

From freedom to revolt: The case of Denmark Vesey

Brief history

Denmark Vesey was born in 1767 in West Africa. His birth name was Telemaque. After a turn of good luck, he was able to purchase his freedom and then, as a skilled artisan, began to prosper, eventually owning land. Not happy with his individual success, Vesey would ultimately plan a revolt that would lead to his own death in the gallows.

While still a boy, Denmark was captured, sold into slavery and brought to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was purchased in 1781 by Captain Joseph Vesey. The Capt. would enslave Denmark for nearly twenty years until, in 1799, a lottery win saw Denmark with enough money to purchase his own freedom.

Denmark went on to be relatively successful but was never fully content with his life knowing the horrible reality experienced by slaves everyday. In 1817, Vesey joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Through the church, Vesey found a political movement. He, along with other leaders of the church began plotting a slave revolt in 1822. July 14 was targeted as the date of the revolt, when both freed blacks and slaves would together seize the city arsenals, torch the city, and rise up against their white oppressors.

The plot would be thwarted because of several slaves leaking the plot to their white masters. Vesey was captured on June 22 and was executed on July 2, along with five other men involved in the plot. The summer would end with the executions of 29 more people.

Vesey would become an important figure for African Americans and a symbol of the militant resistance to slavery. While employing agency to get freedom for himself, he would find true liberation in his political plan to rebel against the institution of slavery.

For further information:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p2976.html>

http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/denmark_vesey.html

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p2976.html>

Case Study 1. From Slave to Statesman: Frederick Douglass

Brief history

Born in 1818 on the eastern shore of Maryland, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was the son of a mother whom he rarely saw before her death and an absent white father. Frederick grew up in, living with his grandparents during his early years. He would eventually escape to freedom, change his name to Frederick Douglass, and become one of the prominent leaders of the abolition movement, but not after experiencing, firsthand, the brutality of American slavery.

At the age of eight, Frederick was sent to Baltimore to live with a ship carpenter named Hugh Auld. After several "relatively comfortable years," Frederick returned to the countryside where he was overseen by a brutal "slavebreaker" named Edward Covey. Frederick was whipped daily and was barely fed. Recounting the days with Covey, Douglass wrote that he was "broken in body, soul, and spirit."

After a few years, Frederick managed to realize freedom by fleeing to New York City in 1838. He was married, settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and changed his name to Frederick Douglass. Almost immediately, Douglass became active in several abolitionist organizations and a black church. Douglass, a profound speaker and writer, published his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* in 1845. His work would be widely read; his story of survival in and escape from the American system of slavery brought him to northern US cities and the United Kingdom to speak out against the evils of slavery. An American statesman, Douglass risked his own freedom by seeking the freedom of others.

For further information:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1539.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass

Case Study 2. The Founding of New Philadelphia: Free Frank

Brief history

New Philadelphia, a small farming town in western Illinois within a days hike from the Mississippi River, has a unique history. In 1836, it was the first American town to be founded by an African American, Free Frank McWorter, a former slave, freed through his own entrepreneurial skills and determination to live his own life.

Frank McWorter was born in 1777 in Union County, South Carolina and purchased, with his family, by a Scottish-Irish plantation owner named George McWhorter. George moved his operation to Pulaski County, Kentucky in 1795 and then again to Tennessee. Before the move to Tennessee, Frank convinced George to let him manage the Kentucky plantation in his absence. During this time, Frank married an enslaved African American woman, Lucy, living on an adjacent farm.

During the War of 1812, in addition to his enslaved work on the McWhorter plantation, Frank established a saltpeter mining and production operation, earning him a wage. This coupled with other wage-paying tasks for other farm owners allowed Frank to purchase freedom for his wife in 1817 and himself in 1819. The combined cost was \$1600.

After purchasing he and his wife's freedom, Frank and Lucy settled in Pike County, IL, where Frank established the town of New Philadelphia. Frank would eventually manage to purchase freedom for sixteen members of his family, costing approximately \$14,000 (over \$300,000 in today's currency). A testament to agency, Free Frank sought he and his family's freedom through his own industriousness, and established a town that may have provided a safe haven for other blacks.

For further information:

<http://www.anthro.uiuc.edu/faculty/cfennell/NP/>

<http://www.freefrank.org/>

<http://www.illinoistimes.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A1923>

Case Study 3. Fighting Agency: Gabriel Prosser Revolt

Brief History

In Henrico County, Virginia, a slave by the name of Gabriel was plotting to organize a slave rebellion. In what would become one of the largest and far-reaching planned uprisings, the outcome would result in legislation significantly limiting the movement of slaves and free blacks in the south.

Henrico county was an agricultural and mining community. These industries required large numbers of laborers, primarily slaves. In 1800, Gabriel, a slave owned by Thomas Henry Prosser, organized a large slave uprising involving several Virginia localities. The plan might have succeeded except for the combined effects of heavy rain and the work of several slave traitors who disclosed the plot to authorities.

Authorities put down the rebellion, but the effects of the conspiracy were profound. As a result, county and state leaders instituted legislation to regulate the movement of slaves and free blacks. These laws were a response to the growing instability in the region and the increasing agency found by enslaved people.

For further information:

http://www.africawithin.com/bios/gabriel_prosser.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Prosser

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/articles/gabriel.html>

Case Study 4. Provocative and Determined: Harriet Jacobs

Brief History

Harriet Jacobs was a fighter. After escaping slavery, she published a book documenting her life, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She would become the first person to openly speak of sexual abuse in the system of slavery, generally making her a provocative figure even among other abolitionists. Her diligence is seen not only in her incredible story of escape, but also in her determination to expose the horrible abuses of slavery.

Born into slavery, Harriet continually had to thwart sexual advances made by her master. She married a single white businessman in the area, hoping this would cause her abusive master to stop. Even after having two children, she was still aggressively pursued by her enslaver.

Harriet's escape took several years. After fleeing the plantation, she lived in a small crawlspace above the porch built by her grandmother and uncle. This way, she could watch her children and remain in hiding, only leaving the safety of the crawlspace to exercise under cover of darkness. Eventually, she managed her escape to the north.

Her husband would purchase the freedom of her children, after prodding from Harriet. After escape, Harriet published her autobiography, but her inclusion of the difficult topic of sexual abuse turned off some white abolitionists. Harriet was actively involved in the abolition movement before the Civil War. During the war, she raised money for black refugees. After the war, she also worked to improve the conditions for the newly freed African American population in the south.

For further information:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2923.html>

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Sjacobs.htm>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/JACOBS/hjhome.htm>

Case Study 5. "Never lost a single passenger": Harriet Tubman

General Information

Harriet Tubman, perhaps best known for her work as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, was a fearless crusader for the freedom of enslaved people. Over the course of a ten-year period, she made 19 trips to escort over 300 slaves to freedom. Frederick Douglass would say of Tubman, some years later, "excepting John Brown... I know of no one who was willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than [her]."

Tubman, born around 1820 in Dorchester County, Maryland, resolved to escape from slavery in 1849 after hearing that she and other slaves on the plantation were to be sold. Partly with some help from a white woman, she traveled by night to Pennsylvania, and then to Philadelphia. Here she found work, saved money, and became involved with the abolitionist movement.

The next year, she returned to the south to facilitate the escape of her sister and her sister's two children. Soon after, she returned again to the south to rescue her brother and two other men. Soon after, she became a "conductor" with the Underground Railroad.

For further information:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html>

<http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/tubman>

<http://www.harriettubman.com/>

Case Study 6. Mutiny, slavery, and the US Supreme Court: La Amistad

Brief history

In July of 1839, schooner La Amistad, sailing under the Spanish flag, left the port of Havana, en route to another Cuban port. The ship was carrying 53 black African slaves, far less than the typical slave ship, which could carry upwards of 300 slaves in cramped spaces below deck. La Amistad was a smaller ship designed to carry cargo. As such, half of the slaves were kept below deck, while the other half remained above deck.

Sengbe Pieh, renamed Cinque by the slave traders, led the 53 slaves in a mutiny in which the captain and the ship's cook were killed. All but two crew members, who were kept to sail the boat to Africa, were put over the side in smaller boats. Unbeknownst to the mutineers, the two navigators steered the ship northwards. About 50 days after the mutiny, the ship was captured by a US warship.

The mutineers were charged with piracy and murder. Their case was appealed by abolitionists and was brought to the US Supreme Court, where former president John Quincy Adams argued their case. Then president at the time, Martin Van Buren, wanted to return the Africans to their enslavers. In 1841, the Supreme Court ruled that Cinque and the other mutineers to be set free on the grounds that the transatlantic slave trade was illegal. They were returned to West Africa.

Away at sea, the slaves aboard La Amistad took advantage of their situation and sought their freedom. Their story represents agency found both by slaves in situ and abolitionists in the courts, finding freedom through strength and the law.

For further information:

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASamistad.htm>

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/mar09.html>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/articles/amistad_mutiny.html

Case Study 7. On a mission from God: Nat Turner's Rebellion

Brief history

In what is possibly the most famous slave revolt in American history, Nat Turner led a slave uprising of 75 against white slave owners. Ultimately the revolt was put down, but not after proving the determination and strength of the slave revolters.

Nat Turner was owned by Joseph Travis of Southampton, Virginia. After a solar eclipse in February of 1831, Turner was convinced that God had chosen him to lead a slave revolt. Several months later, in August, Turner and seven other slaves led an insurrection against Travis and his family. It was Turner's belief that this would lead to a massive rebellion, but only 75 slaves joined the revolt. In all, about 50 whites were killed.

The local state militia sent 3,000 troops to confront the Turner rebels and the revolt was quickly put down. Over 100 innocent slaves were killed in retaliation for the rebellious actions. Turner went into hiding but was captured and executed on November 11, 1831.

For further information:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1518.html>

<http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/natturner/a/turnerrebellion.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_Turner

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASTurnerR.htm>