Monuments are polestars of public memory. In 2014, the installation of a Denmark Vesey statue in Charleston, South Carolina, inspired discussion and disagreement. Vesey, a formerly enslaved carpenter, was convicted and executed (along with thirty-four alleged accomplices) in 1822 for plotting with Charleston slaves to rise up and escape to Haiti. As the Reverend Joe Darby observed, Vesey is now remembered variously as a “dangerous terrorist” and a “freedom fighter” (p. 798). The same is true of figures like Nat Turner and John Brown. What makes Vesey uniquely contentious in academic circles is a second debate over whether his plot existed at all.

*The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History*, edited by Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette, empowers readers to evaluate the evidence for themselves. In some eight hundred exhaustively researched and annotated pages, Egerton and Paquette present a panoply of documents pertinent to the Vesey conspiracy’s origins, unraveling, and aftermath. They cover background material on Vesey and the histories of slavery, resistance, and African American life in Charleston, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the discovery of the plot by Charleston’s white elite; multiple accounts of the trials, including published and unpublished transcripts; diverse eyewitness reports written amid the insurrection scare, including private correspondence and newspaper articles; the post-trial backlash, including the passage of repressive legislation, the destruction of the AME Church, and the solidification of proslavery political doctrines; and the enduring conflict over commemoration. The diversity of source material enables readers to situate the Vesey affair in a broad chronological, geographic, and political context. The editors’ notes, which reflect years of painstaking research, are equally insightful and will be especially invaluable for readers who are new to the subject.

Yet this book is not simply a document reader; it is an intervention in a fierce historiographical controversy over the very existence of a Vesey-led conspiracy. Egerton and Paquette present their thesis clearly in an editorial statement: “the Vesey plot was one of the most sophisticated acts of collective slave resistance in the history of the United States” (p. xv). They also contribute to the growing scholarship on the political importance of slave resistance by connecting the Vesey affair to earlier clashes over slavery, such as the conflict over Missouri statehood (1819-21), and to later milestones on South Carolina’s path to secession. “If the course of the South to secession can be encapsulated by the extension of South Carolina’s proslavery, states’ rights principles to the other slaveholding states,” the editors argue, “then the
events set in motion by Vesey and his followers played a crucial role in shaping South Carolina's political principles on the road to disunion” (p. xiv).

Among specialists, the second portion of this thesis will likely be less controversial than the first. The Vesey plot need not have been real to nurture the growth of a prickly proslavery political creed. The Charleston *Mercury*’s specious charge that Hannibal Hamlin, Abraham Lincoln’s running mate, was a “mulatto” is instructive. Rather, it is the nature of the plot itself which has provoked scholarly argument. In their explanatory text and footnotes, Egerton and Paquette continue a debate that has flickered, and sometimes blazed, for more than half a century.

Richard C. Wade touched off the controversy in a 1964 article which argued that the alleged plot amounted to no more than tough talk by Charleston blacks or paranoia among Charleston whites.[1] This thesis gained little immediate traction, but Michael P. Johnson reopened the case in a 2001 *William and Mary Quarterly* article. Challenging the precision of previous scholarship and critiquing historians’ eagerness to believe in the emancipatory scheme, Johnson argued that Vesey and other defendants were victims, not instigators, of a plot—one hatched by Charleston elites bent on smashing the AME Church and advancing their own careers.[2] Johnson’s essay sparked a dispute which has smoldered ever since, beginning with a *WMQ* forum in which Egerton and Paquette participated with other prominent scholars.[3]

The debate, which hinges on the reading of evidence extracted—often through torture—within an oppressive regime, has serious implications for the study of history generally and the study of slavery in particular.

**The Denmark Vesey Affair** is an extended response to Johnson’s thesis. In their documents and notes, Egerton and Paquette point out that elite Charlestonians did not doubt the existence of a plot, though some questioned the methods of the investigators. They highlight South Carolina legislators’ outraged response to the governor's attempts to downplay the dangers of Vesey’s conspiracy. They demonstrate by example that the Vesey affair cannot be understood through trial transcripts alone, not least because those texts were redacted to suppress testimony considered unsuitable for public consumption.

As a compilation of valuable documents, a model of meticulous editing, and a contribution to an important historiographical controversy, Egerton and Paquette’s volume is an impressive scholarly achievement. It will provide specialists and lay readers alike with the tools they need to think critically about Denmark Vesey and his milieu. Hopefully, the hefty price tag will not limit the book’s influence to those with access to well-heeled libraries, though in an age of lean budgets this unfortunately may be unavoidable. We need to promote the widest possible conversation about Vesey and to conduct it within the framework of reasoned, evidence-driven debate, not least because his church was the one targeted in Dylan Roof’s terrorist attack a year after the Vesey statue was unveiled.

**Notes**


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