rooms. Each of the rooms was accessible from the exterior of the building by way of the porch and were also connected in the interior. This building type was fairly common in the Charleston area during the late-nineteenth century, well after Vesey’s death. These structures bear a resemblance both in layout and scale to the “shotgun houses” of New Orleans, with the addition of a porch that allows one to access each room from the exterior.

A more likely antecedent, however, is the Charleston single house, the city’s iconic house form. The Charleston single house is two stories and is laid out perpendicularly to the street. Its early form is a single room deep, with a two-story porch attached to either the south or west side of the structure. This piazza is typically separated from the street on the ground floor by a doorway with a parapet, thus providing privacy and controlled access while still allowing for a good deal of sheltered outdoor living space, a boon in the muggy South Carolina Lowcountry. The ability to access each

76 Edward Turberg to Beckie Johnson, May 14, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.
room from the piazza is an added convenience, and somewhat reduces the inconvenient traffic patterns of a house that is only one room deep.

In many ways the house at 56 Bull Street is simply a Charleston single house that lacks a second story. These small houses were often built in Charleston as rental properties and were typically expanded with rear additions. The house at 56 Bull Street is no exception, with a rear addition that more than doubled the size of the original building.

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Figure 4.3: Plan Drawing by Elias Ball Bull; figure not to scale. Image courtesy of Charleston County Public Library.

It is likely that this addition occurred in two phases, with one room and the fireplace serving as the first addition and the rear bedrooms being added to the building last.\textsuperscript{79} The rear addition stands proud of the original structure on the west side and the porch terminates on this addition. In general, the building is modest. It is of the type that

\textsuperscript{79} Edward F. Turberg to Beckie Johnson, May 14, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.
a man such as Vesey would likely have occupied: it provides space for a commercial and working area in the front, and allows for living space in the rear. Houses such as this were often occupied by skilled laborers and artisans such as carpenters like Vesey.\textsuperscript{80}

The nomination of this house as a National Historic Landmark was the result of a lengthy process. The Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation is the organization which sponsored the nomination.\textsuperscript{81} The Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation was a non-profit entity established in 1970 in response to the beginnings of planned national bicentennial events. The members of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation felt, as many others did, that the traditional history celebrated by the government-sponsored American Revolution Bicentennial Commission was not sufficiently inclusive.\textsuperscript{82} The organization was formed under the direction of Vincent DeForest with the immediate goal of ensuring the inclusion of African-American historical components in the bicentennial celebration.\textsuperscript{83}

The corporation achieved this goal primarily through work on two fronts. First, via the recording of oral histories from notable African-Americans that might otherwise have been lost, and second, through the use of the National Register of Historic Places. In conjunction with the National Park Service, the organization held a symposium in Washington D.C. in January 1971 which determined a number of possible sites for nomination to the register. Members of the symposium nominated properties for the

\textsuperscript{80} Felzer, \textit{The Charleston Freedman’s Cottage}, 142.
\textsuperscript{81} Lynne Gomez Graves, Denmark Vesey House Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places Inventory, National Park Service.
register and published a volume detailing the sites. Some of these site nominations proved more successful as tools to increase awareness of African-American heritage than others.

For example, Mt. Zion Cemetery in Washington, D.C., an African-American cemetery, was in disuse and disrepair before the organization refurbished it and nominated it for the National Register of Historic Places. While the group was able to draw attention to the cemetery for a time, it has unfortunately once again fallen into disrepair and was recently nominated to be on the D.C. Preservation League’s Most Endangered Places List. In the Charleston area, the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation sponsored the successful nomination of the site of the Stono River Slave Rebellion and proposed and submitted a nomination for Battery Wagner.

The residence on Bull Street was not the first choice of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation for the representation of Denmark Vesey on the National Register. Beginning in 1973, the organization approached local Charleston historian Elias Ball Bull in an effort to determine which site would be most appropriate for a

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Vesey-themed nomination. The woman in charge of the project, Historical Projects Director Marcia M. Greenlee, was initially interested in the nomination of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church on Calhoun Street.\textsuperscript{88} This selection seemed a logical choice. Vesey’s involvement with the A.M.E. Church was well-known, as was the stately Emanuel A.M.E. building on Calhoun Street. There were numerous connections between the Emanuel A.M.E. Church and Vesey. Vesey was an early and active member of the A.M.E. Church and Vesey’s son, an architect named Robert Vesey, even designed the original building for the Emanuel congregation.\textsuperscript{89}

However, the connection between Vesey and the current church on Calhoun Street was tenuous and did not meet National Register criteria. Although Denmark Vesey was very active in the A.M.E. Church, all of the antebellum places of worship for Charleston A.M.E. congregations were destroyed in the aftermath of Vesey’s attempted insurrection.\textsuperscript{90} Further, the original Emanuel A.M.E. Church building was destroyed in a major earthquake in 1886. Once it was determined that the current church was not viable for the National Register nomination, various former sites for worship were considered. So were sites such as the Work House on Magazine Street where the men were tried, although it was determined that the building had been demolished.\textsuperscript{91} The decision to

\textsuperscript{88} Letter of Agreement between Elias Ball Bull and Marcia M. Greenlee, May 3 1973.
\textsuperscript{89} Alphonso Brown, \textit{A Gullah Guide to Charleston} (Charleston: History Press, 2008), 42.
\textsuperscript{90} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 221.
nominate the house at 56 Bull Street was made at the urging of Elias Ball Bull, who was being paid to perform the research necessary for a nomination in Charleston.92

Elias Ball Bull was a native Charlestonian with deep roots in the area. His well-known family dated back to the eighteenth century, with colonial governor William Bull among Elias Ball Bull’s forbears.93 Although Bull suffered from lifelong health problems that required the use of crutches or a wheelchair, he was a tireless historical scholar, often pursuing his interest in history late into the night.94 Bull had a particular passion for historic preservation and the old buildings of Charleston, as well as an interest in “race and culture.”95

This unique and enthusiastic man, on a hunt for an appropriate site to represent Denmark Vesey on the National Register, set about trying to determine the location of Vesey’s house on Bull Street. All that was known about Denmark Vesey’s house was that it was listed as 20 Bull Street in the 1822 City Directory, and that Vesey lived closer to Smith Street corner than the Pitt Street corner.96 The street numbering system in Charleston is such that it can be difficult to determine what modern number a historic

92 Elias Ball Bull to Marcia M. Greenlee, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).
96 Denmark Vesey House historical references, Denmark Vesey House vertical file, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).
address corresponds to, as numbering that predates 1848 was somewhat arbitrary and changed frequently.\(^7\) Bull used a combination of sources including the City Directories, Chain of Title research, and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps to attempt to recreate the pertinent block of Bull Street in the year 1822.\(^8\)

Although Bull’s process was intuitive and turned on what proved to be flawed assumptions, he was able to make a case for the house at 56 Bull Street as being Denmark Vesey’s residence. Ultimately, his methodology was convincing enough to satisfy both the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation and the National Park Service.\(^9\) The house was officially placed on the National Register as a National Historic Landmark in 1976.\(^10\)

The validity of Bull’s conclusions was questioned almost from the very beginning. An examination of the correspondence between Bull and Marcia Greenlee, the representative for the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, reveals that she raised certain concerns about the scholarship even before the nomination was submitted. Bull himself admitted that a certain amount of conjecture was involved in his analysis.

\(^8\) Lynne Gomez Graves, Denmark Vesey House Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places Inventory, National Park Service, Methodological Explanation.
\(^9\) Marcia M. Greenlee to Elias Ball Bull, June 18, 1975, Denmark Vesey House vertical file, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers); Elias Ball Bull to Marcia M. Greenlee, October 16, 1974, Denmark Vesey House vertical file, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers); Elias Ball Bull to Marcia M. Greenlee, June 10, 1975, Denmark Vesey House vertical file, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).
\(^10\) Lynne Gomez Graves, Denmark Vesey House Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places Inventory, National Park Service.
Bull wrote that, “I cannot explain the lack of numbers on the South side of Bull Street.” He continued, “it would stand to reason that the block on the other side of Smith Street would continue the same numbering system.” Bull did not present his conclusions as irrefutable but rather as a body of research that could or could not be accepted.

Bull also presents little assistance when asked for help with verifying his findings. In a letter to Greenlee, he states, “You ask who is qualified and experienced enough to review my research. The staff of the State’s Historic Preservation Office does not know how to conduct a title search.” Bull suggested that Greenlee contact Robert Stockton, a well-respected reporter from Charleston who worked primarily with architecture and historic buildings. Whether the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation contacted Stockton is not known. Bull’s explanations seem to have been satisfactory, and the two entities parted on good terms, with the suggestion that Bull be enlisted for further research in the Charleston area if the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation wished to nominate another property.

Elias Ball Bull’s explanation was included in the National Register Nomination Form in a methodological addendum, but questions remained, exacerbated by the lack of transparency of Bull’s process.

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101 Elias Ball Bull to Marcia Greenlee, October 16, 1974; Elias Ball Bull to Marcia Greenlee April 16, 1975, both in Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).
103 Marcia Greenlee to Elias Ball Bull, June 18, 1975, Box 7 of 27, Records of the Historic Preservation Planner, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, 1970-1981, Charleston County Public Library Special Collections (Elias Ball Bull’s research papers).
In 1980, the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office addressed these questions officially. The precipitating factor in this research was an application for a grant from the Department of the Interior to perform maintenance on the property.\footnote{Charles E. Lee to Mrs. P. Maurice Fox, Nov 3, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.} The research was conducted under the auspices of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History and included both an architectural and historical examination.

The architectural examination was not definitive, but strongly indicated that the building dated from the 1830s at the earliest, making it at least ten years too new to have
been Vesey’s residence. The architect who performed the study, Edward Turberg, was not familiar with the Charleston area. He initially performed a survey of similar buildings in the Charleston area to determine roughly when the building was likely constructed. The examination revealed a few key pieces of evidence that make a date earlier than 1830 unlikely. The oldest portion of the structure contains joists which show evidence of having been cut with a circular saw. Circular sawn lumber was not much in use in Charleston until the 1830s.\(^\text{105}\) The use of cut nails, another technology that was not seen in Charleston until the 1830s, points strongly to the house having been built after Vesey’s death in 1822.\(^\text{106}\)

Bull himself even admitted that the house could not have been standing for long at all if Vesey were to have been its inhabitant, due to such factors as its Greek Revival styling and common bond brickwork. He wrote in the National Register Nomination that, “…the building had just been built when Vesey lived there.”\(^\text{107}\) It is highly unlikely, however, that cutting-edge technology would have been implemented for a low-budget rental property such as the one at 56 Bull Street. Typically the use of innovative styles and building techniques was reserved for more ambitious projects and these styles and methods would be applied to less expensive buildings over a period of years.


\(^{106}\) Edward Turberg to Beckie Johnson, May 14, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Tom Wells, “Nail Chronology: The Use of Technologically Derived Features,” *Historical Archaeology* 32:2 (1998), 78-99.

\(^{107}\) Lynne Gomez Graves, Denmark Vesey House Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places Inventory, National Park Service.
Of some interest is an earlier foundation that was found beneath the house during the course of the 1980 investigation. This is likely the base for a chimney, and could potentially date from the era in which Vesey lived on Bull Street. Thus, the 1980 architectural investigation is not entirely damning. While it strongly indicates that the structure is too new to have been Vesey’s home, the fireplace foundation beneath it could potentially date from the correct era. Furthermore, the fact that many elements of the building have been reworked means that dating it is not a definitive process. For example, the Greek Revival columns on the porch have marks that indicate they have been reused. To say that the building is Greek Revival in style and therefore likely post-dates the Vesey era based on this is an inaccurate conclusion.

Unfortunately, the historic investigation revealed further problems with the nomination. Research indicates that Elias Ball Bull’s recreation of the numbering system on Bull Street in 1822 was neither conclusive nor accurate. Historian Wylma Wates, attempting to retrace Bull’s process, met with an impasse: three contiguous lots were owned by Lewis C. Trezevant as one parcel of land, and it proved impossible to determine which of the three was 20 Bull Street. Further information came from Ward Books and Free Negro Books, neither of which were available at the time Bull pursued his research. These sources did not allow Wates to conclusively determine the location of 20 Bull Street would have been. However, they strongly indicated that the street numbers did not shift as much as Bull had previously surmised. While the results of the

108 Edward Turberg to Beckie Johnson, May 14, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.
research remain, in the words of Wates, “somewhat nebulous,” it seems unlikely that the house at 56 Bull Street was ever Vesey’s residence. It appears that Bull proved that the lot could potentially have been one site for Vesey’s house and failed to fully recognize the ambiguity of the data. He failed to publically consider that there is often more than one possible solution to a particular problem.

Why was this mistake made? Bull can be faulted for his failure to consider other options. He perhaps cannot be faulted for his overenthusiastic acceptance of the house at 56 Bull Street, for this particular house was an all but perfect preconception of what a historian in the 1970s would have wanted Denmark Vesey’s house to be. Bull must not have been able to believe his luck. He was able to trace the residence of Denmark Vesey, an enslaved man who bought his manumission with money from a lottery, to 56 Bull Street, where an original Charleston freedman’s cottage still stood.

While the term “freedman’s cottage” was not commonly used in the 1970s, and did not gain wide use until the 1990s, the concept of these single-story vernacular houses as the residences of free African-American artisans was very popular. Bull made it clear that he was aware of this connection, as he described the house as “the type of rental property for inhabitation by ‘free persons of color.’” The symbolic value of this building as Vesey’s home cannot be overstated. It was the ideal type of structure that one

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109 Wilma Wates to Charles E. Lee, August 29, 1980, Denmark Vesey House File, Charleston County, National Register, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

110 Lynne Gomez Graves, Denmark Vesey House Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places Inventory, National Park Service, Methodological Explanation.
wanted to picture in positive association with Vesey: comparatively modest and simple but also a dignified building, ideal for a proud former slave who had to work hard.\textsuperscript{111}

That Bull was willing to jump to this conclusion should come as no surprise. In a time when much of Charleston remained racially segregated, Bull likely had a strong sense of what he felt a free African-American man’s house should look like. While not motivated by ill-will or open prejudice, Bull’s preconceptions regarding the sort of place a man such as Vesey may have strongly influenced him to push for the nomination of the house at 56 Bull Street despite his admitted ambiguity of proof.

Furthermore, the freedman’s cottage was a type of building that was closely associated with Charleston specifically. That the new National Historic Landmark just happened to be of a classically Charlestonian vernacular type no doubt appealed to locals, including Bull, whose Charleston roots ran deep. Quite simply, the house possessed a rightness of appearance and symbolic value that could not have been more perfect if it had been purpose-built as a memorial to Vesey in the 1970s.

Local news coverage of the nomination was scant. The newspaper articles produced tended towards matter-of-fact descriptions of the house and Vesey. A 1976 article written by the longtime Charleston architecture critic and reporter Robert Stockton appeared as a component of his regular architectural column “Do You Know Your Charleston?” This article features a photograph of the house and seems to have derived the majority of its content from the National Register Nomination and an external

\textsuperscript{111} However, these cottages weren’t really meant for former slaves or African-Americans, they were just a common kind of rental property for artisans of all races. Should I just address this in a footnote?
examination of the building.\textsuperscript{112} A 1977 article in the evening edition of the \textit{News and Courier} is similarly journalistic in tone. It briefly describes the conspiracy itself as well as explaining that the nomination of the house is a component of a larger effort to “designate landmarks… associated with blacks.”\textsuperscript{113}

The nomination of the property did not produce the kind of publicity or controversy that other commemorations of Vesey did. While the almost-contemporaneous hanging of a painting of Vesey in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium resulted in a rash of opinionated letters to the editors of various newspapers and even the theft of the painting, the nomination of the house seemed to be largely ideologically uncontested. None of the many opinion letters to newspapers from the era mention the nomination of the house.

The reasons behind this are unclear, but could perhaps stem from the fact that the public did not perceive the nomination of Vesey’s house as a National Historic Landmark as a way of praising Vesey. That Vesey was an important historic figure was not contested. Nor was the fact that residences of important figures could be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination of his house was not as strong a statement that Vesey deserved to be honored as raising a statue to him would be, for example.

The comparative lack of celebration associated with the nomination may have also contributed to the tepid ideological response. Nothing new was built as a result of

\textsuperscript{113} “Vesey House Designated a Historical Monument,” \textit{Evening Press} (Charleston, SC), Mar 17, 1977.
the nomination. The house did not even have a plaque for many years.\textsuperscript{114} Images of the
house at the time of nomination show a building in comparative disrepair, with broken
windows and surrounded by a chain link fence. Perhaps the nomination of the structure
was simply too understated a gesture about too modest a structure to provoke the sort of
ire that most remembrances of Vesey in the Charleston area do.

Figure 4.5: Photograph of window detail of 56 Bull Street, taken to accompany National Register Nomination in 1975. Image courtesy of Charleston County Public Library.
The house has remained an underutilized historical resource in the years following its nomination. How closely this is tied to the issues surrounding its authenticity is unclear. If the building is mentioned, often it is with a qualifier: “the site where Denmark Vesey is said to have once lived”, or, “a plaque on what may have been his house.”

However, the house has been celebrated at times. It was given a plaque as a component of the 1994 MOJA Festival, an annual Charleston event that focuses on African-American and Caribbean traditions. In 2001, it was featured in *The State* as a component of Black History Month. The image included shows the aforementioned plaque, although it has since been removed.

Several attempts have been made to purchase the building in an effort to turn it into a Vesey museum, but all efforts in this regard have failed. This is said to be due to the extremely competitive real estate market in the area but it is likely that funding for such a museum would be hindered by the tainted provenance of the building. The house is a regular component of many African-American-themed tours of Charleston. It is also featured in popular guide Alphonso Brown’s *Gullah Guide to Charleston* as Vesey’s authentic home.

An image of the house was considered as a component of a recent statue honoring Vesey but was rejected during discussions due to issues of historical

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inaccuracy.\footnote{Minutes of Arts and History Commission, June 5, 2013, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.} As of February 2015, the house is currently for rent. This is not uncommon. There is frequent renter turnover at the property.

It is highly unlikely that this house is the authentic residence of Denmark Vesey yet it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as such. Although the removal of the property from the register is not possible due to regulations, it would likely be the correct course of action for a variety of reasons.\footnote{Properties listed as National Historic Landmarks prior to December 13, 1980 may only be delisted due to loss of the qualities which resulted in the listing. Historian error is not an acceptable reason for delisting.} In allowing such a building to remain a National Historic Landmark, the register as a whole is cheapened—the authenticity of other structures can be called into question, and the value of a National Historic Landmark is diminished. Furthermore, the property is not very well-utilized as a historic resource related to Vesey. It has never been marked by more than an intermittently existent plaque. Almost every attempt to make greater use of the building has failed, due in part to concerns of authenticity.

However, the house is visited by many who are interested in African-American history, and there is no other structure in Charleston that is on the National Register of Historic Places for its association with Vesey. Quite simply, this is the best Charleston currently has to offer in this regard. If the primary motivation of an action such as nominating a property to the National Register is to allow people to draw a connection between a historically important person and a building or place, then the house on Bull Street functions as it should. 56 Bull Street was not named a National Historic Landmark
because it is particularly architecturally significant or the first of its kind. Its importance lay in its ability to connect modern day people with the story of Denmark Vesey. Its ability to do this, while compromised, still remains.

It is telling that the house remains in use as a historic touchstone despite ample evidence that it was never Vesey’s residence. This speaks poignantly to a continuing desire to make contact with a concrete, physical remnant of Vesey. While other forms of commemoration are very valuable, the immediacy and authenticity that is provided by a historic building such as the Vesey residence cannot be denied. It requires none of the obvious interpretation that a modern memorial does, allowing the viewer to experience a sense of true and direct connection with the historical figure. Visitors looking at the house on Bull Street can think that they are looking at the very rooms in which Vesey planned the insurrection, or touching the same railing that he touched. The power of this connection cannot easily be matched through other commemorative forms. That the house is a “freedman’s cottage” only further solidifies its emotional value.

While its lack of authenticity is not ideal, the fact that there is not an alternative property on the register would mean that its delisting would simply create a void. Until such an alternative is imminently viable, it is the responsibility of preservationists to consider the spirit of the law, so to speak, rather than just the letter. It is necessary to preserve and protect this property as it is while simultaneously attempting to determine an alternate solution that involves both a connection between Vesey and the built fabric of Charleston and a robust factual basis.
The painting of Denmark Vesey that hung in the Gaillard Auditorium for almost forty years is an unassuming and innocuous piece of art using a simple and forthright painting technique and bright cheerful colors. It depicts a well-dressed, white-haired man lecturing to a receptive but placid audience from a pulpit in a modest church building. However, its simplicity belies the firestorm of controversy which dogged its early years as well as its remarkable ongoing usefulness in memorializing Vesey in more recent decades.
That the installation in 1976 occurred at all was in many ways a miracle of compromise and kismet. For many years, South Carolina had been the site of a strong backlash against civil rights. Race relations were particularly volatile on the Charleston peninsula itself, under the dual pressures of gentrification and poverty. Many neighborhoods were highly segregated. For example, Charleston’s East Side actually became less diverse between 1960 and 1970, with the population shifting from 93 percent to 99 percent African-American.121

It was in this charged climate that 32 year old Joseph P. Riley was elected mayor in December of 1975.122 He brought with him new ideas regarding the arts, crime, and racial relations. Riley made it clear from the beginning of his tenure as mayor that he wished to change the way African-Americans were treated in Charleston as well as to improve the dialogue between blacks and whites. According to a 2014 New York Times article on Riley, “he has long considered it the South’s mission, and his own, to build bridges between white and black people.”123

Riley began pursuing this mission early. At a 1976 meeting of the Arts and History Commission, the body in Charleston which oversees the installation of public art, he went before the commission to express his desire to see increased recognition of “black people who have participated in the history of this city.”124 Riley was eager for

121 East Side Master Plan, Part I: Analysis, Department of Planning and Urban Development, City of Charleston, August, 1984.
124 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, February 16, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
opportunities to honor African-American Charlestonians, who were underrepresented in public forums. The possibility of a Denmark Vesey memorial at the Gaillard Auditorium, which had opened only seven years earlier, was just what he had been looking for.

The desire to honor Vesey at the new auditorium was present from the very beginning, with a failed attempt to name the auditorium for Vesey. This gained little traction and the auditorium was named instead for the current mayor J. Palmer Gaillard. However, the urge to remember Vesey remained and gained new life via the Reverend Fred D. Dawson. Frederick Douglass Dawson, a Baptist minister and longtime Civil Rights activist, wrote a letter to the Charleston City Council urging them to rename King Street as Martin Luther King Street and to honor Vesey at the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. Dawson requested a plaque inside the auditorium and a marble statue to be placed outside the auditorium. His requests regarding Vesey were forwarded to the Arts and History Commission and the Auditorium Committee. The timing of this letter before City Council could not have been better. It occurred on December 23, 1975, just days after the election of a young new mayor with a strong desire to honor local African-American historical figures.

The Auditorium Committee of the Charleston City Council and Barry Goldstein, the director of the auditorium, addressed the request. By the January 21, 1976, meeting

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127 Ibid.
of the committee Goldstein had come up with a somewhat unique plan for integrating Vesey into the memorial fabric of the auditorium. Goldstein suggested that, rather than a plaque only honoring Vesey, an entire wall of plaques, called the “Charleston Hall of Fame,” should be installed in the auditorium. Committee members saw this as a particularly appropriate suggestion in light of the national bicentennial, and suggested the inclusion of a series of flags as well. Thus, the desire to memorialize Vesey was quickly diluted by Goldstein and the other members of the committee. In fact, the only way in which a reader could discern that this discussion had anything at all to do with Vesey at all was his name in the heading under which this discussion was described.\textsuperscript{128}

It is difficult to ascertain the motivation behind this suggestion at this late date. It is certainly possible that Goldstein and the other members of the committee wished to minimize the impact of a Vesey memorial in the auditorium because of antipathy towards Vesey or the feeling that he did not deserve such an honor. However, it is also quite possible that the suggestion was a good faith attempt at compromise made by someone who foresaw the firestorm of controversy that a Vesey memorial might cause. Whatever the motivation, a letter of support read at the January 27, 1976, meeting of City Council indicates that the public was still interested in the Auditorium Committee installing a Denmark Vesey memorial rather than a “Charleston Hall of Fame.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{128} Minutes of Auditorium Committee, January 27, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
It was three months before the memorialization of Vesey was addressed again. Robert I. Ford, a city councilmember, Auditorium Committee member, and longtime Civil Rights activist, decided to take up the cause. Interestingly, in the March 16, 1976, Auditorium Committee meeting, Ford “brought up the fact that the request that Denmark Vessey [sic] be recognized by the city had not been acted on,” rather than the fact that the “Charleston Hall of Fame” had not seen movement. The committee determined that a picture would be preferable to a statue. After discussion, the Auditorium Committee decided to hold a design competition among local high schools, specifically naming the predominately black East Side C. A. Brown High School. The painting which won the competition would be hung to “begin the Hall of Fame.”

When the Auditorium Committee went before the full City Council during the next week, they couched their proposal strongly in the context of the “Hall of Fame” idea. In fact, it was not until the fourth paragraph of the proposal that Vesey was mentioned at all, when the committee explains that hanging the portrait of Vesey in this “Hall of Fame” was “a way of carrying out” Rev. Dawson’s request. The desire to install a portrait rather than a bust and to have a contest among local high school fine arts departments was reiterated here as well.

The disconnect between the theoretical “Hall of Fame,” which is largely what was discussed in these meetings, and the reality, which presents no clear avenue for how the

131 Ibid.
other members of the so-called “Hall of Fame” were to make their way there, is interesting. It is almost as though two conversations were occurring. On the one hand, the practical work of installing a memorial to one man, Denmark Vesey, on a limited budget was underway. On the other hand, the committee (aside from Ford) almost universally discusses the “Hall of Fame” rather than the Vesey portrait. Whether the committee was truly dedicated to the installation of many other figures in the “Hall of Fame” is unclear. However, it is certainly possible that in couching the Vesey portrait in terms of a “Charleston Hall of Fame,” committee members were attempting to deflect some Vesey’s notoriety.

Whether aided by the “camouflage” of the “Hall of Fame” or not, the installation of the painting proceeded apace and the finished piece was presented for the approval of the Arts and History Commission in July, 1976. Mayor Riley’s presence at this meeting is noteworthy. It was somewhat unusual for the mayor to attend a committee meeting, especially if he did not have anything specific to say to the committee members. It is probable that the mayor’s presence was seen as tacit support for the piece’s approval. The only suggestion made by the Arts and History Commission regarding the painting was to combine the identification and historical information into one plaque.133

The brief interaction of the Arts and History Commission with this painting is somewhat anomalous. For example, in August 1975 the same committee dealt with the installation of a portrait and bust of J. Palmer Gaillard, Jr., in the same auditorium that

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133 Minutes of Commission on Arts and History, July 19, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
Vesey’s portrait was to be hung. The minutes for this discussion span several pages, including detailed conversation regarding the wording of the plaque for the bust and a rendering of its proposed pedestal.\footnote{Minutes of Commission on Arts and History, August 29, 1975, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.}

![Figure 5.2: Rendering of pedestal for J. Palmer Gaillard, Jr., bust](image)

The minutes regarding the painting of Vesey, on the other hand, are one paragraph long and seem to represent the acceptance of a \textit{fait accompli} rather than a real debate about the painting. There are a number of possible and by no means mutually exclusive explanations for the differential treatment of two works of art destined for the same building. It is likely that the bust of Mayor Gaillard was seen as the more important of the two pieces and therefore deserved more attention. It is probable that Mayor
Riley’s presence calmed any possible dissent. It is also important to note that in 1976 the Arts and History Commission was a very new committee, having been established in April 1975. The committee’s roles and responsibilities were still somewhat nebulous in 1976. In September of that year the body debated whether it was within its purview to determine whether art could be put up at all or whether its role was a “purely esthetic” assessment.  Whatever the reason, the painting was approved by the Arts and History Commission and was set to be hung amidst pomp on August 9, 1976.

The painting itself, 40 inches long and 24 inches high, was done in bright acrylics with white impasto swirls of texture.  It was created by Dorothy B. Wright, the art teacher at C. A. Brown High School. Mrs. Wright, whose work primarily focuses on African-American heritage, was paid $175 for the piece. The painting features Vesey with his back turned to the viewer, lecturing a group of African-American followers from behind a pulpit. While the style of the painting is somewhat fanciful—Wright has elected to use a more gestural technique rather than a purely photorealistic approach—the scene is presumably fairly accurate. What little is known of Vesey’s appearance has been dutifully incorporated into the piece. Wright depicts Vesey as a tall, white-haired man with excellent posture. Although the clothing may not be historically accurate, Vesey is recognizably well-dressed, as per his appearance in contemporary descriptions. There is

135 Minutes of Commission on Arts and History, April 17, 1975, and September 30, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
136 Minutes of Commission on Arts and History, July 19, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
no captured record of Vesey’s face. Wright effectively sidesteps this issue by depicting him from behind.

![Figure 5.3: Detail of painting by Dorothy B. Wright](image)

In many ways, however, the painting feels like an incomplete or hollow depiction of a complex and ultimately dark event. Wright’s role as an educator shows in the work, as she sometimes prioritizes the work’s didactic purpose over historical accuracy. For example, it was more important to her to depict Vesey as recognizably well-dressed than it was to select period-appropriate clothing. There is also the choice of Vesey lecturing in the church, from a pulpit, to a well-behaved and receptive audience. The scene feels
fundamentally educational. The congregation is a teacher’s dream, and the attitude of the individuals in the room is eager but peaceful.

It is impossible to know if this sort of scene took place. The A.M.E. Church in the 1820s was in constant conflict with white society, often having to limit worshipping times and even being forbidden to worship without a white monitor in place. The very act of meeting to worship as the people in Wright’s painting are depicted as doing would have been one of defiance and protest. The apparent safety of their meeting place and the congregation’s placid demeanors belie the profound danger of their actions.

It is noteworthy that Wright chose to depict Vesey in a moment such as this rather than actually planning the insurrection. Any large meeting such as this one, especially at a worship space, came with the risk of having spies even if designated monitors were not present and so any dialogue or sermon would have been carefully crafted to avoid raising suspicion.

Wright effectively sidestepped the insurrection’s ugliness and the image imposed by Vesey himself by depicting him engaged in an innocuous and sanitized activity. Rather than dealing with the complexity and negative associations of the man, she imposed 1976 values—education, self-improvement and spirituality—onto a nineteenth-century figure.

The content is not the only reason this painting presents a disconnect between the tragic nature of the 1822 insurrection and its depiction in 1976. The vibrant colors, playfully swirling impasto, and style, which avoids photorealism but retains features such

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as perspective, all work toward making the piece a pleasant and easily interpreted work of art. Wright’s painting is an act of imagination rather than documentation.

Ultimately, however, it is difficult to see the real fault in this. The painting was done in 1976 to commemorate the life of Denmark Vesey but also to meet the needs of contemporary Charlestonians. It was a painful and tumultuous time in terms of race relations in Charleston, with changing attitudes and bitterness. It may be that Wright, particularly with her own unique insight as an educator, saw that what was truly needed was not a complex depiction of a potentially violent man but a positive reminder of the ways in which African-American Charlestonians had been showing agency for hundreds of years. This painting is not just about Denmark Vesey, it is about pride of community and hopefulness.

The painting and its accompanying plaque were installed on August 9, 1976. The opening ceremony leaned heavily on religious sources, with nine out of fourteen speakers hailing from various churches. The audience sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

139 Program for Dedication Ceremony in Honor of Denmark Vesey, in Denmark Vesey vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston.

140 Denmark Vesey Portrait vertical file, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.

Mayor Riley spoke of Martin Luther King, Jr., and described Vesey as “…a hero, who gave his life so that man may be free.” He explained away Vesey’s threat of profound violence: “When he was caught, they had to make a case. And the case had to be made strong so that he would be put away. And that’s what happened.” In general, the
remarks were designed to build connections between blacks and whites, and tended to completely avoid the issue of violence altogether.

Image 5.4: Dorothy B. Wright and Joe Riley with the portrait at its unveiling. Image by Richard Burbage and courtesy of The Post and Courier.

The backlash against the unveiling was immediate and intense. The Evening Post, the evening edition of the News and Courier, featured a lengthy article that very night by staff writer Jack Leland. This article was clearly an opinion piece, though it was not presented as an editorial. It was peppered with misinformation designed to smear Vesey, and bordered on offensive as it glibly punned about “hanging” Denmark Vesey twice in the first line. Leland stated that the court trying Vesey “was… legitimate, its jurists were eminently qualified judges, its procedures were just under the state’s code of
the time and the evidence was overwhelmingly in favor of a guilty finding.”\textsuperscript{141} In fact, there had been concerns regarding the validity of the court proceedings even in 1822, most notably from Supreme Court Justice William Johnson.\textsuperscript{142} Leland repeatedly presents other fallacious arguments as facts to bolster his stance, even saying that Vesey “had a reputation of being brutally unkind to … the slaves he owned.”\textsuperscript{143} The only evidence there is regarding Vesey owning a slave is when he attempted to purchase one of his wives, Beck as well as his children with her in an attempt to free them.\textsuperscript{144}

Another article appeared in the \textit{News and Courier} on August 11. This one fell under the guise of an attempt to “cool” the inflamed passions of readers but instead served only to fan the flames. This article stated that “The News and Courier … does not [welcome heat]” with regard to race relations, and that “speeches designed to stir up one part of town against another need to be offset by cool words from responsible sources.”\textsuperscript{145} \textit{The News and Courier} then printed those very words it decries, in the form of the remarks of Jesse Taylor, who gave a highly impassioned speech quite out of keeping with the tenor of the rest of the unveiling ceremony on the 9th.

Taylor put forth an isolationist argument, stating that African-American people needed to rise up against whites rather than celebrate history with them. In fact, Taylor decried the event altogether: “If you study Denmark Vesey…we should sit and be

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\item \textsuperscript{141} Jack Leland, “Portrait of a Man: Denmark Vesey,” \textit{Charleston Evening Post} (Charleston, SC), August 9, 1976.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 178.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Jack Leland, “Portrait of a Man: Denmark Vesey.”
\item \textsuperscript{144} Douglas R. Egerton, \textit{He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey}, 83.
\end{itemize}
ashamed of ourselves for feeling so good and feeling because of a portrait, we’ve come so far.” Taylor directed some of his disgust towards the hopeful and bridge-building tenor of the event and the painting itself, a nuance which was ignored as public anger began to build towards the painting. In short, the News and Courier chose to print the one inflammatory speech given on a day filled with words of friendship and hope.

News and Courier editor Frank Gilbreth, Jr., brought the issue to a head on August 13 when he wrote about the painting in his popular column, “Doing the Charleston.” Writing under the nom de plume Ashley Cooper, Gilbreth said, “It is beginning to look to many of us as if some black extremists are more interested now in showing that they wield power—and in demonstrating to whites that they will not be denied—than they are in promoting racial equality and harmony.” Not all Charlestonians agreed with Gilbreth. He received enough complaints that he had to (albeit begrudgingly) write an explanatory column the next week and the official copy of the article stored at the City of Charleston Records Management Division has the words “shame on you” scrawled across the top of it in cursive.

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146 Ibid.
By August 22, the controversy had made the statewide news. An article in The State, a newspaper published in Columbia, South Carolina, presents an unbiased report on the proceedings, including both portions of Gilbreth’s article and statements made by Riley at the unveiling. However, the controversy continued to boil in Charleston, and the painting along with its accompanying plaque was stolen from the Gaillard Auditorium on September 17, 1976. The News and Courier notice regarding the theft ran on page 1-C and was less than one third the length of Leland’s article on the day of the unveiling.

The theft prompted a police investigation as well as the offer of a $200 reward. Additionally, Mayor Riley announced that, should the painting not be returned, he would simple commission a new one. The painting was returned unharmed shortly thereafter.

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150 Bobby Isaac, “Vesey Painting Missing From Auditorium”.
It was left outside the Gaillard Auditorium and an anonymous tip was placed with the
*News and Courier*. ¹⁵¹

The Auditorium Committee discussed where best to place the painting “so that it
will not be stolen again” on October 5, 1976. The committee decided to leave the
painting in roughly the same location, although it was rehung higher on the wall to make
access more difficult. ¹⁵² Robert Ford, who agitated to install the painting, and the
alternative press, such as *The Chronicle*, a Charleston newspaper that serves the African-
American community, placed the blame for the theft on the one-sided coverage of the
daily news. ¹⁵³

Although the painting was rehung and remained safely in place for the next thirty
years, the plaque which accompanied the painting was never returned or replaced.

¹⁵² Minutes of Auditorium Committee, October 5, 1976, accessed at City of Charleston Records
Management Division Office.
Wright lamented this fact, perhaps because she never designed the painting to be a stand-alone piece. Indeed, without the contextual information provided by the original plaque, the painting could easily depict one of any number of historical figures. While those who knew of the piece and who knew about Vesey were aware that it depicted him, visitors to the auditorium often had no idea what they were looking at. Although the painting was returned and rehung, it was also in essence defanged. The strong words which accompanied it were removed. While it remained a memorial touchstone for those who wished it to be, the painting ceased to serve as a means to educate those who did not understand the man and the events it commemorated.

154 Dottie Ashley, “Dorothy Wright: Artist Honors the Champions of Civil Rights,” The Post and Courier (Charleston, SC), September 27, 1997.
Much of the importance of a public memorial lies in its prominence of place. A public memorial is a symbolic object existing in a public place. It is assumed by those who install such a memorial that the public will be forced to have a certain amount of contact with it whether they choose to or not. Often a public memorial such as a statue is rendered in a very forthright and legible way so that its meaning can be understood at a glance. Text is added to further communicate the memorial’s meaning, prevent misinterpretation, and to educate the viewer. Without its textual context, the painting in the Gaillard became avoidable, and lost a significant amount of its power to educate.

Despite these limitations, the painting proved to have staying power and became an important touchstone for those interested in Denmark Vesey in Charleston. It has been reproduced numerous times, is mentioned in almost every article regarding Vesey’s impact on the fabric of Charleston, and has made the national news at least twice since the year 2000. The City of Charleston commissioned Wright to paint another portrait for them in 1997, this time of Septima Clark, an important figure in the Civil Rights movement. Wright earned $7,000 for the painting, forty times what she earned for the painting of Vesey.

Today, significantly, the future of the painting is once again unclear. The Gaillard Auditorium is being completely rebuilt and it remains unknown whether the painting will be rehung in the new auditorium. It currently sits in storage in an office along with

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156 City Council Minutes, Regular Meeting, August 19, 1997, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
artifacts owned by the Slave Mart Museum. Failure to replace it in the new Gaillard Auditorium would be a grave mistake. Additionally, the long-held error of not replacing the plaque that accompanies the painting should be rectified. While the inclusion of the original explanatory plaque would help make the painting a more effective didactic tool, it is highly unlikely that this plaque could ever be located. A replacement plaque, as well as one that describes the painting’s rich history, would be a great benefit to viewers. This painting has been a beloved touchstone for those interested in Denmark Vesey and his life and history in Charleston. It is used by educators wishing to teach children about Vesey. It is a useful object that fills a very real need in the community.
Most importantly, it has become in and of itself an important part of the history of Charleston. The Civil Rights era and its concomitant struggles, failures, and successes is a part of Charleston history that has surprisingly few physical manifestations. Too often the sites of these struggles have been altered or destroyed, due sometimes to ignorance of their importance and oftentimes to outright bigotry. For example, the famous lunch
counter of the Kress Building, the site of the first integration sit-in in Charleston, was removed in the 1990s. It is now an H&M clothing store.\textsuperscript{157} It is the responsibility of preservationists to ensure that the memories of this pivotal era be saved even if they have not yet reached the fifty-year mark. This painting may only be one small part of this fabric, but it is important to not become complacent about small things simply because they are small. Leaving this painting as it is in storage, facing away from even the one person who occupies the office it is in, is an utter waste.

Artist Ronald Jones placed a memorial sculpture dedicated to Denmark Vesey in the alcove beneath the main stairs of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1991. The sculpture is somewhat hidden away beneath the stairs. It also is not immediately recognizable as a tribute to Vesey. Visitors must take the time to read the inscription beneath it in order to make the connection. The path leading to the
installation of this memorial to Vesey is unique in that the sculpture was originally one component of a larger, city-wide visual art exhibition associated with the Spoleto Festival named *Places with a Past* that was intended to be temporary. Thus, the route to the installation of this piece was one which followed a rather rarified, avant garde approach rather than the broad-based populist approach that led to the hanging of Dorothy Wright’s painting in the Gaillard, for example.

The path to this exhibition began in 1988, when Middleton Place, a local historic plantation, suggested that the Spoleto Arts Festival use the grounds of Middleton as a location for a wide-ranging sculptural installation. The Spoleto Arts Festival had by this time been operating annually in Charleston for over a decade. The festival was instituted by a composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, and began with a focus on music and the performing arts. Menotti organized the festival in conjunction with the *Festival dei Due Mondi* in Spoleto, Italy. However, by 1989 the organizers of the Spoleto Festival felt that the time was ripe to branch out into the visual arts and were keen to set up an installation on Middleton’s grounds for the 1990 event.

This plan was scuttled by the unexpected devastation of Hurricane Hugo in September of 1989 which caused a great deal of damage to the Charleston area and the grounds of Middleton Place in particular. Though tragic, this event actually proved to be fortuitous for the planned art installation. The damage to Middleton Place forced the

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159 Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival*, 8; Interview with Nigel Redden and Mary Jane Jacob (draft), 1991 Visual Arts, The Kreisberg Group, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston. (Note: while the official name for this archive contains the phrase “1956-1989,” this is not the case.)
organizers of the Spoleto Festival to shift the location of the exhibition from the ornamental grounds of a plantation to the whole city of Charleston. This ultimately provided much richer cultural fodder for the artists involved and resulted in a show which dealt with issues that might not otherwise have been so fully addressed, race and gender among them.

The time was ripe for a show with this sort of focus. During the late 1980s and early 1990s were what were later called the “culture wars” were in full swing. As the countercultural movements of the 1960s faded, the culture wars pitted socially conservative Americans, fresh with indignation, against a newly articulate progressive group.\(^{160}\) While the two groups clashed over issues such as abortion and affirmative action, a movement to critically reexamine the nation’s history also emerged. People began to analyze history, focusing more closely on how the biases of historians shaped collective historical understandings. A concomitant interest in the “other,” often presented in the form of queer studies, black studies, or women’s studies, also helped draw the focus of many liberal thinkers towards the underrepresented or repressed figures in history.\(^{161}\)

*Places with a Past* drew strongly from this growing awareness, seeking to position itself on the forefront of social art. In describing the exhibition to an art historian, curator Mary Jane Jacob stated, “Among the timely issues were those of

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\(^{161}\) James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America*, 222-239.
gender, race, and cultural identity, considerations of difference, the notion of the colonizer-colonized paradigm, ideas of domination and exploitation. These are subjects much in the vanguard of criticism and art-making.”¹⁶² The selection of Mary Jane Jacob as a curator was telling. Mary Jane Jacob began curating exhibits with a focus on examining underrepresented areas of art as early as the mid-1970s, with exhibits such as “Kick Out the Jams: Detroit’s Cass Corridor 1963-1977,” an exhibit which focused on a countercultural avant-garde art scene that grew up around Wayne State University.¹⁶³

By 1991, Jacob had quit her job as chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and was pursuing a career as an independent curator of ambitious exhibits which explored cultural issues. Jacob curated a three-year project in Chicago, called “Culture in Action,” which also started in 1991. This collaborative project spanned the city and was devoted to “the pressing social and political issues of the time, such as AIDS, homelessness, racism, and illiteracy.”¹⁶⁴ Jacob’s agenda as a curator was clear, and the organizers of the Spoleto Festival were aware of the direction the exhibition would likely take should they hire her.

In fact, there was significant disagreement within the upper echelons of Spoleto Festival whether a potentially controversial exhibit should occur at all. Spoleto founder Gian Carlo Menotti strongly opposed the exhibition, going so far as to threaten his

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¹⁶² Mary Jane Jacob quoted in Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival, 17.
resignation and speak out against the exhibition in the papers. In the storm of controversy that ensued, General Manager Nigel Redden was forced to resign after the 1991 festival.

Issues of personal taste were not all that was at stake. An exhibition such as *Places with a Past* was ambitious in scope, and was a considerable financial and logistical risk, particularly before the festival received significant funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Furthermore, there were concerns regarding allowing artists to have full reign in the wake of obscenity scandals, such as those surrounding the Robert Mapplethorpe photographic exhibit in Washington, D.C.

Despite these misgivings, the Board of Directors, led by Spoleto U.S.A. General Manager Nigel Redden, convinced Menotti that the show should go forward. The exhibit was considered to be the first of its kind to take place in the United States, although European precedents include a 1962 exhibit in Spoleto, Italy, and Sculpture Projects Münster, in Germany. Planning the exhibit began with visits from possible

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168 *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival*, exhibition information sheet, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
170 Ibid.
171 Jens Hoffmann, 14; Terry Ann R. Neff, ed., 7.
artists in January, 1990.\textsuperscript{172} Many of the artists selected, such as Cindy Sherman, David Hammons, and Liz Major were well-known and engaged often with alternative histories. The exhibition received national recognition, with articles in the New York Times and a review in The Burlington Magazine.\textsuperscript{173} It has been featured in at least two retrospective studies of influential exhibitions in the United States.\textsuperscript{174}

The show lasted from May 24 to August 4, 1991, and featured seventeen exhibit sites designed by nineteen artists.\textsuperscript{175} Some of these locations had on-site monitors during business hours while others did not. The Jones sculpture did not have a monitor, presumably because the Emanuel A.M.E. Church was an occupied building already and the sculpture was not as fragile as some of the more ephemeral installations.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
Figure 6.2: Map showing locations of installations for *Places with a Past*
From the very beginning, the show dealt with issues relating to slavery and the African-American experience in Charleston. In an interview before the 1991 festival opened, Jacob stated:

Because none of the artists have picked up on the usual historic figures, the exhibition will make room for others to speak. Some of the voices that will come through are those of the slave revolt leader Denmark Vesey (in Ronald Jones’s sculpture), African-Americans (in Houston Conwill’s diagrammatic mapping and Lorna Simpson’s photo and audio installation), and black and white women (in Ann Hamilton’s house environment and Elizabeth Newman’s attic nursery devoted to nannies and the white children they cared for.)

In fact, some raised concerns that the exhibition had too narrow a focus. For example, Alison Harwood, a design professional affiliated with both *Vogue* magazine and the Historic Charleston Foundation, urged “focus diversity” for the artists rather than an overwhelming emphasis on slavery. Despite this, the show retained a conscious focus on highlighting underrepresented aspects of Charleston’s history. Jacob took great pride in the caliber and diversity of the artists selected for the exhibition.

Ronald Jones was one of the artists who contributed to *Places with a Past*. In 1991, Jones was already a well-known artist based in New York. Jones describes himself as a “multi-disciplinarian” and in 1991 was working both as a visual artist and a professor. Although Jones’s work did not have a readily discernible style, it almost always was conceptual and typically incorporated an element of political or social

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177 Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival*, 17.
178 Ronald Jones Curriculum Vitae, Box 5-22, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
commentary that required a level of explanation to understand: “a work by Ronald Jones can be interpreted or ‘decoded’ only be reference to other source materials.”

For example, his 1989 exhibit at Metro Pictures in New York featured a series of wood tables in a gallery space. While these tables were handsome, well-made, sculptural items on their own, understanding the exhibition required an explanation. The tables were actually a series of designs for the three-party peace talks that were meant to occur between the North and South Vietnam and the United States in the 1969 Paris peace talks. The design of these tables was used by the attendees as an excuse to avoid commencing the talks for months. Thus, Jones makes political commentary via the use of aesthetically pleasing objects in a way which is not immediately apparent.

This use of innocuous or pleasing objects, well-crafted and sumptuous materials, and underlying political or social commentary was the norm for Jones in the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to the theme of the 1969 Paris peace talks, Jones dealt with subjects such as the use of the Columbushaus, a building designed by Erich Mendelsohn, by the German S.S. during World War II, and the 1954 Hague Convention, which concerned the treatment of cultural sites. Jones sought to explore a variety of political themes.

However, his work was often criticized as being too subtle or lofty to truly connect with the average viewer. The lack of obvious connection between the objects

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181 Ibid.
182 The Columbushaus was designed by a Jewish architect in the spirit of the Bauhaus and therefore many artists consider its use by the Nazis during the Second World War to be particularly egregious. G. Roger Denson, “Ronald Jones,” Artscribe, (March/April, 1989), 79-80; Glenn Harper, “Ronald Jones,” Art Forum, 15:2 (October, 1986), 87-88.
created and the actual meanings behind them could be seen as too clever. The pieces lacked immediacy, as the emotion behind them was obscured by the veil of obscure symbolism. Jones was often seen as an intellectual elite struggling to connect. It is telling that Peter Halley uses the word “flaneur” to describe him. Even more interesting is the use of the word “hermetic” to negatively describe Jones’s work in two separate articles published in the late 1980s. According to Eleanor Heartney, “Jones’s work retains a hermetic quality that still smacks too strongly of the Ivory Tower.”

Whether this academic, distanced quality was something which Jones sought to alter in his work for the Spoleto Festival is not known. However, his early and enthusiastic involvement in the 1991 Spoleto project seems to indicate at least a very strong desire to be a full participant “in the trenches,” rather than simply a designer who works from afar. Jones was one of the first artists who signed on for the project, and spent a good deal of time in the Charleston area. He even served as a local liaison for some of the other artists. He was very interested in the outreach and education portions of the exhibition and gave lectures at the Gibbes Museum of Art and the College of Charleston.

In fact, Jones’s level of early involvement may have been the cause of some concern on the part of the exhibition organizers. Jones came into the project early and

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183 Peter Halley, “Ronald Jones, Marcel Duchamp, and the New South.”
185 Eleanor Heartney, “Ronald Jones at Metro Pictures.”
186 Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival, 8.
187 Mary Jane Jacob to Art Loop, April 9, 1991, General Correspondence, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
188 Mary Jane Jacob to John H. Paull, September 5, 1990, General Correspondence, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
with a strong sense of what he wished to accomplish. Bothered by the lack of recognition that Vesey had received in Charleston, Jones knew from the very beginning that he wanted to memorialize Vesey in some way. He also had placed the Emanuel A.M.E. Church at the top of his shortlist of potential locations before his design was even finalized.

His timetable for design and installation of the piece was similarly accelerated as compared to many of the other artists involved in the exhibition. He had determined what he wished to do by the spring of 1990 and work began on the statue in Italy as early as May 1990, though the exhibition was not scheduled to open until May 1991. Although this meant that he was well-organized and easy to manage, it also meant that his work did not benefit from the collaborative aspects of staging a group exhibition. In a fax to Nigel Redden, Mary Jane Jacob described the ongoing fabrication of Jones’s statue in Italy as a “fait accompli problem,” indicating that perhaps his approach was not precisely what she had envisioned for the exhibition.

Furthermore, Jones was interested in creating a permanent piece of art rather than a temporary one. This conflicted with the vision of Mary Jane Jacob for *Places with a Past*. Jacob saw the exhibition as a group of temporary installations, and even discussed how this type of art differed from permanent art. In an interview, she stated that she felt the installations in *Places with a Past*, “have to be temporary…being temporary allows

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189 Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival*, 166.
190 Spoleto Festival 1991 Exhibition, Timetable for Project Proposed by Ronald Jones, General Correspondence, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
191 Mary Jane Jacob to Nigel Redden, September 7, 1990, General Correspondence, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
artists to take more risks,” and that “‘Places with a Past’ is a vehicle for discussion, not for aestheticizing the Charleston urban landscape." However, Jones was interested in creating a lasting memorial to Vesey rather than a temporary one, and the idea of the sculpture remaining after the exhibition ended was discussed with the members of the Emanuel A.M.E Church from the very beginning of negotiations. In many ways Jones’s work was a piece that was incorporated into the exhibition rather than a piece that was designed as a component of the exhibition.

Jones knew early on in the process of designing his piece that a good relationship with the reverend and congregation of Emanuel A.M.E. Church would be key to his success. Not only was the church his first choice for locating the sculpture, the church was also considered a very influential force in the African-American community in Charleston. The Emanuel A.M.E. Church is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal congregation in the Deep South, and is able to trace its roots back to the days of Denmark Vesey himself, beginning in 1817. The congregation was forced to cease meeting in 1822 following Vesey’s attempted insurrection, but began meeting again after slavery was abolished in 1865. When the A.M.E. Church was reorganized in Charleston, Emanuel was the first congregation to build a church, located on the Calhoun Street site. The current Gothic Revival structure is on the National Register of Historic Places and

192 Interview with Nigel Redden and Mary Jane Jacob, 1991 Visual Arts, The Kreisberg Group, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
193 Mary Jane Jacob to John Gillison, May 3, 1990, General Correspondence, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
194 “History of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church,” 110 Calhoun Street file, City of Charleston Board of Architectural Review Office.
dates from 1891, although it replaced an earlier building in the same location which was destroyed by a major earthquake occurring in 1886.  

The Emanuel A.M.E. Church felt a strong affiliation with Denmark Vesey during the era in which Jones was working. Vesey is discussed in the historical information provided in a church-produced brochure, and the information accompanying a proposal to S.C. Department of Archives and History Continuation Form, Emanuel A.M.E. Church vertical file, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library.

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195 S.C. Department of Archives and History Continuation Form, Emanuel A.M.E. Church vertical file, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library.
the Board of Architectural Review prominently features Vesey. Vesey was seen as an important part of the rich early heritage of the Emanuel A.M.E. Church.

However, Jones still had to work to convince the parishioners and reverend of Emanuel A.M.E. to allow him to place the statue in the alcove. While the records regarding this decision could not be located, some familiar with the church in the early 1990s recall that there was a great deal of discussion regarding the placement of the statue. The entire congregation was familiarized with Jones’s work as well as that of George Bernard, the photographer upon whose work the sculpture is based. Jones made himself available to answer questions from the congregation, and promoted his lectures to interested church goers.

In the end, the strong support of Reverend John Gillison helped sway more reluctant congregants and ultimately resulted in the approval of the project by church elders. Gillison, a native South Carolinian, had been involved with the A.M.E. Church since he was a child and was a well-respected leader. The approval process within the congregation took at least two months. Official approval was provided by June 1990.

\[196\] Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church brochure, Emanuel A.M.E. Church vertical file, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Library; “History of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church,” 110 Calhoun Street file, City of Charleston Board of Architectural Review Office.  
\[197\] Mary Jane Jacob to John Gillison, May 3, 1990, General Correspondence, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.  
\[198\] Mary Jane Jacob to Nigel Redden, October 25, 1990, General Correspondence, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.  
\[199\] Mary Jane Jacob to John Gillison, May 3, 1990, General Correspondence, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.  
\[200\] “Emanuel’s Pastor has Preaching in Blood,” This Week, News and Courier (Charleston, SC), January 19, 1989.  
\[201\] Nigel Redden to John Gillison, June 25, 1990, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
Because the Emanuel A.M.E. Church was a prominent site on Calhoun Street in Mazyck-Wraggborough in Charleston, the approval of the congregation was only the first step towards the installation of the sculpture. In Charleston, alterations to these sorts of buildings must be approved by the Board of Architectural Review (BAR), a city commission composed of local architects and other preservation-minded professionals. The installation of the sculpture was the sort of alteration to a historic structure that could easily have been blocked by the BAR. First of all, while the sculpture is nestled within the alcove, the space where it sits is visible from the public right of way, a location where the BAR is often more particular about potential alterations. Secondly, the installation of the sculpture required the disruption of some of the fabric of the building, as a portion of the wall where the sculpture was placed had to be removed. Despite concerns, the installation of the statue passed the BAR easily by way of a “Staff Review.” The “Staff Review” is a non-public process in which a City Preservation Officer approves or disapproves a project and reports this to the BAR.

While the rationale behind a “Staff Review” approval is not typically provided in public records, it is likely that a few factors made the approval of the sculpture an easy decision. The destruction of historic building fabric was no doubt of concern. However, the area in which the sculpture was to be placed was quite small and had already been altered. The walls that enclose the space under the stairs leading to the main entrance on the church’s second floor were covered in stucco in the 1949-1951.202

202“Abridged History,” Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church brochure, Emanuel A.M.E. Church vertical file, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Library.
Secondly, the statue group was presented to the BAR as a temporary installation. In some ways, this was a bit of a contrivance. While the entire *Places with a Past* exhibition was intended to be temporary, Jones wanted his sculpture to be permanent from the very beginning. However, the initial proposal to the BAR was for a temporary sculpture. Only later did Reverend Gillison make a second proposal to install the sculpture permanently. It is possible that the sculpture’s BAR approval was assisted by the application of the board’s more lax standards for a temporary installation despite the fact that the sculpture was really intended to be permanent.

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The sculpture that Jones installed in the alcove shows what appear to be four young boys, leaning peacefully on a ledge and rendered photorealistically in black marble. The sculpture is set into the wall of the alcove, and the walls of the space in which it sits are finished in a somewhat variegated pink marble. A large plaque is placed on the wall beneath the sculpture, and it contains an explanation for the piece which doubles as the installation’s long title. If one does not read this plaque, there is little chance that one would ever associate the statues of the boys with Vesey.

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What Jones is actually depicting in the statue is a fairly true recreation of a stereograph in the collection of the Gibbes Museum in Charleston taken of two young boys by George Bernard in 1874 or 1875. Bernard, General Sherman’s campaign photographer, came to Charleston after the end of the Civil War with a desire to use his skills as a photographer to illuminate the plight of newly freed African-Americans. In the stereograph, entitled “South Carolina Cherubs, Charleston,” Bernard posed the two boys in the same manner as the iconic cherubs in the “Sistine Madonna,” painted by Raphael in 1512. The gesture was a symbolic one, meant to link the sacrifice of Christ to the sacrifices of African-Americans. Jones, famous for his love of both the iconic symbol and the clever metaphor, sought to extend the work’s symbolic meaning through one more iteration, “including the continuing challenge for freedom of all peoples.” In creating a copy of a copy of a well-known and symbolic work, Jones wished to expand the meaning of the symbol while simultaneously retaining the meanings gained in the two earlier iterations.

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206 Descriptions of Art Installations, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston; Mary Jane Jacob to John Brumgardt, August 21, 1990, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
208 Descriptions of Art Installations, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
209 Ronald Jones, Untitled piece description, Box 5-20, Spoleto Festival U.S.A. Archives, 1956-1989, Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.
Figure 6.5: Cherubs in Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, Bernard’s “South Carolina Cherubs, Charleston,” and Jones’s sculpture. Center image courtesy of the New York Public Library.
Whether the piece was ultimately successful in this regard is unclear. It seems that, through the multiple layers of interpretation of Raphael’s iconic work, the original associative meanings have become too vaguely referenced to remain legible. The symbolic value of the cherubs in Raphael’s original work is readily discernible to those familiar with symbol in religious art, particularly in the overall context of the work. Furthermore, the angels themselves are recognizably famous, and have been reproduced independently of the context of the full painting on many occasions and on objects ranging from canvas prints to jewelry.²¹⁰

When Bernard’s stereograph was viewed properly, it is likely that a contemporary viewer would have understood that he was referencing Raphael’s work, particularly if one knew the title of Bernard’s work. However, Jones’s reference to Bernard in 1991 is a fairly obscure one. Few people seeing the sculpture would have been familiar with Bernard’s stereograph. The issue is compounded by Jones’s literal recreation of the stereograph, a type of image which incorporates two very similar photographs. These two photographs are viewed simultaneously, one through each eye, and create an image which appears three-dimensional. Jones’s sculpture exactly copies the stereograph, thus showing what appear to be four boys instead of two. It is highly unlikely that anyone viewing Jones’s statue of four boys would make the connection to the work of either Bernard or Raphael without being explicitly told of the reference. While this is in keeping with the work of Jones, it places the sculpture firmly in the realm of subtle fine art rather than an easily read object.

²¹⁰ Terry Ann R. Neff, ed. Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival, 168.
The lengthy title of the sculpture, as placed on a large plaque beneath it, serves to elucidate the subject. It reads:

RONALD JONES
UNTITLED (THIS REPRESENTATION OF GEORGE N. BARNARD’S STEREOGRAPH SOUTH CAROLINA CHERUBS (AFTER RAPHAEL), CHARLESTON, S.C., C.A. 1874-1875, IS A REMEMBRANCE OF DENMARK VESEY’S RIGHTEOUS REBELLION. VESEY, A FREED BLACK MAN, PLANNED THE LIBERATION OF CHARLESTON’S SLAVES AT THE HAMPSTEAD CONGREGATION OF THE EMANUEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN 1822. AND THOUGH THE INSURRECTION WAS PUT DOWN ONLY HOURS BEFORE IT WAS TO UNFOLD ACROSS THE CITY, VESEY’S SPIRIT OF REVOLT AGAINST INJUSTICE WAS AN EXPRESSION OF THE PROMISE OF CIVIL RIGHTS IN A FREE SOCIETY.)
REVEREND J.H. GILLISON, PASTOR
Thus, the sculpture follows the rubric set by other works by Jones during the early 1990s. It is difficult to understand without its explanation, and when viewed superficially simply appears to be an aesthetically pleasing sculpture of four boys against a backdrop of pink marble. While the piece is successful as a work of art, it perhaps is too strongly grounded in the aesthetic and conceptual understandings of Jones to be a very good memorial. It certainly does not communicate readily with passersby, in part due to its location, in part due to its complex symbolism, and in part due to the subtlety of a lengthy explanatory plaque carved out of black marble. It fits more readily into the body of Jones’s other work than it does in the memorial canon.

It makes sense that the impact of the piece has primarily been as a work of art rather than as a tool for remembering Denmark Vesey. The exhibition as a whole was well-received, garnering national attention. While Jones’s sculpture was not considered to be a standout feature of the exhibition, it was never described as a failed installation, unlike some other pieces, and it has been used as an image for both articles and book chapters about the exhibition.\footnote{Jeffery Day, “One of a Kind Controversial Art Exhibit Noteworthy for its Content,” \textit{The State} (Columbia, SC), June 9, 1991; Jens Hoffmann, \textit{Show Time}, 27.} This may in part also be a matter of convenience. Jones’s work was both ready to photograph before many of the other pieces were and is one of only two installations that remain standing. Images of the sculpture have also been used at times in articles regarding Vesey, though not with the same regularity as the painting by Dorothy Wright or even the contested Vesey House on Bull Street.\footnote{Stephanie Barna, “A Dark History Comes to Light,” \textit{City Paper} (Charleston, SC), September 8, 1999.}
The sculpture is now for the most part ignored. A recent article regarding David Hammons’ contribution to *Places with a Past* incorrectly states that “Hammons’ billboard, flag, and half-home are the last standing exhibit pieces after 21 years.” A church source stated that people simply just do not think much about the sculpture anymore. It seems that an overreliance on subtly clever references has rendered this sculpture a beautiful yet mostly ineffectual memorial.

Jones’s sculpture may not be as effective a part of the Vesey memorial fabric as Dorothy Wright’s painting in the Gaillard is, but it is still important to make sure it remains preserved. In addition to being one of a very few memorials for Vesey in Charleston, it is one of only two remaining components of an art installation that is considered to be one of the most influential city-wide exhibitions in the United States. Luckily, the sculpture in the alcove of the Emanuel A.M.E. Church is not under any threat. It is a respected if mostly ignored part of the church fabric and is well-kept and maintained.

Objects such as this pose a unique challenge. It can sometimes be difficult to determine whether efforts should be taken to promote their use as a larger component of the commemorative fabric. In this instance, the desire is to increase the visibility of any memorialization of Vesey, since so few such memorials exist. However, the reasons why the sculpture alcove is not a popular memorial now are intrinsic and cannot be rectified. The sculpture simply does not have the immediacy of association that the house on Bull

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Street, the painting in the Gaillard Auditorium, or the monument in Hampton Park do. The loss of interest in this sculpture occurred organically and would likely occur again even if efforts to renew interest in it were undertaken. While it is important to ensure that it remains in good repair, the efforts of preservationists interested in the memorialization of Vesey are better directed elsewhere.
CHAPTER SEVEN

DENMARK VESEY MONUMENT IN HAMPTON PARK

Figure 7.1: Denmark Vesey Monument by Ed Dwight
On February 15, 2014, a group of influential people including Mayor Joe Riley, professors from the College of Charleston, and pastors unveiled a monumentally-sized bronze sculpture of Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina. It was the culmination of over fifteen years of effort. This may seem to be an unusually long period of time. However, it reflects a number of factors including financial constraints, conflict within the community, and the slow pace of bureaucracy.

This lengthy time frame was both a positive and negative factor in the development of the monument. As racially-based opposition to the statue posed a number of roadblocks to its installation, the process itself can be seen as proof that race relations in Charleston remain complex even in a time that many wish to believe is beyond the reach of overt racism. However, the lengthy process also resulted in the involvement of a greater and more diverse proportion of the community than would otherwise have occurred. In effect, the statue gained a groundswell of fans in disparate arenas for almost two decades. Its final unveiling seemed more like the return of a well-known local friend than the introduction of a new hero.

The process leading to the installation of a statue to commemorate Denmark Vesey in Charleston dates back to 1996. The concept was the brainchild of Curtis Franks and Henry Darby.²¹⁴ Initially the statue was little more than a passing idea, but the men decided to form a committee devoted to actually making the idea into a reality. They began holding regular meetings at the College of Charleston’s Avery Research Center, an

²¹⁴ Barney Blakeney, ”Vesey Monument Unveiled as First to Honor an African American in the Lowcountry,” The Charleston Chronicle (Charleston, SC), February 19, 2014.
African-American heritage research facility located in the building of the former Avery Normal Institute, a famous school for African-American children dating from the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{215} Their process during these years would set the tone for the entire project. They worked slowly but steadily, often seeing little progress but continuing nonetheless.

Relatively early in the process they gained a supporter in the form of Mayor Joe Riley. That Riley would be interested in such a statue should come as no surprise. Riley was the same man who worked to install a painting of Vesey in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium twenty years earlier. When racial turmoil resulted in the theft of the painting, Riley stated that he would simply commission another copy of the painting if the original was not returned.\textsuperscript{216} In short, Riley was no stranger to the potentially contentious issue of commemorating Vesey, but remained interested in seeing Vesey recognized in Charleston.

Another early supporter was Ellen Dressler Moryl, then-Director of the Office of Cultural Affairs for the City of Charleston.\textsuperscript{217} Dressler Moryl saw herself as more of a facilitator of the arts in Charleston than an active participant, and worked to assist a number of small arts organizations and projects such as the installation of the statue.


throughout her career with the Office of Cultural Affairs.\textsuperscript{218} Thus, Dressler Moryl was eager to assist with the project without making value judgments regarding its potentially divisive nature. However, Dressler Moryl was also a supporter of African-American heritage initiatives in Charleston, having founded the MOJA Festival, an annual African-American and Caribbean arts and heritage event.\textsuperscript{219} Dressler Moryl proved to be particularly important because she provided the group with access to early funding opportunities from the National Endowment for the Arts.\textsuperscript{220}

Convincing Dressler Moryl to sign on and gaining the support of the mayor proved to be the easiest steps of the process, and had been achieved by 1998. However, the group, which christened itself the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee, still had a great deal of work left to do. A long-running concern was getting the approval of the City of Charleston to build the statue in the first place.

In Charleston, the installation of new monuments on public property involves following a complicated and at times ambiguous procedure. The net result of this is that many individuals have a say in whether a monument is built at all, and many opinions are considered when it comes to factors such as the appearance of a statue and the content of any words that might appear on it.

This was not always the case. Up until the early 1980s decisions regarding the installation of new public art were made on an ad hoc basis, typically by Mayor Riley and

\textsuperscript{218} Erica Jackson Curran, “Ellen Dressler Moryl Has Been a Driving Force on Charleston’s Art Scene.”
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220} Curtis J. Franks, interview with Daron Calhoun and Deborah Wright, May 5, 2014, partially published in “Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston!” \textit{Avery Messenger}, Summer 2014.
Steve Livingston, the Director of Parks for the City of Charleston. In 1980 Riley created a body, the Design Review Committee, to both lighten the load on Riley and Livingston and help standardize the process. The Design Review Committee was comprised of the directors of a number of relevant departments including Planning, Cultural Affairs, Public Service, and Parks. Its decision making process was not available for public review or comment.

While this body effectively managed the decisions regarding new commemorative art in Charleston for a number of years, the situation became increasingly complicated in the 1990s, a period which saw a large increase in the number of proposed memorials in Charleston. Some of these memorials, such as the Holocaust Memorial, were well-received by critics and locals. However, Riley remained somewhat wary about installing an overabundance of commemorative pieces. In an effort to make the approval process more robust, transparent, and to include elements of stylistic and historical factual assessment, Riley initiated a new policy regarding monuments and reorganized the Commission on Arts and History.

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221 Minutes of Commission on Arts and History, January 6, 1999, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Office.
222 Ibid.
225 Minutes of the Commission on Arts and History, December 2, 1998, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Office; in official documents this organization is referred to as both the Commission on Arts and History and the Arts and History Commission.
The Commission on Arts and History was organized in the 1970s with a primary purpose of regulating the growing body of tour guides in Charleston. It continued to operate, albeit more and more sporadically, through the 1990s. With the resolution of its founding issues, the group was relegated to dealing with relatively unimportant administrative issues. For two years the commission did not meet at all.

In 1998, the commission reorganized and began meeting regularly. This was the result of new policy initiated by Riley which sought to create a more clearly defined process for the approval of new monuments. In many ways however this reorganization actually resulted in some confusion about the roles of the Commission on Arts and History, the Design Review Committee, and City Council. A number of the early meetings of the commission after its reorganization focused on precisely what its role could be within the definitions provided by municipal code as well as what its role should be in practical terms.

Over a period of three months, the role of the commission slowly began to take shape. In January 1999, the commission determined that while all new public commemoratives objects must be considered by the Design Review Committee, only those “that would culturally impact the community” would need approval from the Commission on Arts and History. Furthermore, the commission would focus primarily on issues such as historical accuracy and contextual relevance while the Design Review

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226 Minutes of the Commission on Arts and History, April 17, 1975, accessed at City of Charleston Records Management Office.
Committee would deal with more practical concerns such as continued maintenance and how a new object would mesh with the surrounding architecture. In February 1999 the commission further elaborated on this, stating that it should be “the place to first give constructive criticism, asking questions about relevance, location, finances, artists, materials, etc.”

While placing the more subjective components of the evaluation process into the hands of the Commission on Arts and History served to lighten the load on the Design Review Committee, it also helped in making the process appear more transparent and fair. It is important to recall that, while the minutes of the Commission on Arts and History are in the public record and that public comment is accepted, this is not the case for the Design Review Committee. As the influx of new monument proposals meant an increase in proposal rejections, having a process which was entirely opaque would have been a political disaster.

The Denmark Vesey statue proposal was one of the first projects considered by the newly reorganized Commission on Arts and History. In fact, a new flow chart and revised Monument Plan were discussed at the same meeting at which the Denmark Vesey monument was first proposed. The Denmark Vesey monument was first considered in

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228 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, January 6, 1999, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
229 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, February 3, 1999, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office
230 For a simple explanation of this, see the minutes of the Arts and History Commission for December 2, 1998: “The Arts and History Commission is the public part of the decision making process. Citizens many times see things that city staff does not; the public needs to be involved.”
231 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, April 7, 1999, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
the context of a greater discussion regarding Marion Square, the original proposed location for the statue.\textsuperscript{232} Marion Square was a logical place to put the statue. A well-travelled public area in the heart of Charleston, Marion Square sits directly in front of the historic Citadel, which was constructed as a result of Vesey’s thwarted insurrection in 1822.\textsuperscript{233}

The Commission on Arts and History was first made familiar with the proposal for the Denmark Vesey statue in April 1999.\textsuperscript{234} At this point the statue had already gained the approval of the Design Review Committee for the use of a thirty by thirty foot area in Marion Square. While the design was still in process, the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee knew that they wished to produce a figural memorial.\textsuperscript{235}

Despite the still somewhat nebulous nature of the project, it was still met with some resistance. City of Charleston Landscape Architect Amanda Barton felt that the statue would be inappropriate in Marion Square, arguing that “the feeling of the design team is to commemorate what the square is, what its history is, and why the square is there, outside of that, there really is no more room for other statues or memorials.”\textsuperscript{236} However, there was a good deal of support for the monument from others, including City

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} Robert Behre, “Marion Square Rises from Scruffy Past to be Seen as City’s True Center,” \textit{The Post and Courier} (Charleston, South Carolina), November 27, 2003.
\textsuperscript{234} Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, April 7, 1999, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
\textsuperscript{235} The Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument proposal, Denmark Vesey Monument vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston.
\textsuperscript{236} [sic] Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, April 7, 1999, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
\end{footnotesize}
Councilmember Robert George, who countered that Vesey played an integral role in the establishment of the Citadel Military Academy, and therefore, “if anything belong[ed] in Marion Square as a monument, the memorial to Denmark Vesey certainly qualify[ed].”\(^{237}\)
The commission ultimately determined that any evaluation on their part would be preemptive anyway, as Marion Square, while maintained by the City of Charleston, is owned by the Washington Light Infantry and Sumter Guards.

Despite the support of Riley, Dressler Moryl, and the Design Review Committee, the Washington Light Infantry and Sumter Guards were unwilling to approve the use of Marion Square as a site for the monument. The Guards were only willing to consider the installation of such a monument if Vesey’s “contribution to the monument” was “minimized,” according to Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee member Henry Darby.\(^{238}\) As this was not an option the committee was willing to entertain, another site was sought. With the assistance of Mayor Riley, the committee decided to relocate their proposed statue to Hampton Park, a city-owned property.\(^{239}\)

While Hampton Park does not see the same level of foot traffic that Marion Square does, there were a number of factors that helped recommend the site. Hampton Park is located in proximity to the Citadel, much like Marion Square. Additionally, Hampton Park played a unique commemorative role in Charleston’s Civil War history, particularly for African-Americans. During the Civil War, Union soldiers were held as

\(^{237}\) Ibid.


\(^{239}\) Ibid.
prisoners of war at Hampton Park, and over 250 had been buried there in unmarked graves. In 1865, African-American Charlestonians built a cemetery there to honor them. The dedication of the cemetery on May 1, 1865 was the first celebration of what would come to be known as Memorial Day. Furthermore, the quiet nature of Hampton Park lends itself well to the thoughtful contemplation of the Vesey statue in a way that busy Marion Square does not.241

The Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee officially came before the Commission on Arts and History in March 2000.242 Their proposal was conceptual at this point, although they had already determined that they wished for the statue to be representational, with three figures ranging from twelve to fourteen feet in height.243 No artist had yet been selected, and no money had been raised. Their stated goals included not only educating the public about Vesey and African-American heritage but also “to demonstrate the universality of men and women’s desire for freedom and justice irrespective of race, creed, condition or color.”244 The members of the committee at the presentation included Henry Darby, Curtis Franks, Dorothy Wright, and Marvin Delaney, among others.245

241 Henry Darby, interview by Sarah Katherine Dykens, March 31, 2015, transcript.
242 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, March 1, 2000, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
243 The Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument proposal, Denmark Vesey Monument vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston.
244 Ibid.
245 Others in attendance in support included Donald West, Cherie Owens, Eleanor Coaxum, and Annette Teasdale; Minutes of Art and History Commission, March 1, 2000, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Office.
The reaction of the Arts and History Commission was mixed, but largely positive. Some of the concern regarding the project was procedural. Commission member Carol Ezell felt that, as this was the first major project to be considered by the commission since its reorganization, special care ought to be taken. The majority of the rest of the commission felt that preliminary approval should be given without delay, as the project would have to come before the commission again once it was more developed.  

However, Commission Chair Robert Rosen and member Charles Waring did engage in meaningful debate regarding the value and appropriateness of the proposed sculpture. Waring, apparently taken somewhat by surprise at the rapidity with which his fellow commission members sought to approve the proposal, argued that he was reluctant to approve a sculpture with Vesey as the main figure “since the Vesey plan was to massacre all the white people living in Charleston at the time.” He also said that his opinion was shared by many other Charlestonians.  

Rosen countered that many traditionally honored historic figures were slave owners and that, as African-Americans were still expected to respect people such as George Washington, it was only fitting that figures such as Vesey be honored as well. He also thought it fitting to place the statue of Vesey in Hampton Park, which was named for Wade Hampton, a slaveholding Confederate general. He stated that “the conflict is descriptive of the history of this region.” Preliminary approval was granted with five members voting in favor, one opposed, and one abstaining.

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246 Ibid.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid.
In April 2000, the support of the mayor was made public and explicit via a glowing proclamation presented in front of City Council. Mayor Riley spoke with lofty and at times fanciful rhetoric, describing Vesey as a “hero and [lover] of liberty,” and urging “young people of this City and throughout the State of South Carolina” to “draw from the example of courage and heroism of Denmark Vesey to overcome the difficulties they may face today.” Much more importantly, the proclamation was accompanied by a $25,000 grant from the City of Charleston, to be distributed in five $5,000 yearly installments.

The proposal elicited angry comments from the public at large, as expressed in letters to the editor published in *The Post and Courier*. Some even went so far as to describe Vesey as planning a “Holocaust.” However, discussion of the proposal in the local news by established journalists was fairly nuanced, particularly when compared to the earlier treatment of Dorothy Wright’s painting of Vesey in 1976, for example. Reporters such as Ron Menchaca sought to describe the controversy fairly, and the tenor of most articles was one of explanation rather than opinion.

In an opinion article, R.L. Schreadley was similarly eager to present both sides. Interestingly, though, Schreadley placed the divide between the two opinions on clear racial lines: “Blacks view Vesey as a martyr, an honest man skewered by racial injustice. Many whites see him, however… as the demonic leader of a barely thwarted insurrection

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that would have leveled Charleston to the ground…”253 Schreadley failed to note that while some whites are opposed to the statue, some of the most vocal supporters of the statue are also white. Some commenting in the media, such as the then-President of the College of Charleston, Alex Sanders, argued for bypassing the issue entirely by suggesting a different, less contentious historical figure to honor.254 That Sanders felt a white Presidential candidate was an appropriate substitute for Vesey as an African-American history honoree indicates that some local figures were not as racially savvy as they thought themselves to be. Waring, the commission member who cast the opposing vote, wrote a letter of clarification after he felt he was somewhat misrepresented in the press. Waring stated that he is not motivated by racial prejudice in his opinion, but rather was opposed to genocide. He also introduced a key issue in the debate for the next fifteen years: historical accuracy.255

In a case such as the one involving Vesey, the evidence is limited and compromised enough that any number of conclusions can be reached. For example, a small but vocal contingent of Vesey scholars argue that the conspiracy to commit the insurrection never existed at all, and that Vesey was framed by James Hamilton, Jr., an overly ambitious politician, to further his own career. Another group takes the trial record of Vesey and his co-conspirators to be an accurate description of Vesey’s intentions and, like Waring, see Vesey as morally reprehensible, or even as a terrorist.

Some, such as Mayor Riley, choose to gloss over the issues of violence entirely, calling
Vesey a “man of love, a man of compassion, a man who was interested in righting
wrongs.” Still others, such as Reverend Joe Darby, argue for a consideration of the
violent historical context, and an acceptance of the ambiguity of the data.257 Many of
these opinions were expressed in the wake of the 2000 proposal. Even more attention
was given to Vesey due to other factors which increased his fame, such as the publication
of three books about him and a symposium held in Charleston.258

It was also during this period of time that the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of
Freedom Monument Committee began to receive financial support. The $25,000 from
the City of Charleston proved to be particularly important, as it provided much needed
seed money and allowed the committee to begin to get the project off the ground.259 This
financial support allowed the committee to produce a professional call for artists in 2005
and distribute it on a national level.260

256 Joseph Riley, “Remarks on Dedication of Portrait of Denmark Vesey,” August 9, 1976, Denmark Vesey
Portrait vertical file, City of Charleston Records Management Office.
258 Douglas Egerton, He Shall Go Out Free; David M. Robertson, Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of
America’s Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 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).
259 Curtis J. Franks, interview with Daron Calhoun in “Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston!” Avery
Messenger, Summer 2014.
260 Ibid.; Minutes of Arts and History Commission, June 1, 2005, accessed at City of Charleston Records
Management Office.
The proposed budget for the project was $150,000 and the committee received responses from a number of well-known artists, including Richard Hunt and Maya Lin. Dorothy Wright, a local artist and educator who created the painting of Vesey that hung in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium did much of the work in selecting a sculptor for the Vesey monument. Wright and the committee selected Ed Dwight, a sculptor based in Denver. Dwight dealt primarily with African-American heritage commemoration, and

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261 The Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Call for Artists (pamphlet), Denmark Vesey Monument vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston; Stratton Lawrence, “‘Terrorist’ or ‘Freedom Fighter’?” City Paper (Charleston, SC), 2006.

262 Curtis J. Franks, interview with Daron Calhoun in “Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston!” Avery Messenger, Summer 2014.
had designed memorials such as the African American History Monument in the South Carolina capital of Columbia.\textsuperscript{263}

In September 2007 the Charleston County Council voted to give $40,000 to the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee. This provided the committee with a needed financial boost and allowed Henry Darby to predict that the statue would be erected within the next three years.\textsuperscript{264} It also allowed the committee to move forward with the production and presentation of a model for the proposed statue.\textsuperscript{265}

The model featured three figures, with Denmark Vesey in the center flanked by Peter Poyas and “Gullah Jack” Pritchard, two of his most important lieutenants. Like much of Dwight’s work, the statue was to be fairly traditional in design, composed of bronze figures atop a marble base.\textsuperscript{266} Dwight sought to create a narrative that was easy to understand but that also contained a large amount of information within the monument. Every element of the monument told a story. The symbols were all quite literal, ranging from the items the three men carried—the recognizable tools of their trade—to the extensive written material intended for two sides of the marble base. The original design for the base incorporated carved images as well including the house at 56 Bull Street, which is listed as a National Historic Landmark for its association with Vesey. This

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{264 Tenisha Waldo, “Charleston County Council Votes to Give $203,500 in All,” \textit{The Post and Courier} (Charleston, SC), September 5, 2007.}
\footnote{265 “Controversial Statue,” \textit{The Post and Courier} (Charleston, SC), November 19, 2007.}
\end{footnotes}
design was rejected due to the inclusion of this house, as many historians doubt that it was even built at the time of Vesey’s death.  

267 Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, June 5, 2013, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.
Figure 7.3: Model for proposed three-figure monument. Image courtesy of Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston.
The style of the sculpture was similarly traditional, featuring realistic bronze figures rendered in a somewhat painterly style. Dwight typically works in a realistic manner, at times even using castings of actual clothing items to create as accurate a sculpture as possible. All three men stood with one foot slightly in front of the other, in a subtle contrapposto pose that is both formal and highly traditional, having been a favorite with sculptors since Greek and Roman times. The overall effect of the sculpture, with its larger-than-life-sized bronze figures standing atop a severe square marble base, was somewhat imposing and truly monumental.

As the monument grew closer to being a reality, coverage in the media began to increase and opinions again became more heated. A local radio DJ, Rocky D, called Vesey a would-be terrorist. The proposed monument made the national news with an article sympathetic to Vesey in USA Today. The article quotes Henry Darby extensively and features an image of the three-figure model for the proposed statue.

As the installation of the monument became more concrete, its placement in Hampton Park began to draw the protests of some neighboring residents. People such as F.X. Clasby, then-President of the Wagener Terrace Neighborhood Association, argued that Hampton Park was best left as a “passive green park.” In a September 2007 Letter to the Editor published in The Post and Courier, Clasby states that the Wagener Terrace Neighborhood Association “passed a motion that ‘respectfully requests that the city of

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270 Stratton Lawrence, “‘Terrorist’ or ‘Freedom Fighter’, City Paper (Charleston SC), 2006.


Charleston maintain Hampton Park as a passive horticulture park and that no additional statues or monuments be installed at the site.”

Interestingly though, the minutes for the Wagener Terrace Neighborhood Association meetings during this time frame do not contain any mention of this discussion. The only written reference to the neighborhood association’s resistance to the plan to install the monument is found in the minutes of the November 2007 meeting, when both Sis Marshall and Joe Wolfe “reiterated” the desire to prevent more monuments from being placed in Hampton Park. The November meeting minutes also indicate that Mayor Riley attended the October 2007 meeting to discuss the monument, a fact which was only recorded very briefly as, “Mayor Joe Riley spoke after the meeting.” More space in the written minutes was devoted to the yard of the month.

Despite the objections of the Wagener Terrace Neighborhood Association, the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Committee was able to break ground for the statue in January 2010. The final design was quite different from the original model for a variety of reasons. The potential cost of the monument was a major problem. While the initial budget was for a $150,000 statue, the three figure design was estimated to cost more than $400,000. This became of particular concern when the artist, Ed Dwight, became ill. Since Dwight was in his seventies at the time, the committee felt

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that putting up the monument quickly was important. Dwight suggested that they rethink the design, limiting the sculpture to a single figure.278

The groundbreaking for the statue resulted in more national news coverage, including articles in *Esquire* and *The Huffington Post*.279 It also caused another rash of discussion and conflict in the local media. The groundbreaking happened to coincide with discussions regarding a proposed “secession monument” to be installed at Patriot’s Point. A number of commenters argued that neither monument ought to be built, as both were overly contentious and served only to “stir up animosity.”280 Much as in 2000 and again in 2007, some sought to consider both sides of the debate, or to attempt to more clearly settle issues of historical ambiguity.281

In addition to these more nuanced opinions, certain commenters were more aggressive in their criticism. In a February 2010 Letter to the Editor, Michael Trouche likened Vesey to O.J. Simpson and argued that “the hateful Vesey got what he deserved.”282 A local AM radio personality named Jack Hunter received quite a bit of publicity when he published an opinion column that was designed to shock in the City

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He argued that “erecting a statue to honor Vesey is admitting that terrorism is sometimes justified,” and declared that Vesey, Osama bin Laden, and Harry Truman were all terrorists.\textsuperscript{283} Arguments by people such as Hunter may have been spurred on by an important political shift occurring throughout the United States by 2010 which involved the increasing radicalization of the far right and the growth of the Tea Party movement.

In 2013, the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee went before the Arts and History Commission multiple times. While all the presentations were fairly involved processes, the final review was far more rigorous than earlier reviews. The language used on the monument was the primary issue dealt with in this meeting. As the Denmark Vesey monument contains quite a bit of text and it is the responsibility of the Arts and History Commission to ensure historic accuracy, it is understandable that a lengthy discussion was necessary. However, the commission also discussed issues that were slightly less matter of fact, such as the overall tenor of the written content of the monument.\textsuperscript{284}

Harlan Greene, an archivist working at the College of Charleston’s Addlestone Library, served as a historian on the commission. Greene was concerned that the language used in the Vesey monument was overly subjective compared to the language used on other monuments throughout the city.\textsuperscript{285} The chair of the commission, David

\textsuperscript{283} Jack Hunter, “Denmark Vesey was a Terrorist,” \textit{City Paper} (Charleston, SC), February 10, 2010.

\textsuperscript{284} Minutes of the Arts and History Commission, June 5, 2013, accessed at the City of Charleston Records Management Division Office.

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
McCormack, made a number of suggestions for alterations in language. Some of these were perceived as weakening the impact of the statue and attempting to make the statue more politically correct. One change, for example, was rejected by Bernard Powers, the College of Charleston professor who wrote the material, as making “the statement too polite.” The record indicates a heated conversation, with commission member Karen Chandler saying “she was incensed about the editing of the language presented by scholars, historians, and writers who did their research.” Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee member Curtis Franks remembers the meeting as being contentious with primary opposition from the chair of the commission, who he recalls as becoming “irate.” Despite the lengthy debate, approval of the project was granted, with only McCormack in opposition.

The statue was finally unveiled on February 15, 2014. A great deal of fanfare accompanied the unveiling, with a program that lasted over an hour and featured music as well as remarks from a number of people including the mayor. The overall tenor of the ceremony was fairly religious, as Vesey’s historic affiliation with the A.M.E. Church as a lay leader was emphasized. Civil War re-enactors of the 54th Massachusetts Company, one of the first African-American union regiments, were also present. The ceremony was well-attended by both black and white Charlestonians.

286 Ibid.
287 Ibid.
289 Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Unveiling Program, Denmark Vesey Monument vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston.
Although the statue no longer featured three figures, it retained a great deal of the quality of the original design, including its traditional and imposing nature. Its meaning was clear. This was a monument for a hero. The literal design of the statue left no room for ambiguity about its purpose. The reliance on written material and easy symbols such as Vesey’s carpentry tools and a Bible made the statue instructive and educational.

Figure 7.4: Detail of Denmark Vesey Monument, showing carpentry tools and hat

In fact, in some ways the statue might have seemed slightly unimaginative, and more than one critic complained that it was inaccurate to show such a detailed likeness of
a historical figure for whom no known depiction exists. However, it is this unambiguous
and traditional approach that gives the statue much of its power. It is uncompromisingly
laudatory, and its literal nature ensures that all viewers know it is a statue of Denmark
Vesey, the freedom fighter and hero. Given the contested nature of Vesey’s history and
legacy, a traditional and didactic monument was the most effective way to achieve the
Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Committee’s goals of education and
recognition.\footnote{The Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument proposal for the Arts and History
Commission, Denmark Vesey Monument vertical file, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston.}

Despite the conflict which accompanied the statue’s development and installation,
it has been well-received. It is featured as an attraction on Trip Advisor, a website which
rates possible tourist destinations, and currently has 4.5 out of 5 stars.\footnote{Denmark Vesey Monument, North Charleston, Trip Advisor,
http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g54370-d6599239-Reviews-Denmark_Vesey_Monument-
North_Charleston_South_Carolina.html.} It was listed as a
“best new statue” staff pick in the \textit{City Paper}.\footnote{Corey Hutchins, “Best New Statue,” \textit{City Paper} (Charleston, SC), 2014.} It can be somewhat difficult to locate,
as there is no map of Hampton Park which indicates where it is found in the park. It also
can be difficult to read the inscription on the front marble base, as the font is fairly small,
the marble is reflective, and the gold paint which filled in the letters has faded somewhat.
Despite this, on a recent visit by this researcher two separate groups of people stopped by
to visit the statue, and made an effort to read the inscription anyway.

While a great deal of work is still to be done in Charleston regarding Vesey’s
commemoration, it is clear that much progress has been made since initial attempts in the
1970s. Thus far, this statue seems to be an effective and well-used tool for interpreting
and honoring Vesey’s legacy. Whether it becomes an integral part of the commemorative landscape of Charleston or interest in it fades over time has yet to be determined. Of key importance to this is the continual physical upkeep of the statue and the surrounding area. Refreshing the paint to make the writing legible, closely monitoring the silicone sealant used in the base, and ensuring the accompanying plantings remain in healthy condition will all serve to encourage visitors. The work of installing the monument is done. However, the statue is slightly out of the way and will require physical upkeep. Faithful continued maintenance, both physically and in the form of promotion, will be key to the success of this piece.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For now we see as through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face:
Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.
--1 Corinthians 13:12

It is often said that history is written by the victors. In the case of Denmark Vesey and nineteenth century Charleston in general, it could also be said that history has been written by the oppressors. It is for this reason that the legacy of Denmark Vesey remains contested. Given that the information regarding Vesey’s plot comes from biased sources, it is likely impossible that Vesey’s innocence or guilt will ever be satisfactorily determined. In many ways, this final judgment is not relevant. Vesey’s value, as with all influential historic figures, is largely symbolic. Vesey the man will never be fully understood. The idea of Denmark Vesey, however, is emblematic of the continuing struggle for racial equality in the United States. He represents agency in the face of an overwhelming attempt to remove the corporeal rights of an entire group of people.

Similarly, Vesey’s commemorative arc in Charleston represents the hard work of a community struggling to reintegrate the many histories that have been redacted out of local, regional, and national historical narratives. For many years, Denmark Vesey was remembered only in a negative light, if at all. South Carolina history textbooks gave
Students studying at the Citadel, in a building which would not have been constructed if Denmark Vesey had not attempted an insurrection, felt blindsided by their ignorance of him.

In the 1970s a desire to commemorate historical figures such as Vesey swept across the country. As it did, the slow process of remembering the history that Charleston had forgotten gathered momentum. These early attempts were imperfect, and met with opposition from many quarters. The nomination of Vesey’s house as a National Historic Landmark proved to be inaccurate, and did not have the strong, lasting impact that the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation hoped it would. It also suffered some from being a project implemented by a group outside of Charleston. The nomination of the house was a component of a large-scale national effort to place significant African-American historical buildings and sites on the National Register of Historic Places. It did not initially have a great deal of support or interest locally.

However, despite its true history, the house remains a potent artifact, providing a symbolic connection to Vesey. Furthermore, the nomination of the house predates the nomination of many other sites of slave revolts to the National Register of Historic Places. For example, the Rebecca Vaughan House in Virginia, associated with the Nat Turner insurrection, was not nominated until 2006. Additionally, the house is used

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295 Rebecca Vaughan House, National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, National Park Service.
commemoratively today. It continues to be a component of African-American heritage
tours. It is the only component of the Vesey commemorative landscape which dates from
the nineteenth century, thus filling what would otherwise be a void.

In 1976 the installation of Dorothy Wright’s painting in the Gaillard Municipal
Auditorium resulted in such one-sided reporting in the local press that someone,
apparently incensed, stole the painting off the wall. Both the creation of the painting and
its safe return were the result of a top-down intervention on the part of Charleston mayor
Joe Riley. However, its unveiling drew a crowd of Charlestonians interested in African-
American history. It eventually became a well-loved touchstone for those interested in
Vesey. As the Vesey story was not then included in primary, secondary, or collegiate
instruction in history, the house on Bull Street and Dorothy Wright’s painting became
some of the only avenues for teaching and learning about Vesey. With the singular
exception of the mayor and a few others, Vesey and his insurrection remained a taboo
subject and were unwelcome in discussions about what chapters of the city’s history
should be publicly commemorated.

More contentious still was the 1991 exhibition *Places with a Past*. This highly
successful, if impermanent, exhibit marked a significant step in the city’s progress
towards embracing a broader historical understanding of itself. The exhibit consciously
sought to give representation to the unrecognized and unrecorded voices of the past,
including Denmark Vesey. The city-wide exhibition was extremely well-received,
generating national attention. This marked a shift in the audience for the commemoration
of Denmark Vesey from interested locals to a much broader group. The installation of
Ronald Jones’s sculpture honoring Vesey at the Emanuel A.M.E Church also did not face the media opposition or public backlash that Vesey’s commemoration did in the 1970s.

However, the impact of this exhibit and statue proved to be fleeting. The exhibition was always intended to be temporary. Today, while it is still influential in the academic analysis of the development of such city-wide exhibitions, only two of its installations remain. Furthermore, Jones’s sculpture ultimately proved to be too subtle a reference to have a strong lasting impact. It did not become the well-loved memorial Jones sought to create.

The monumentally-scaled statue of Vesey placed in Hampton Park in 2014 represents a real and significant step towards the integration of Denmark Vesey into Charleston’s historic lexicon. That the Denmark Vesey and the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee were able to raise enough money to construct such an ambitious monument indicates that there is much more support for Vesey locally than there was in the past. The placement of the statue in a popular city park also shows a willingness on the part of local government to accept Vesey as an important local historical figure. Coverage in the official local news was more nuanced and reflected a progression in attitudes towards race and history compared to the biased coverage of Wright’s painting forty years before. Additionally, it is clear from the outpouring of Charlestonians that came to the unveiling ceremony as well as those who continue to visit the statue regularly that Charleston has made great strides with regards to the treatment of this racially important historic figure.
However, an examination of the placement and design process reveals that Vesey remains a conflicted historic figure. The road to the construction of this statue was long, with development from the planning stages to the actual implementation lasting almost twenty years. The slow pace towards installation and dedication was the result of setbacks such as the refusal of the Washington Light Infantry and Sumter Guards to place the monument in Marion Square. Other issues included financial concerns and arguments regarding the commemorative text of the sculpture. Much like Dorothy Wright’s painting, a great deal of support for the statue came from the City of Charleston, especially Ellen Dressler Moryl, the Director of the Office of Cultural Affairs, Mayor Joe Riley, and City Council. The need for this sort of top-down steering is troubling, particularly when coupled with the hateful opinions expressed by radio personalities and citizens through Letters to the Editor. A new anger seemed to accompany each step towards successful erection of the statue.

Nevertheless, it was built, and stands today as proof that a monument celebrating a contested figure such as Vesey can be raised. Furthermore, its acceptance into the community indicates that the commemoration of such a figure will not result in great discord, as many in Charleston feared. In fact, Henry Darby feels that Charleston could set an example for other cities with contested historical figures: “if the Charleston community could erect a monument on Vesey, the Hampton community in Virginia and
the Chicago community in Illinois could use our experience as an example to erect a monument on Nat Turner and Fred Hampton, respectively.”

The collective understanding of who Denmark Vesey was and what he represented has shifted in the years since his execution. For a very long time, the only opinions regarding Vesey that were given any official voice were those demonizing him. Beginning in the Civil Rights era, a more complex and multifaceted picture of Vesey began to emerge, and it became clear that Vesey could symbolize individual agency and heroism as well as violence and betrayal. A richer understanding of the paternalistic dynamics of slavery also cast the narrative of Vesey’s insurrection and the resulting social and political chaos in a more nuanced light.

Despite this, Vesey remains a divisive figure in Charleston today. While many of the opinions regarding Vesey expressed more recently in the local news show a desire to understand Vesey in a balanced way, the conceptualization of Vesey as an evil would-be murderer has not changed since 1822 in some quarters. The complexity and variety of ways in which Vesey is represented in Charleston today reflects a city which is still working to develop a more sophisticated understanding of its racial dynamics.

The commemorative expression of Denmark Vesey in Charleston has also shifted as his meaning has changed over time. It took over one hundred years for the official commemorative process to begin at all. Initial efforts began in the 1970s, and were often modest or even inaccurate. The backlash against these early attempts was pervasive and

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296 Henry Darby interview with Deborah Wright and Daron Calhoun, in “Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston!” *Avery Messenger*, Summer 2014.
extreme. However, thanks in part to the support of Mayor Joe Riley and others in city
government, the early attempts were allowed to persist and a climate was created which
encouraged the celebration of alternative histories. Efforts to memorialize Vesey
continued in the 1990s, though their effectiveness proved fleeting. Finally, in 2014 the
installation of a monumental statue in a popular public park indicates that, while still
controversial, Denmark Vesey has been accepted as a significant figure in Charleston
history. His importance can no longer be contested, and the fact that he is a hero to many
cannot be ignored.

While the commemoration of Vesey in Charleston has shown a great deal of
progress, there is much work left to be done. A strong step in the ongoing process would
be a Multiple Property Submission to the National Register of Historic Places. The
submission could include a number of sites affiliated with Vesey, such as Charleston City
Hall and the site of the former Work House where Vesey was held. This would create a
fuller context for the historic picture of Vesey’s life in Charleston. It would also lighten
the commemorative load carried by the house on Bull Street, which suffers from
inaccuracy.

The replacement of Dorothy Wright’s painting in the new Gaillard Auditorium
once it is completed is also a key recommendation. The painting is currently in storage
where no one is able to benefit from it, and rehanging it would be an easy and
inexpensive step. In order to maximize the benefits to the public, the painting could be
accompanied by not only a replica of its original plaque but an additional informational
piece which explains the history of the painting itself. The story of its theft and return is an important but little-known part of Charleston’s Civil Rights history.

Additionally it is important to remember that the work does not end when the statue is built or the National Register Nomination gets approved. This actually marks the beginning of the truly important part of the process, which is the ongoing maintenance of the site and education of the interested public. Too often lectures and events accompany an unveiling and then occur no more. Charleston has been on a slow but positive trajectory towards greater historical diversity, as indicated by the treatment of figures such as Vesey. In order to begin to undo the damage caused by a one-sided historical narrative the momentum must carry forward. Vesey’s story must continue to be told and retold.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Transcription of Interview with Henry Darby

Interview conducted March 31, 2015, in North Charleston, South Carolina at 5:00 p.m. Henry Darby interviewed by Sarah Katherine Dykens. Interview recorded March 31, 2015 and transcribed April 10, 2015 by Sarah Katherine Dykens.

Dykens: Mostly I’m looking for more of an insider perspective. I’ve looked over stuff like the City Council minutes, minutes of the Commission on Arts and History, all the newspaper stuff.

Darby: Okay well just reading the first and second questions—these are some very good questions, ma’am. I guess I can take it from number one.

[Question #1: As a founding member of the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee, the installation of the statue of Denmark Vesey in Hampton Park has been a long struggle for you. I know that you cannot explain the entire process to me, but could you tell me some of what you would consider to be the high and low points of the process? Which parts stick out as pivotal moments to you in retrospect?]

Darby: I guess one of the high points was when we were able to go before the City Council of Charleston to get the approval thereof and have the City of Charleston donate the first $55,000. That was very high. But there was a low within the high because we were not just ready yet, as an organization in a position to accept the funds because we did not have our 501c3 status.
Dykens: Okay.

Darby: So that was a holdup but nonetheless we were able to accept the check (laughter) and we worked expeditiously to get the paperwork done. One of the lowest points for me was the continuation of going back and forth back and forth with the Arts and History Commission as well as the lack of support from various aspects of the African American community, particularly the A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Church leadership. That was very low for me because I’m thinking they would have made a contribution of a more substantial nature—particularly the black church would have played more of an important role. That was very low for me. As well as the backlash of various white conservative members of the Charleston community. I didn’t know there would be such a backlash. I didn’t know that. I didn’t think—the African American community had to be marginalized in this day and age.

Dykens: Yeah.

Darby: But actually the highest of points was the actual unveiling of the monument and to say that it took us eighteen years. I was quite ecstatic that it came to fruition.

[Question #2: You have been a constant advocate for the installation of this statue. Could you explain why it was so important for the City of Charleston to have such a memorial?]

Darby: For number two I guess my answer would simply be that the city of Charleston has a diverse population so I think common sense would suggest that it also have a diverse memorial to those various groups of persons. Those that various group would happen to be African American and should have been someone significant,
someone whom the African Americans chose, because the white establishment
didn’t want us to choose Vesey, they wanted something else. But I think the
African American community is mature enough and are educated enough to select
our own heroes. So I thought that was quite an important thing. We are mature
enough to select who we want to represent us.

[Question #3: This project was the result of a long and complicated process. Was the
efficacy of the statue negatively impacted in any way by the complexity of the process?
Similarly, did having a lengthy process with many stakeholders improve the value of the
statue for the community as a whole?]

Darby: Um—was the efficacy of the statue impacted—?

Dykens: I guess what I was trying to get at with this is that when I first started looking
into it I noticed that there were a lot players, it took a long time and there was
feedback from the Arts and History Commission, there was an issue with the
moving of the statue, and I went into it thinking that maybe all of this tampering
would have negatively impacted the statue in some way but then I sort of came to
the conclusion that it may have actually been pulling more people into the process
and creating more interest in different diverse areas that we would otherwise have
seen.

Darby: Well actually it did have a negative impact because our first choice was Marion
Square—and perhaps Dr. Powers and Mr. Franks may have mentioned it, but
again our first choice was Marion Square. But Marion Square is not owned by the
City of Charleston. Mayor Riley was all for it. The Office of Cultural Affairs was
all for it but the Washington Light Infantry and the Sumter Guards, two old
guards of the old order—of the very old order— (laughter) Mind you had we gone
with what they proposed—which was to have Vesey with a number of other
African Americans as some kind of addendum that was perfectly fine, but to give
Vesey the blessing, no they didn’t want that at all so they said no. But then the
mayor stepped in with suggestion of Hampton Park which was excellent in terms
of proximity—to have Vesey next to the Citadel and next to Ashley Avenue
where the hanging tree used to be, so those three things did come to together. So
Hampton Park was raised as a secondary measure. The best place would have
been Marion Square where more of the people and tourists would visit so it did
negatively impact the process at the time because we would go back to the board
when and where how long and then the process to procure the park. As a matter of
fact I don’t think the process taking that long… I don’t think so in terms of the
stakeholders. As a matter of fact it became fewer from my perspective.

Dyakens: That’s interesting

Darby: Yes.

We got more people involved because it was something that they had to do in
terms of Parks and Recreation and things of that nature but in terms of individual
persons and people of the city that could have contributed, no I didn’t see that at
all.
[Question #4: What influenced the decision to make the statue representational rather than abstract? At what point in the process was this decision nailed down—did the committee have a fairly strong idea of what it wanted from the beginning?]

Darby: What influenced the decision to make the statue representative rather than abstract? Because particularly the young, too many don’t understand the abstract and we selected representational as long as it was free-flowing. We just didn’t want him standing there, we wanted him in action and in motion and to come from a utilitarian perspective. That’s what we wanted the artist to come up with. So from the very beginning we did not look at anything abstract. We wanted people to be able to look, see, feel—see his hair, see his eyes—we wanted it to be that type of monument.

Dykens: Now it’s interesting—I read in the newspaper that someone suggested an abstract sculpture and I personally felt like that might dampen the message.

Darby: Yes very much so. From the very beginning the committee was in favor of something representational rather than abstract. I don’t think anyone on the committee was in favor of that. Now one of our former members I think a Dr. [inaudible]? He brought in a freedom [inaudible] of a boat of African Americans coming over but that was not Vesey, that was not Vesey at all. And others who actually had a monument of actually a lynching and that was never—that would have been an embarrassment and we didn’t want that at all. I think having a monument that way—perhaps it could have been done but we did not again want to embarrass the city.
Dyken: That’s interesting.

[Question #5: How was the fact that there isn’t any photographic record of Vesey upon which to base the statue addressed?]

Darby: Now how is the fact that there isn’t any photographic record of Vesey—? It’s a very good question and its one that—I was asked by quite a few people. When I was pushed, pushed, pushed towards that exact question—I said that we don’t know what Jesus looked like, we don’t know what Christopher Columbus looked like, we don’t know what angels looked like, we don’t know what Moses or David looked like, so why is it that you are going to oppose us basing this monument in terms of what Vesey looked like as if to use as a deterrent from having the monument erected. So that was a very good question and that was the answer we had given.

[Question #6: To what extent was Ed Dwight given artistic liberty, and to what extent was the nature of the statue dictated by your committee and other groups? Did you have to compromise on design elements for reasons that weren’t financial?]

Darby: Oh my gosh, Ed Dwight? Enough cannot be said about Ed Dwight. There are no words which could actually describe what he did for this monument—even to the point of scaling it to what we have today. The pose—he came up with the original three, in terms of Vesey and two lieutenants and he went along with that, but because of the funding we just couldn’t do it and he made a great contribution to the monument monetarily.
In terms of compromise on the design itself, no we did not. I mean other than reducing the three figures to the one.

Again if it weren’t for Mr. Dwight the Vesey monument as we know it would not be in existence today. Because he made a huge contribution, he was able to adjust to the change which was imperative for it to be successful and he really gave it his all. As a matter of fact he assisted us even in raising funds and not to pay him! He wanted to see the successful completion of the monument. That’s the type of guy that he is. And once we saw his work there was no need to continue the search. None whatsoever, we knew that Mr. Dwight was the person to do it for us.

[Question #7: Did the move from Marion Square to Hampton Park positively or negatively impact the efficacy of the statue?]

Darby: Number seven, in terms of positive and negative impacts. Actually it’s both.

Positively, Hampton Park is in close proximity to the historical niche of the Citadel, and the lynching tree. It’s also more of a space for contemplation than Marion Square. In Hampton Park you just have Vesey and one can just sit there and contemplate without distractions and again that’s not what would have happened at Marion Square. There’s so many other things that visitors would not focus on Vesey as opposed to John C. Calhoun and the other monuments there. So basically ultimately it was a positive.

[Question #8: The original design for the statue included Peter Poyas and “Gullah” Jack Pritchard. What inspired you to include figures other than Vesey?]
Darby: I went forward simply to ask why not because these men as well as the other thirty four they made their contributions too in terms of giving their lives and they would be representative of all the others—and also that they too could be studied because at least in the realms of history you hear of Denmark Vesey, Denmark Vesey, but seldom do you talk of Peter Poyas or Gullah Jack or Monday Gell who were actually the inner circle of all of this group. So that’s really the main reason why we wanted to include Gullah Jack and Peter Poyas. In addition to that, the descendants of Peter Poyas still live in Charleston.

Dykens: Oh, okay.

Darby: Yes. And they were so elated to learn that the monument would be erected and they were there and can you imagine if there were enough funds for Peter Poyas to be up there as well? Oh my gosh! (laugher)

[Question #9: Is Denmark Vesey adequately memorialized in Charleston at this point? Would a Multiple Property Submission to the National Register of Historic Places that covered a variety of locations important to the insurrection and Vesey’s life be a useful contribution to the current body of commemoration in Charleston?]

Darby: Is Denmark Vesey adequately memorialized? Sadly, I would say no. Because there still is not enough interest in him—I think particularly among the young—and he is still being demonized by so many, so I feel that it is not adequate.

This next question that you have about a multiple property submission? Yes, there is no question about that. And as matter of fact, it would be of help to other African American monuments that could be raised. We’ve been at this for so long
that the committee is so very tired (laughter) but at least we have a type of blueprint to help others if they want to do something for other figures. Now of course there were four major reason why the monument came into existence but for me a fifth reason was that if African Americans could do Denmark Vesey here in Charleston, South Carolina, then those African Americans, liberals, and radical whites could do a monument on Nat Turner in Virginia. That has never happened. So that was my fifth reason because if we could show Vesey could be erected that that could give them some gumption to say, “Hey we could do something for Nat Turner,” and as a matter of fact I think Virginia could do something on Gabriel Prosser. So… that was the fifth reason for me.

[Question #10: Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything I haven’t asked you that you would like to comment on?]

Another thing is if it were not for Mayor Riley I do not believe the committee would have been successful because really he did his best to assist us even when it came down to the naming of Hampton Park, assisting with giving us funds. However, I’m sad to say that it took a political connection to get Vesey. And again not being arrogant, but I do think that if I, being one member of the monument committee, were not a part of Charleston County Council with political connections, I think that the opposition would have been in a position to shun us and say, “No, you don’t need this,” but because of the political connections that this person may need this or this person may need that— [they may think] we may have to go to Darby and since Darby is a member of this
committee—we may need this and so I’m thinking that’s one reason it came into existence—political connections. And that’s why it’s so important for African Americans to be on these various boards and commissions and county councils and forms of representation, because they unmarginalize the history that’s so often left us out.

And I guess something else I would like to say—whether this will be a part of your thesis or not—disappointed in the church specifically the A.M.E.’s bishops because Denmark Vesey came out of the A.M.E. church and when this plan came into existence I thought—I’m saying to myself—there will not be a problem raising the money. Because when we first met at [inaudible] asking where will we get the money? And I’m saying we won’t have a problem with it. The A.M.E.’s they’re going to be doing it because the love Vesey as their son. I was so wrong (laughter). I was so wrong. And incidentally, I’m not an A.M.E., I’m a Baptist so… (laughter) but other than that I think that’s it.

Now did you read how Vesey came into existence? Did Dr. Powers or Mr. Franks tell you how we got Vesey?

Dykens: You mean—in what way?

Darby: In terms of the actual idea, the thought.

Dykens: I think I read an interview with Curtis Franks about that but I can’t remember exactly.

Darby: Well, it has been reproduced many times but I think for me—I was a 16-year-old freshman at Morris College and basically it was just a dream of mine. I never
thought it would come to fruition. I knew in the back of my mind that I was going to do something with Vesey. I didn’t know exactly what it was. Whether my son was going to be called Denmark Vesey. But I don’t have a son, I have daughters (laughter). Or something like naming a street. But I did not know the magnitude of how he would come to exist in terms of a monument. So that’s a long time ago, ma’am (laughter) and I think that if the committee knew that it would take eighteen years from the very beginning, I don’t think—no. No. But persistence, persistence, persistence.

And I guess another major reason why we were successful even though people came and went. The reason why the monument committee was so successful is that there were no egos. We didn’t have to worry about who was this or who was that, who has this degree who has that degree. All of us basically were smart as hell with a lot of education and whatnot but we did not let that get in the way. Because many times someone would get despondent or we would try to throw up our hands and the others said, “No, come on—we’ve come this far,” so that’s where we are. But yes ma’am, if I think of something else I will definitely email it to you.

Dykens: Oh, that would be great.

Darby: Alright.

Dykens: Well I did have one question that’s not on here. I was noticing—I was reading through the Arts and History Commission minutes and there is a very long
meeting where they kind of picked apart the language that was used on the final monument. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Darby: My question was, “When are we going to be educated enough to write our own history?” Why is it that we have to write through the eyes of the—European-American eyes? Why can’t we write from an Afro-centric perspective? Why?

And we weren’t embellishing anything, everything was from historically documented facts. It was nothing that was embarrassing the city, so why can’t we write our own story? But we persisted. They made some very, very minor changes, but overall we pressed until we got what we wanted to get. They tried to stump us in terms of, “opinion this,” and “opinion that,” but we had studied the other monuments to say, “Look, they [inaudible], so why can’t we?” So we were determined to write our history, ma’am. Yes.

Dykens: Okay. I think that’s about it. Thank you!
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