

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 13
Issue 1 March 2010

Article 16

3-1-2010

Groundbreaking for Vesey Monument

David Slade

Post and Courier of Charleston, S.C.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Slade, David (2010) "Groundbreaking for Vesey Monument," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol13/iss1/16>

This News and Announcements is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Groundbreaking for Vesey Monument

David Slade

Posted: [Tuesday, February 2, 2010 12:01 a.m.](#), Updated: [Friday, March 23, 2012 11:52 a.m.](#)



Grace Beahm / A model of the new Denmark Vesey Memorial that will be erected in Hampton Park, designed by Ed Dwight.

In an event sure to rekindle the racially polarized debate over Denmark Vesey's place in history, a site in Hampton Park was dedicated Monday for a monument to the man hanged for plotting a slave rebellion in Charleston.

To the local politicians, religious leaders and historians at the event, Vesey was a civil rights leader acting on a universal desire for justice that unites all people. Monument designer Ed Dwight favorably compared Vesey to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



• Artist Ed Dwight discusses the new Denmark Vesey memorial that will be erected in Hampton Park. The civil rights leader was hanged in 1822 for plotting an uprising in Charleston.

But this is Charleston, where the hanging of a portrait of Vesey in the municipal auditorium in 1976 -- more than 150 years after Vesey was himself publicly hanged -- prompted much criticism, and the theft of the painting.

"It was very controversial," College of Charleston history professor Bernard Powers Jr. said. "People were writing to *The News and Courier* expressing outrage that the portrait of a criminal could be hung in a public place."

The painting was returned, and more securely mounted, after Charleston Mayor Joe Riley said the city would commission a replacement if the painting remained missing.

Powers, a member of the committee planning the Vesey monument, said he smiles every time he sees the painting.

In Hampton Park on Monday, in a clearing not far behind the large gazebo on Mary Murray Boulevard, the Rev. Joseph Darby acknowledged both the strong feelings about Vesey and the day's chilly weather in his opening comments.

"God ordered this weather for everyone who said it would be a cold day before there was a statue for Denmark Vesey in Charleston," Darby said.

Riley described Vesey as an important civil rights figure, part of the "substantially untold story of African-American history and life in this community and this country, and their role in building America."

"We tell these untold stories so the truth will set us free," the mayor said.

Vesey and 34 other alleged conspirators were hanged in the summer of 1822. Vesey was convicted of plotting a bloody uprising in Charleston, in which enslaved blacks and freed men like himself would take up arms and slaughter the white residents, and then flee to Haiti.

Vesey had purchased his freedom after winning a lottery.

Whether Vesey actually plotted an uprising remains a question debated by historians, with little to go upon but spotty records of the trial. Much of the evidence was testimony from slaves who were rewarded financially, freed, or spared death sentences for their cooperation.

Powers said some questions are unanswered, but he believes the case has been made that Vesey did plan the uprising.

Certainly, South Carolinians had no doubt the insurrection was real.

The foiled uprising prompted the city to establish an armory and militia training ground that became The Citadel and what is now Marion Square, and restrictive laws put harsh new limits on blacks in Charleston, whether enslaved or free.

The planned Vesey monument has been in the works since 1996, with Charleston County Councilman Henry Darby leading the effort.

In 2000, the city of Charleston donated \$25,000 and the land, and in 2007, County Council agreed to give \$40,000.

While Monday's event was billed as a groundbreaking, Darby said there's still about \$300,000 to be raised.

The "Denmark Vesey: Spirit of Freedom Monument" has been designed to feature a bronze statue of Vesey and the other ringleaders in the plotted uprising, Peter Poyas and Jack "Gullah Jack" Purcell, standing atop a 5-foot granite pedestal on a plaza.