

Sources and Interpretations

Power and Confession:

On the Credibility of the Earliest Reports of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy

James O'Neil Spady

THAT Denmark Vesey inspired and led the most extensive effort to organize a slave insurrection in U.S. history was once a familiar story. In textbooks, lecture notes, and monographs, historians reported that Vesey had recruited a set of coconspirators from among the enslaved laborers, domestics, and hired-out slaves in Charleston, South Carolina. They had plotted a bold revolt during the spring of 1822, inciting support by advocating for a biblical exodus and the natural rights of the enslaved. Secret meetings had gradually generated an extensive network encompassing scores of conspirators in the city and countryside. Thousands of slaves pledged to participate. The plan called for a devastating, coordinated attack from multiple directions that would quickly capture Charleston's weapons store, burn the town, and commandeer ships on which to flee to Haiti, possibly with Haitian aid. But just days before the attack would have commenced, the "Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy" was exposed by slaves. The subsequent trials led to thirty-five hanged, including Vesey himself, and thirty-eight more transported. The local African Methodist Episcopal Church was destroyed. And the events changed southern history by shattering white confidence in the docility of the enslaved, giving evidence of slaves' desire for freedom and inspiring newly prohibitive

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regulations of slaves and free blacks. Breathtaking in scope and drama, the plan and its betrayal made Vesey, a free black carpenter and former slave, seem a tragic-heroic figure of great courage and significant political acumen.¹

Then, in 2001, historian Michael P. Johnson argued in an article for the *William and Mary Quarterly* that the slave testimonies (“confessions”) at the heart of the legal and historical evidence were fabricated by anxious, racist, white Charlestonians. The Vesey conspiracy was not really a slave conspiracy at all. Vesey and his coconspirators had been framed. The only conspiracy was by whites who wanted to eliminate free blacks such as Vesey and to close the African Methodist Episcopal Church that he and others attended. Claims in the court documents that there had been an extensive conspiratorial network among the enslaved were merely “conjured” into being by whites who intimidated prisoners, coerced confessions, led witnesses, and jailed the accused together so that mortal fear of the gallows would yield corroborated stories that named names and chose scapegoats, such as Vesey.² To hide this white conspiracy, authorities edited their records of the investigation and trials, changing statements and destroying documents. In Johnson’s revision of the events, Vesey and many other accused who did not testify, who pleaded innocent, or who kept silent attained a grim heroism by remaining mute in the face of the worst. One can still argue that the events changed southern history, though with substantially different meaning, since Johnson’s interpretation leads to lynching and white conspiracy instead of a black struggle for freedom and abolition.

Johnson’s critique of the parts of the evidence on which he focused was often devastatingly unassailable, and it has productively advanced scholarly approaches to power relationships written into the evidence of slave conspiracies. But, beginning with a Forum in the subsequent issue of the *Quarterly*, Johnson’s extension of that critique into a claim that there was no conspiracy among slaves has received both support and criticism. There is no consensus yet on what the heightened skepticism about the court documents means for interpretations of the 1822 events. Johnson’s interpretation has affected how some textbooks are written and not others, and he has found persistent and challenging critics in Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette. They have, individually or together, published at least three essays offering fresh evidence and debating key parts of Johnson’s argument.

¹ The standard text on Denmark Vesey’s life and the 1822 conspiracy is Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, rev. ed. (Lanham, Md., 2004). For bibliographies of the most significant older works on the events of 1822, see Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 58, no. 4 (October 2001): 915–76, esp. 972–73; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 253–60.

² Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 971.

Jointly, they are working on a new volume of the trial record and supporting documents. Yet, with ongoing debate, this extensively documented incident remains bedeviled by a reasonable doubt with significant implications: are the transcripts of slaves' testimony credible at all as reports of an intended slave uprising?³

Using Johnson's criteria for evaluating the evidence, the earliest reports that white authorities received lead, surprisingly, to a conclusion different from the one Johnson himself reached: Joe LaRoche and George Wilson, who reported plans to spark a slave uprising, were so placed within networks of intimate relationships among slaves and slave owners and gave their initial testimony under such conditions that they must be accepted as credible.⁴ Johnson dismissed them as "pet witnesses," insisted their testimony was not significant, and focused on other "star witnesses," who gave most of the testimony when measured as lines of text.⁵ That approach obscures Wilson's and LaRoche's pivotal statements. Reconsidering these early reports opens a fresh pathway into the archive, shedding some light on the uprising's organization and suggesting how extensive it might have been. This early testimony indicates that the planners had extended their reach into the countryside by using intimate family bonds between urban and rural slaves to create communication networks. New supporting evidence furthermore suggests that if an uprising had begun in Charleston, these networks might have helped

³ Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 233–51 (app. 2: "Denmark Vesey and the Historians"); Robert L. Paquette, "From Rebellion to Revisionism: The Continuing Debate about the Denmark Vesey Affair," *Journal of the Historical Society* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 291–334. For an abstract of Michael P. Johnson's success with some media and other scholars, *ibid.*, 293, 327 nn. 6–11. See also Paquette and Egerton, "Of Facts and Fables: New Light on the Denmark Vesey Affair," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 105, no. 1 (January 2004): 8–48; Jordan Lewis Reed, "American Jacobins: Revolutionary Radicalism in the Civil War Era" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2009), 55 n. 35, 61–66.

⁴ The intimate dimensions of slavery have not been lost on scholars, going back at least to Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). For a few other examples, see Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York, 2004), 187–233; Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), 51–83. To engage the theme of intimacy in the Vesey conspiracy is in part to return to terrain covered in William Freehling, "Denmark Vesey's Anti-Paternalistic Reality," in *The Reintegration of American History* (New York, 1994), 34–58. For other analyses taking intimacy as a significant category, see David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore, 1985); Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989); Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994). I have chosen to follow the spelling of Joe LaRoche's name as found in Douglas R. Egerton's and Michael P. Johnson's work (LaRoche), rather than how some of the documents sometimes spelled it (LaRoache). See Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 915–76; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*.

⁵ Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 945 (quotations).

restive slaves in the countryside to learn of the events and therefore decide whether to join the Charleston uprising.⁶

GEORGE WILSON was a mixed-race, converted Methodist who professed loyalty to his master and enjoyed an unimpeachable reputation among blacks and whites. He and Joe LaRoche gave the first credible and specific testimony about an uprising to Charleston officials, confirming an earlier, less specific report from another slave named Peter Prioleau and launching the city's investigation in earnest. The circumstances of Wilson's early testimony do not confirm Johnson's analysis. Wilson was a volunteer, never compelled to testify and never arrested. He had no special reason to fear imprisonment, either. He never, therefore, had the motive or opportunity Johnson describes as leading to the production of a false story of conspiracy among the court's star witnesses. Nor is it likely that the court faked his testimony. Rolla Bennett, the main person impugned by Wilson's testimony, had white legal counsel present, hired by Thomas Bennett Jr., the sitting governor of South Carolina. Counsel for Rolla Bennett could have chosen to cross-examine Wilson or attack his credibility but apparently chose not to attempt it. Though it is perhaps possible that the court could have destroyed an exculpatory cross-examination, surely legal counsel for Governor Bennett—or the governor himself—would have denounced the court if it had either destroyed an effective cross-examination or faked Wilson's statements in the public record. Instead Rolla Bennett confessed once he was convicted and the governor, who stood to lose valuable property, concluded that his own trusted domestic slave was in fact guilty. The most reasonable probability is that Wilson got through the proceedings unscathed because he reported truthfully the news he had learned. The portion of the trial record dealing with his testimony is credible. Wilson had to decide either to become a de

⁶ This research is part of my book (in progress) on learning, race, and power in the Lower South, but my plan is to expand on the approach in a book on uprisings in North America. On Joe LaRoche, George Wilson, and other "unarrested" witnesses as "pet witnesses," see Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 944 ("unarrested"), 945 ("pet witnesses"), 944–45 nn. 90–91, 970. Michael P. Johnson opposes the label of "pet witnesses" to "arrested witnesses," whom he argues were far more significant (*ibid.*, 945). His evidence to support their significance is an assessment of the number of lines of testimony arrested and pet witnesses gave. Arrested, "star," or "cooperative" witnesses gave most of the volume of recorded testimony, and Johnson claims that the key context of their testimony was their fear of punishment, which elicited false testimony (*ibid.*, "star," 945, "cooperative," 945 n. 93, 945 nn. 91–99, 951–52, 960). His argument centers on an analysis of the testimony of arrested witnesses. This procedure obscures and fails to appreciate the more nuanced relationships of power within Wilson's and LaRoche's voluntary confessions. The definition of intimacy used in my framing of that nuanced power is not solely about the conjugal family. It is also about close relationships and person-to-person encounters in general and the power dynamics within them. See Ann Laura Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Stoler (Durham, N.C., 2006), 1–22, esp. 13–16.

facto part of the conspiracy he had just learned of or to reveal the plot to his master, and he did not hesitate to do the latter. He confessed. This decisiveness seems mainly to have been driven by fear for his friends and his own immortal soul if he kept quiet about what he had learned.⁷

The centerpiece of Wilson's testimony was that LaRoche brought Bennett to him one night to share the secret of a planned insurrection. Bennett warned Wilson of the conspiracy in coded language and described its broadest features to him. Wilson understood, refused to join, wept, and urged both men to avoid the whole affair. Then he and LaRoche—though at Wilson's urging—went together to Wilson's master, Major John Wilson, and reported what they had learned. Because Wilson's and LaRoche's confessions are so closely tied together in the circumstances of their production, Wilson's credibility extends substantially to LaRoche: if LaRoche was lying about the meeting with Bennett and Wilson, then so was Wilson. If the court faked or substantially altered LaRoche's testimony, certainly Governor Bennett or his attorney would have challenged the veracity of the record rather than accept Rolla Bennett's guilt. But it also makes little sense to conclude that Wilson and LaRoche colluded to frame Bennett because, though they gave consistent testimony, they did not report identical stories. LaRoche's testimony, unlike Wilson's, suggested that LaRoche had hesitated to report the crime of conspiracy. He even told the court of conditions under which he would have joined it. It is hard to believe that LaRoche would have colluded with Wilson to give testimony that made Wilson look like a hero to whites and himself a possible insurrectionist. Moreover, that LaRoche risked incriminating himself ought to qualify him as credible according to Johnson's "rule of thumb" that testimony "manifestly not in a witness's interest is more likely to be true."⁸ LaRoche's testimony, therefore, should be regarded as credible.⁹

⁷ "Examination of George a negro belonging to Mr. Wilson," Governors' Message, Enclosure B, Court Proceedings and Testimony Regarding the Denmark Vesey Rebellion, House of Representatives Copy, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>; "Examination of Joe, a negro man belonging to Mr. LaRoche," *ibid.* For Peter Prioleau's statement, see John Oliver Killens, introd. to *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston, 1970), 33–34. The definition of conspirators effective in 1822 was an unhelpful inheritance from English common law adopted by South Carolina in 1712. It did not have a threshold as to membership, and there is no reason to assume that three individuals could not be treated as a conspiracy, but the three would seemingly need to have pledged an oath or made some other alliance. Joe LaRoche's testimony suggests that he may have done that at some point, perhaps telling Rolla Bennett that he would join if the rebels passed his house. See Thomas Cooper, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C., 1837), 2: 423. I am grateful to Marion C. Chandler, an archivist at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, for this citation.

⁸ Michael P. Johnson, "Reading Evidence," *WMQ* 59, no. 1 (January 2002): 193–202 (quotations, 194).

⁹ "Examination of George belonging to Wilson," South Carolina Department of Archives and History; "Examination of Joe, belonging to LaRoche," *ibid.*

LaRoche told the investigating court that Bennett had attempted to recruit him to join an intended “rising” of the slaves. He had refused, but Bennett brought the subject up again on a later occasion, telling him more of the details. Bennett told LaRoche about attending meetings in which the conspiracy was planned. He said visitors from the countryside had come into the city to take part in the meetings. LaRoche claimed that Bennett told him white men had said that the legislature had set the slaves free but that local whites were preventing it. According to Bennett, LaRoche testified, Haitians and men from “Africa” would hasten to their aid if and when the blacks attacked the whites. The planners also expected help from three sets of “country” slaves: “Mingo” from Johns Island (near Stono), a body of slaves from James Island (across the Ashley River), and an unspecified third group that could come down to the city from Charleston Neck (Figure I).¹⁰ LaRoche said Bennett claimed personally to be a contact for the contingent in the Johns area.¹¹

This testimony was important to the court because it was difficult for the defense to impugn. Governor Bennett’s lawyer called four witnesses to testify against LaRoche’s credibility. But all four testified that they knew no reason to think LaRoche had a personal vendetta to settle with Rolla Bennett. At the close of the presentation of the evidence, Bennett confessed. Though he denied some charges, he admitted the most damning, made references to the biblical exodus, and named Peter Poyas as a fellow organizer. Then the court unanimously convicted him. Finally, Bennett gave a jailhouse confession to the Reverend Daniel Hall, a Methodist minister. Even without its specificity, LaRoche’s and Wilson’s testimony would have at least confirmed the general fact of a conspiracy, which investigators had first learned of weeks earlier from another slave. Prioleau had claimed that William Paul had approached him about “the rising.” Paul had told Prioleau that a large number had joined in a plan to rise up for their freedom and that he could take him to a man who would write down his name on a list of participants. There is no indication that Wilson and LaRoche knew

¹⁰ “Examination of Joe, belong to LaRoche,” South Carolina Department of Archives and History (“rising,” [12], “country,” 7).

¹¹ On further questioning, Joe LaRoche declared that Denmark Vesey had also spoken to him and that meetings might have been at Vesey’s home on Bull Street. Rolla Bennett also named Vesey in his second confession, following his postconviction confession during trial proceedings. But for the moment, for my thought experiment, I am excluding these statements from the main text because they fit Michael P. Johnson’s criteria for suspecting the veracity of the statements (see footnote 6). See “Examination of Rolla,” *Governors’ Message, Enclosure B*, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 41–45, 45–47.

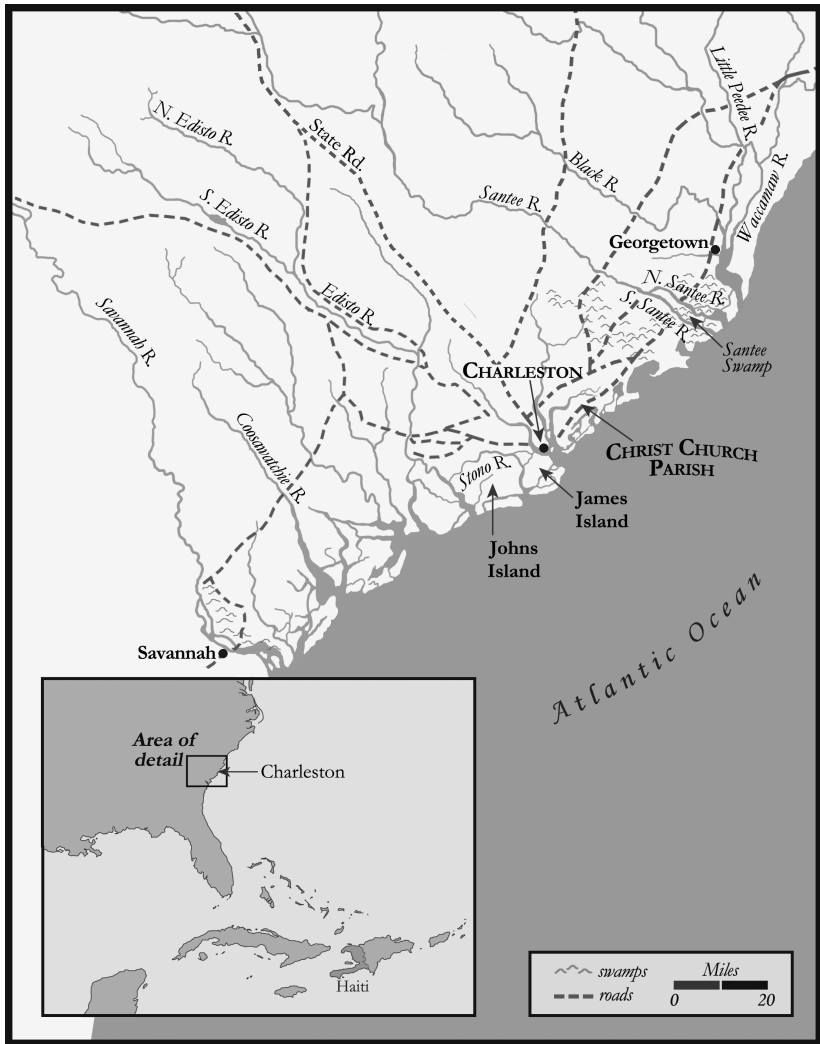


FIGURE I

Major water routes, roads, and swamps from Charleston to Savannah and Georgetown, circa 1822. Drawn by Rebecca Wrenn. A color version of this map is available: <http://jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.68.2.0287/>.

of these men's testimony in any way whatsoever. Therefore in these early reports—excluding Bennett's and Paul's detailed prison confessions—we have a credible story about an uprising. The documents are more detailed than most such reports in North American archives, offering an unusual opportunity to describe and explain the slaves' organizing process and its reach into the countryside.¹²

ROLLA BENNETT, Joe LaRoche, and another of the witnesses against Rolla, a man called only Sambo in the records, were related by marriage or kinship to a woman named Amaretta. Sambo was her brother. LaRoche was her former husband. She was married to Bennett at the time of the trials. Amaretta was likely more significant to the events than scholars have appreciated, perhaps a key link in the communication networks. Scholars have shown that slave women of Amaretta's time and place were active and assertive in the illicit but open markets in Charleston. These markets drew slave women and men from the countryside into the city on a regular basis and likely were a communications hub. Amaretta must have known the market well as a customer, acquiring food for, among other things, the meals where Bennett and LaRoche apparently discussed the uprising plans. Sambo lived twelve miles away, on the LaRoche plantation on Johns Island near Stono in the countryside. The uprising planners wanted LaRoche to recruit people at Johns because Bennett did not know the people as well as LaRoche did. Thus, LaRoche's confession reveals that the planners assessed existing intimate relationships and made decisions about who could most discreetly and effectively assist them in spreading the news of the intended rising to people in the countryside.¹³

The official report of the proceedings did not share this information about family relationships with the public in as much detail as was available in the manuscript record. Michael P. Johnson argued that such discrepancies between the manuscript record and the published report supported a conclusion that the court conspired to cover up their coercion of false testimony from their fearful witnesses. Such discrepancies, however, do not

¹² "Examination of Rolla," South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 45–47. The examinations of Joe LaRoche, Mrs. LaRoche, and three of Thomas Bennett's slaves (Peter, March, and Sampson) on Rolla Bennett's behalf took place June 22, 1822. See Governors' Message, Enclosure B, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>. For Peter Prioleau's statement, see Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 33–34. For William Paul's fearful confession, *ibid.*, 35.

¹³ "Examination of Joe, belong to LaRoche," South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 166–78; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 55–56, 97, 144.

necessarily prove that the underlying story was false or that a white conspiracy existed. The court suppressed witness names to protect them (and their masters' financial interests) from harm, but it probably suppressed information about the role of intimate family and social relationships for the sake of the city's security. Some of the discrepancies between the official report and the manuscripts—though not all of them—represent instances of the well-established practice of regulating print discourse about slaves and slavery for fear of encouraging insubordination or rebellion. Charleston was a city where black actors could not perform on stage for fear of the effects on the city's enslaved. It was a city where the word "Negroes" might be disguised with asterisks in newspapers for fear of attracting slaves' attention.¹⁴ Reading the published official report in this context suggests that elisions from the manuscripts may have been considered prudent to inhibit emulation of the uprising organizers' techniques for bridging the difficult divide between urban and plantation slaves.

Those techniques could have easily been imitated. LaRoche was chosen through his close intimate and family connections and for how these relationships might extend the planners' network safely. Perhaps such outreach was part of how Bennett had been approached, since he also had friends and family in the countryside. LaRoche testified that he was told there were many slaves in the country already intending to join the conspiracy. Such relationships allowed something more forceful than mere ideas to be exchanged: intimate personal relationships, in face-to-face meetings, could mobilize community values of family and loyalty that would underscore the practical significance of assertions of divine sanction, human dignity, or political liberty. Furthermore the slave patrols frequently encountered slaves visiting family spread out among the plantations, and they could become intolerant of frequent trips, even if accompanied by a pass. Distributing the trips among multiple slaves, such as Bennett, LaRoche, and others, might outwit the patrollers' suspicions. As an organizing technique, it was an insightful adaptation to the spatial and legal power dynamics of slavery.¹⁵

¹⁴ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 229. Robert Olwell cites a notice in the May 29, 1775, [Charleston] *South Carolina Gazette* claiming "there is gone down to Sheerness, seventy-eight thousand guns and bayonets, to be sent to America, to put in the Hands of N*****s" (ibid.). Olwell notes there were rumors of insurrection in Charleston in 1775–76 that might have driven the *Gazette* to omit letters in "N[egroe]s" as encoding; when this text was read aloud by whites, they would stumble on the key word, possibly then not reading it at all in the street or tavern where slaves might hear. In 1807 John Lambert's *Travels through Canada, and the U.S.* noted an incidence of keeping blacks from the stage. See Lambert in Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 405.

¹⁵ "Examination of Sambo, a negro the property of Mrs. LaRoche," Governors' Message, Enclosure B, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 42–43; Sally E.

Few historians have closely examined this countryside aspect of the plan and its intimate dimensions, perhaps because they lacked leads to corroborating evidence. Robert L. Paquette has published information about assaults, insurrectionary activities, and incitements in the countryside around Charleston, toward Stono. Other rural groups existed to the north of Charleston too. In 1822 groups of runaway slaves, called Maroons, became active in and around Christ Church Parish.¹⁶ In the Christ Church uprisings, planters thought local slaves had been influenced by direct encounters with free blacks in Charleston. Beginning in 1821 and 1822, reported declines in crop prices had led some planters in Christ Church to bring redundant slaves to Charleston for sale. Some in the parish believed that the “unrestrained intercourse of these with free blacks and low and worthless white people” in Charleston inspired ideas “of insubordination and of emancipation” in the slaves who made this trip.¹⁷ These ideas then circulated back into the countryside once these slaves were sold or were returned unsold.

Some planters argued that these movements of people instigated “maronage.” In the most important example—from the perspective of the planters—a slave named Joe killed a planter near Georgetown and then eluded capture in the Santee River region.¹⁸ He escaped even when organized militia units attempted to locate him and when the General Assembly and Governor Thomas Bennett Jr. established bounties: “Emboldened by his successes and his seeming good fortune he plunged deeper and deeper into Crime until neither fear nor danger could deter him first from threatening and then from executing a train of mischief we believe quite without a parallel in this Country.” With Joe apparently attacking whites with impunity, “runaways flew to his Camp” and Joe “soon became their head.” Local white authorities and leading citizens grudgingly admitted “he had the art and the address to inspire his followers with the most Wild and dangerous enthusiasm . . . few of the enterprises . . . planned . . . fail’d.”¹⁹ Though whites emphasized such

Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 115–17.

¹⁶ Robert L. Paquette describes other instances of assault and small-scale rebellion during the summer and fall of 1822. See Paquette, *Journal of the Historical Society* 4: 307–9. Paquette’s examples are south of Charleston; mine are north of Charleston.

¹⁷ “Petition of John Jonah Murrell et al., Christ Church Parish, to the South Carolina House,” 1829, in Loren Schweninger, *The Southern Debate over Slavery* (Urbana, Ill., 2001), 1: 105–9 (quotations, 1: 106).

¹⁸ Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 20–22.

¹⁹ “Inhabitants of Claremont, Clarendon, St. John, St. Stevens, and Richland Districts to South Carolina Senate,” ca. 1824, in Schweninger, *Southern Debate over Slavery*, 1: 83–85 (“Emboldened,” 1: 83, “runaways flew,” 1: 84).

leadership by an individual who possessed art and could inspire enthusiasm, it seems probable that a critical factor in his success was the community itself, which somehow was able to share enough information with slaves so that runaways could find the camp while keeping that information away from the white militias, which tramped fruitlessly around the lower Santee.

The Maroons apparently lived safely and well hidden amid the Santee plantation country. An extended, privately funded expedition into the Santee watershed and swamps failed to locate the community at any of its possible camps. As in the case of the Charleston uprising, an enslaved associate of the rebels voluntarily gave whites the edge they needed. Only the "fidelity of a slave belonging to *Mrs Perrin* of Richland District *named Royal*" made the surprise of the Maroons possible. Royal Perrin knew the location of the camp, and he took authorities there personally, luring the rebels out by acting as a decoy. In a short skirmish in which the rebels "attempted to defend themselves with well charged musquets," the camp was destroyed and its members were killed, captured, or driven off.²⁰ Even so, a separate incident in 1822 produced a small Maroon community in Christ Church that included whole families and eventually even children who were born in the woods.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 84 (quotations).

²¹ The General Assembly manumitted Royal Perrin as reward for his aid. In the second example,

in 1822, a negro . . . absconded and came into the parish as a runaway. In 1824 a fellow belonging to Mrs. Legare joined him as a runaway was shot and killed in his company—In 1825 a family five in number purchased at the sale of A. Vanderhorst, absconded and joined the same ringleader—They continued out until October last, when the Children surrendered (one having been born in the woods) the Father and Mother having been both shot and killed—In 1827 three Negroes belonging to a Parishioners Estate returned in like manner after the sale of his effects, as runaways. One of them in January last snapped a gun heavily loaded with Slugs at one of Your Memorialists, who met him in the woods and who immediately shot the negro. Another of these three negroes in October last attacked another of Your Memorialists with a knife fifteen inches long, stabbed him in the hand and would have cut his throat, but for assistance rendered in time to save him. In 1828, runaway slaves were collected from various parts of the Parish, one was Killed upon the spot, and another severely wounded for the second time and taken, in January last Eighteen Slaves the property of one of your Memorialists went off under their driver and of these one fellow has been shot and killed, while the house of the owner has been pillaged by his own slaves, ten of whom are still out in the neighboring parish—

See "Petition of John Jonah Murrell," in Schweninger, *Southern Debate over Slavery*, 1: 84–85, 108.

These regions where Maroon activity was under way or where it would soon erupt figured prominently in some of the confessions. Even in the official report, the court claimed that the Charleston uprising planners had traveled as far as Combahee, Euhaws, Georgetown, and Santee. The main routes to these locations would have taken them right through areas in which Maroons were hiding. Slave master James Ferguson, in his letter to the court describing the supposed guilt of several slaves on his country plantations, wrote of traveling with one of the alleged conspirators (Frank Ferguson) to Georgetown.²² Countryside slaves may not have been extensively coordinated with the Charleston uprising, but the evidence demonstrates that a significant opportunity for such coordination existed.

ROYAL PERRIN learned the location of the Maroon camp—a secret circulating within parts of the slave community—and decided to confess what he knew to white authorities rather than become complicit with the secret. Power drove him to confess, but it was essential that his information be accurate. In Charleston this dynamic between the secret circulation of information and the sudden betrayal of the secret also pivoted on decisions of individual slaves at an intimate level, outside direct surveillance by authorities but nonetheless immersed in this slave society's deeply unequal power relationships. The reasons for these sudden reversals become more intelligible when reviewing the manuscript records rather than the published versions to understand the family relationships, friendships, and loyalties among the slave informants and between them and whites. Slave law created incentives for betrayal, such as the possibility of freedom, but dramatic revelations resulted from loyalties, fears, and affections in the everyday lives of the enslaved and free black community.²³

The closer a given relationship was, the more likely it was that slaves would share information with each other. These networks of trust or loyalty eventually included whites, but not necessarily the slaves' own masters. In those scenarios slaves sometimes revealed the secrets they had learned. Peter Prioleau and William Paul did not know each other well. Prioleau would probably never have been told of the plan if he had not inadvertently remarked about Haiti, which left Paul mistakenly thinking he might sympathize with the plan. Because they were not closely acquainted, Prioleau's access to further information—and Paul's willingness to continue recruiting him—ended with Prioleau's nervous response and immediate flight. But George Wilson, Joe LaRoche, and Rolla Bennett were different. Suppressed

²² Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 20–22.

²³ Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 147.

in the official report were statements showing how close the three men were: Bennett was Amaretta's current husband and LaRoche her former husband, and Bennett, LaRoche, and Wilson were all in the same Methodist class in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Wilson was the class leader. LaRoche described Bennett as a "bosom friend"; they ate meals together that Amaretta Bennett probably prepared.²⁴ In fact it was Bennett's familial connections more than any others that joined LaRoche, Rolla Bennett, and the countryside slaves. Amaretta Bennett's mealtimes supplied the social site through which LaRoche learned of the plan in such detail, a much fuller account than what Prioleau had been able to learn.²⁵

The meeting of Wilson, LaRoche, and Rolla Bennett and the decision by two of them to confess what they learned was therefore a crucial turning point that betrayed one intimate social network (among slaves) to another intimate social network (among slaves and masters). LaRoche was family to Bennett, who wanted him involved, or at least warned, because they were friends. Wilson was also among Bennett's closest intimates. Yet, though LaRoche was tugged in both directions by his relationships with Wilson and Bennett, Wilson immediately decided that participating in the uprising would be a mortal sin. And Wilson prevailed on LaRoche. These intimate dynamics reveal an important fact about this conspiracy and suggest a pattern underlying how other insurrectionary conspiracies and marronages proceeded and were revealed: as the slaves organized, some attempted to recruit or at least warn people with whom they felt a social bond, and vital information thereby eventually crossed from slaves to whites when it reached slaves who had learned to identify with whites as well as blacks.²⁶

Such dynamics within the organizing and exposure of insurrectionary efforts were not unique and their repeated emergence suggests how power at the structural level of slave society was applied, lived, and reversed at the level of intimate relationships. In 1816, for example, a backcountry South Carolina newspaper reported on "a conspiracy . . . among the slaves" with "15 or 20" conspirators. Official reports declared that the planners had used a Methodist church and that some had even been class leaders. The organizers had kept their plans secret within a core group. Their alleged commanders were brothers. But eventually the planners' own networking exposed the plan when white and black communication networks crossed in the person of a single slave whom someone in the core group trusted. That "favorite

²⁴ "Examination of Joe, belonging to LaRoche," South Carolina Department of Archives and History (quotation, [12]).

²⁵ "Examination of Rolla," *ibid.*; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 33–34.

²⁶ "Examination of Joe, belonging to LaRoche," South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

and confidential slave” of a prominent white planter revealed the plan, much like Royal Perrin in the countryside or LaRoche, Prioleau, and Wilson in Charleston.²⁷ Scholars have long observed that slave law recognized the existence of communication networks among slaves. Incentives such as freedom were designed to encourage slaves to expose hidden discussions.²⁸

Slaves learned to plan resistance through intimate social relationships because power in South Carolina slave society had spatial and discursive dynamics that regulated the timing, style, and place of speech and action. Intimate speech was some of the toughest to surveil. Political scientist James C. Scott has described this activity as the staging of public and hidden transcripts: on- and offstage speech. The hidden transcript is secret talk that critiques and upends the masters’ claims to superiority and—as in Wilson’s and LaRoche’s testimony—may eventually include plans for an uprising and not just talk. Prioleau expressed anxiety about Paul’s telling him of a plan for insurrection in a public place, evincing a clear understanding of the need to calibrate speech according to place. This practical knowledge was at least as important as learning the ideas that Anglo-Americans often imagined triggered rebellions, such as Christian doctrines or the concepts of liberty and self-ownership. Such ideas by themselves did not determine resistance. As the three members of Wilson’s African Methodist Episcopal class demonstrate, Christianity might produce either greater loyalty to whites or condemnation of them. Knowledge of the layout of cities or the countryside could make a slave a trusted courier, or it might inform marronage and insurrectionary maneuvers.²⁹ Slaves wove the spatial and discursive dynamics of early American society and culture into fateful decisions of how to live, what to hide, and whom to tell. The African Methodist Episcopal Church doubtlessly became a space of urban marronage for some members such as Denmark Vesey or Bennett but not for Wilson.

CREDIBLE, EARLY REPORTS implicated multiple slaves in a plan to raise a rebellion in Charleston in 1822. Whites immediately labeled the plan a conspiracy, but this term was not what George Wilson and Joe LaRoche appear to have used. They and other slaves usually called it “the rising” or “the business.” The name for the events matters. A rising or a business has connota-

²⁷ [Edwin Clifford Holland], *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated against the Southern and Western States . . .* (Charleston, S.C., 1822), 75–77 (quotation, 75).

²⁸ For information about the Methodist church being involved, see the *Camden [S.C.] Gazette*, July 11, 1816, [3]. For incentives, see Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 147.

²⁹ Holland, *Refutation of the Calumnies*, 75–77; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 33–34; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), 4–5.

tions that are more legitimate, even inspiring. Using the word conspiracy perpetuates the patina of criminality that white slaveholders saw in the slaves' self-liberation, obscuring more than it reveals about the slaves' motivations and subjectivity. An emphasis on the rising or the business reframes the events according to how the accused slaves might have evaluated the actions they were considering and the meaning of their efforts to motivate or caution each other.³⁰

What were the forces that drove Wilson, LaRoche, and Rolla Bennett to decide either to join or to confess once they had learned of the rising? Published and unpublished court records emphasized how enslaved and free black leaders supposedly distorted religious and libertarian ideas for savage, ignorant, and diabolical ends. Magistrates argued that perversions of the Bible had allowed Denmark Vesey to motivate recruits partly by deceiving them. It would be insufficient simply to reverse the polarity of such racial explanations and insist that slaves were motivated by noble and liberationist readings of political and biblical texts. Such an analysis would remain trapped in the white minority's selections from the evidence and would therefore be incapable of appreciating the power relationships between individual slaves and between slaves and whites that the documents reveal. Power expressed and felt in person was the context affecting confession and uprising as well as the meaning of religious or political incitements for deliverance or liberation.³¹

Moving beyond the historiographical controversy and fully explaining the organizers' techniques and why individual slaves decided to join or confess will require credible evidence and an empirically grounded theory of

³⁰ Compare "the rising" and "the business" in manuscripts and the official report. One way of reexamining the uprising plot would be as a chain conspiracy, rather than a hub-and-spoke conspiracy. Doing so might resolve some of the contradictions in testimony because it would suggest that Denmark Vesey was not the exclusive center but rather one articulate link in a chain that had other critical links. As information flowed along the chain, conspirators learned different and even conflicting information about the plan. For uses of "the business" by blacks and whites in the Atlantic world as a term of resistance, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000), 116, 133, 204, 324.

³¹ Michael P. Johnson's essay understands the importance of such power, and therefore coercion and intimidation at the personal level were central to his rejection of slave testimony. See Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 915–76. Douglas R. Egerton's biography of Denmark Vesey also discusses how power dynamics between individuals functioned to coerce or cajole slaves either to join the rising or to confess its existence. Egerton gives a broad context to these relationships, setting his explanations in the social life of the city. He focuses significantly on taverns, friendships, interracial loyalties, intraracial tensions, and family responsibilities in his effort to understand the consciousness of planners and recruits. See Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 54, 65, 68, 81, 92, 96, 112, 124–25, 151.

power and agency in the slaves' confessions. How did power and discourse motivate slaves' decisions? Religious and political ideas were contextualized by how slaves had learned to understand their status and obligations within slave society as a whole. This knowledge of status and obligation gained meaning through immediate and extended family, close friendships, and master-slave loyalties, all of which were the flesh and bone of the incitements to rise up and the fears of insurrection's consequences. Some slaves encouraged, denounced, and described their need and motivation through appeals to manly courage, dignity, and intimate friendship. And some expressed revulsion on an equally intimate terrain, appalled at the prospect of killing the white families and children whom they served and knew well. Powerful personal affections and fears regulated LaRoche's choice to keep the secret when Bennett first revealed the plan to him. Intimate power relationships also regulated his choice to confess when Wilson joined the conversation. Wilson and LaRoche do not appear to have explicitly discussed punishment by whites as a reason to confess. Rather, their fears were reflected in concerns for each other as living friends and as immortal souls. Wilson wept as he spoke secretly with LaRoche and Bennett but only when Bennett declared he could not disavow a plan that was days away from execution.³²

Exaggerated reports about the thousands of slaves who had supposedly joined the uprising in its planning stage are also best explained through an understanding of how such claims functioned in the close relationships of the enslaved, which was the only vehicle through which news circulated until the secret was betrayed. Incitements to manly courage benefited from

³² "Examination of George belonging to Wilson," South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Michael P. Johnson drew empirically grounded theory from two places: legal maxims about how intimidated witnesses behave and an extensive list of studies of rumor and literacy by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. See Johnson, *WMQ* 58: 973–74. I have modeled a different approach to power and discourse in the intimate relationships of the enslaved and in their confessions. Michel Foucault's analysis of power is more appropriate in assessing power relationships within confessions. His narrative of techniques for producing knowledge about human lives begins in the seventeenth century with the religious confession. Foucault argues that the confession is a mode of intimate and power-laden knowledge production that became the model for all modes of dialogue-based investigations by scientists and state agents. Neither the person giving information nor the person hearing it holds complete power. They are in a relationship: speakers feel an "imperious" incitement to speak and without this speech the hearer cannot interpret and intervene. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), 61–62 (quotation, 62), 66–67, 92–94. The religious confession limns a more appropriate approach to George Wilson's and Joe LaRoche's voluntary statements than the carceral category Johnson applies. Ann Laura Stoler has developed this Foucauldian theme. See Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire," 13–16, 19–20.

the impression of mass support. Such tales, if believed, overthrew the specter of white retaliation and replaced it with expectations of numerous well-armed slaves, thus encouraging humble people to join a violent insurrection. This view of a mass uprising was compelling for LaRoche, who admitted at the risk of incriminating himself that if such a rising had launched and his friends, family members, and other insurrectionists had marched past his house, he would have fallen in behind them, bringing what little he owned (some fishing line and grain) to aid the effort. If LaRoche had believed that a few insurgents were merely marching into massacre by a superior force, he perhaps would have had a different response.

LaRoche considered joining the uprising and then later confessed that fact despite fear, not because of it. From his relationships within slave society, he appears to have learned conflicted perceptions of moral action in response to his oppression. He seemed to fear each choice until friends guided him through the paces: he would have joined a battalion of friends in the street, and when he confessed it was with a friend's attendance. For the organizers of the rising in Charleston in 1822 to expect success, they could not assume an army of clear-eyed and resolute revolutionaries were simply waiting for a signal to strike. If an army of thousands would ever mobilize, the uprising's organizers had to assume many others would make decisions as hesitantly as LaRoche. They must have expected that incitements to manhood and vast exaggerations of the prospects of success were essential strategies to convince uncommitted low-country slaves (and maybe themselves) to rise up just as uncommitted slaves had fallen in with rebels in Haiti's North Province in 1791. Persuasion through secret speech and bold action was what other insurrectionary organizers in North America and elsewhere had hoped for. They spread news of an uprising as discreetly as possible to raise community expectations and create a willingness to risk death and destruction for a chance at freedom.³³

Through networks of intimate friendships, study groups, and family, Wilson and LaRoche learned that an uprising was planned to occur in only a few days. No reasonable standard for evaluating evidence should lead historians to ignore these vital reports. Nor should the testimonies be dismissed as idle talk by the oppressed. It was talk seeking to recruit people for a planned uprising, a topic of great danger and seriousness for the enslaved. The talk itself was already an act of defiance. The growing sense of power

³³ "Examination of Joe, belonging to LaRoche," South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 108–35, 183–201; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (1979; repr., Baton Rouge, La., 1992), 11–12; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 155; Paquette, *Journal of the Historical Society* 4: 318–19.

felt by men such as William Paul and Bennett was the uprising in process. And their sense of power gave them confidence that they could speak in ways and in places and with people they would normally have considered too dangerous. Independent sources reveal other risings among slaves in the countryside to the north and south of Charleston who might have exploited an insurrection if one had commenced in the city. That is not to claim the events in the countryside in 1822 were linked to the planned rising in Charleston. And it is not at all the same thing as saying there was an army of thousands waiting for the word to invade Charleston. But it does mean that with the right timing and considerable luck a broader insurrection might have resulted.

The credibility of Wilson's and LaRoche's testimony—as well as the part given by Bennett before conviction—opens a new pathway back into the analysis of the events. In general their credibility restores confidence in the early proceedings because it shows that the court was not making up everything from the start. Wilson and LaRoche had unwittingly and independently confirmed some of what another slave, Peter Prioleau, had volunteered to his own master and the city council two weeks earlier. Prioleau's testimony implicated William Paul, and if he can be believed, several others were also implicated in these first testimonies. Future research will have to determine how extensive the planning for the rising was, what Vesey's particular functions within it were, and to what extent a white conspiracy to coerce false testimonies and execute innocent blacks to calm the white public is traceable through alterations of the public record. Rebuilding the picture of the uprising by following the slaves' testimony from one person to another on the basis of assessments of their credibility and their intimate ties will quickly lead to the jailhouse confessions Michael P. Johnson critiqued. Bennett, for example, named Vesey only after postconviction imprisonment, when he would have had every reason to fear for his life and ample motivation to name names to escape the gallows. For this reason an empirically grounded theory of confession and power among the enslaved as well as in their interactions with whites will be fundamental to a full analysis. Just as we should not simply reverse the moral polarity of slavery to understand what motivated rebellion, we also should not simply invert the conclusions of the court and conclude that its power was so total that it could force Wilson and LaRoche to voluntarily confess, elicit wholly misleading testimony, and hide their own official conspiracy so completely for nearly two centuries.³⁴

³⁴ "Examination of George belonging to Wilson," South Carolina Department of Archives and History; "Examination of Joe, belonging to LaRoche," *ibid.*; Killens, *Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, 33–34; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 62, 66.