



He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey

Douglas R. Egerton

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On July 2, 1822, Denmark Vesey was hanged in Charleston, S.C., for his role in planning one of the largest slave uprisings in the United States. During his long, extraordinary life Vesey played many roles--Caribbean field hand, cabin boy, Chandler's man, house servant, proud freeman, carpenter, husband, father, church leader, abolitionist, revolutionary. Yet until his execution transformed him into a symbol of liberty, Vesey made it his life's work to avoid the attention of white authorities. Because he preferred to dwell in the hidden alleys of Charleston's slave community, Vesey remains as elusive as he is today celebrated, and his legend is often mistaken for fact. In this biography of the great rebel leader, Douglas R. Egerton employs a variety of historical sources--church records, court documents, travel accounts, and newspapers from America and Saint Domingue--to recreate the lost world of the mysterious Vesey. Although Vesey's 1822 conspiracy has attracted the attention of earlier scholars, Egerton recaptures the historical drama and significance of the failed exodus by examining the turbulent life that led up to it. If Vesey's plot was unique in the annals of slave rebellions in North America, it was because he was unique; his goals, as well as the methods he chose to achieve them, were the product of a hard life's experience. Writers too often construct generic slave rebels, whose plans and personalities vary little from one plot or revolt to another. Egerton, a leading authority of slave resistance, demonstrates that Vesey's hope of leading his disciples out of the United States set him apart from earlier black insurgents. Whereas most of those who rose for their freedom during the 1790s, such as Toussaint Louverture in Haiti or Gabriel in Virginia, fought to join political society on equal terms, Vesey simply sought to escape it. Unlike Nat Turner's chaotic revolt, Vesey's plan was hardly doomed to failure; his precise design, months if not years in conception, struck his contemporaries as eminently feasible. Vesey's remarkable fifty-five year journey to the gallows is the subject of this book.

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