

# USA, the Charleston Black Church Massacre, White Supremacy Terror

Rev. Clementa Pinckney, a Civil-Rights Champion, Was Lost in the Attack

Friday 19 June 2015, by [GRANDIN Greg](#), [NICHOLS John](#), [ZIRIN Dave](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2015).

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## The Charleston Massacre and the Cunning of White Supremacy

According to Matt Ford at *The Atlantic* [[1](#)], the Charleston, South Carolina, church where a white gunman murdered nine people was

*"The oldest black church south of Baltimore, and one of the most storied black congregations in the United States, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church's history is deeply intertwined with the history of African American life in Charleston. Among the congregation's founders was Denmark Vesey, a former slave who was executed in 1822 for attempting to organize a massive slave revolt in antebellum South Carolina. White South Carolinians burned the church to the ground in response to the thwarted uprising; along with other black churches, it was shuttered by the city in 1834. The church reorganized in 1865, and soon acquired a new building designed by Robert Vesey, Denmark's son; the current building was constructed in 1891. It has continued to play a leading role in the struggle for civil rights."*

[Denmark Vesey](#) is one of the most prominent names in America's long history of racial terror. And the killer didn't choose just Vesey's church but his anniversary. Based on [fragmentary evidence](#), white Charlestonians in 1822 came to believe that Vesey's revolt "would begin at the stroke of midnight as Sunday, June 16, turned to Monday, June 17." And they identified Vesey's church as the center of the conspiracy.

White militia began to arrest both freemen and slaves, 10 that weekend, and many more in the days that followed. Vesey, a freeman, was captured on June 22. It's not just the executors of the "war on terror" who have used euphemisms to describe torture. A Charleston official referred to the interrogations the captured men were subject to like this: "No means which experience or ingenuity could devise were left unessayed to eviscerate the plot."

Then, after a quick trial and guilty verdict, Vesey and five others were hung on July 2. More arrests were made, and more executions followed, 35 in total, often in front of immense crowds.

Here's the historian Ira Berlin, summing up what is known of Vesey's life:

*"It is a story well worth the telling. One of millions of young Africans sold into the Atlantic slave*

marts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the young Telemaque—later transmuted into Denmark—was plucked from a cargo of some 400 slaves by Captain Vesey, who was taken by his “beauty, alertness and intelligence.” Vesey assigned the lad to his cabin, taught him to read and write, and allowed him to learn a trade—and much else.... The Veseys, both the captain and his slave, eventually alighted in the city of Charleston, mainland North America’s largest slave port. There, Captain Vesey retired to a comfortable respectability, supported in part by the earnings of his slave, who was permitted to hire himself out on his own.... While Denmark Vesey crossed the line from slavery to freedom, he did not...affiliate with Charleston’s growing community of free people of color. These artisans and tradesmen, with light skins that betrayed their mixed racial origins, aspired to the privileges of the master class, whose deportment, speech and values—including slave ownership—they emulated. Rather than being satisfied with a pale imitation of freedom, Vesey became increasingly discontented. In the back alley groggeries and weekly Bible classes, he denounced slavery as criminal usurpation, citing the Scriptures, the Declaration of Independence and even Congressional debates. He sneered at those who accepted bondage and deferred to whites, declaring that they deserved to be slaves. The angry old man awed even those he did not intimidate. Vesey believed slavery would only end with fire, and understood that a successful insurrection rested upon uniting the fragmented black population. While he may have dismissed the assimilationist-minded free people of color, he believed the other elements of the black community could be brought together. To those taken with Christianity, he quoted the Bible. To those mindful of power, he spoke of armies of Haitian soldiers in waiting. To those fearful of the spirit world, he enlisted one Jack Pritchard—universally known as Gullah Jack—a wizened, bewhiskered conjurer whose knowledge of African religious practices made him a welcome figure on the plantations that surrounded Charleston. And while he drew followers from the slave quarter and the artisans’ shops, he also enlisted from the master’s household, recruiting even the personal servant of South Carolina’s governor. Vesey coaxed and cajoled, implored and exhorted, flattered and bullied until his scheme was in place.”

Berlin writes that “while slaveholders sent Denmark Vesey to the gallows and committed him to an unmarked grave, they failed to consign him to historical oblivion.... Former slaves preserved his memory, even as former slaveholders denied it. Today it seems clear that Denmark Vesey will not remain buried much longer.”

Maybe others remembered him as well, though it might just be a coincidence that “the clean-shaven white man about 21 years old with sandy blond hair and wearing a gray sweatshirt, bluejeans and Timberland boots” [2] chose the anniversary of Vesey’s preempted revolt to massacre nine members of the congregation Vesey founded.

Or maybe history, along with white supremacy, is just cunning that way.

**Greg Grandin**

\* The Nationblog on June 18, 2015 - 11:50AM ET:

<http://m.thenation.com/blog/210305-charleston-massacre-and-cunning-white-supremacy>

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**A Civil-Rights Champion Was Lost in the Attack on Charleston’s Emanuel**

## African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, where a young white man reportedly shot and killed nine people Wednesday night [3], is an historic center of religious and social activism, with roots in anti-slavery and anti-segregation struggles going back two centuries and a contemporary commitment to the struggle against police brutality and economic injustice.

The oldest AME church in the South, and one of the largest African-American congregations in the region, it is referred to as “Mother Emanuel” [4] because of the central role this faith institution has played in the lives and the history of a city, a state, a region, and a nation. That centrality is recalled in the church’s history [5]:

*“In 1822 the church was investigated for its involvement with a planned slave revolt. Denmark Vesey, one of the church’s founders, organized a major slave uprising in Charleston. Vesey was raised in slavery in the Virgin Islands among newly imported Africans. He was the personal servant of slavetrader Captain Joseph Vesey, who settled in Charleston in 1783. Beginning in December 1821, Vesey began to organize a slave rebellion, but authorities were informed of the plot before it could take place. The plot created mass hysteria throughout the Carolinas and the South. Brown, suspected but never convicted of knowledge of the plot, went north to Philadelphia where he eventually became the second bishop of the AME denomination. During the Vesey controversy, the AME church was burned. Worship services continued after the church was rebuilt until 1834 when all black churches were outlawed. The congregation continued the tradition of the African church by worshipping underground until 1865 when it was formally reorganized, and the name Emanuel was adopted, meaning “God with us.””*

Rebuilt and expanded over the ensuing decades, it became an essential stop on the circuit of civil-rights champions, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in the 1950s and 1960s; and it has remained a touchstone for contemporary struggles for economic and social justice. The church’s pastors have long been leaders of those struggles.

The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, [who was among those killed](#) during the prayer meeting Wednesday night, carried on that tradition. When he was elected to the South Carolina General Assembly [6] almost two decades ago, at the age of 23, he was the youngest African-American to serve as a South Carolina state legislator. Since 2000, he has served in the South Carolina Senate.

Rev. Pinckney, with his great sense of history and mission, carried on a family tradition of religious leadership and political engagement.

A 2010 profile in the *Charleston Post and Courier* [7] noted that “In his family, on his mother’s side, are four generations of AME pastors. His great-grandfather, the Rev. Lorenzo Stevenson, sued the Democratic Party in the state to end whites-only primaries. His uncle, the Rev. Levern Stevenson, who pastored at Macedonia AME Church in Charleston, was involved with the NAACP in the 1960s and 1970s fighting to desegregate school buses in Jasper County, and sued Gov. John C. West to create single-member voting districts that would open the door to blacks who wanted to serve in the Legislature.”

As a pastor and a legislator, Rev. Pinckney maintained the commitments of his family and his church to voting-rights and civil-rights struggles that are far from finished. “Could we not argue that America is about freedom whether we live it out or not?” he said in 2013 [8]. “Freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness. And that is what church is all about: freedom to worship and freedom from sin, freedom to be full of what God intends us to be, and to have equality in the sight of God. And sometimes you got to make noise to do that. Sometimes you may have to die like Denmark Vesey to

do that. Sometimes you have to march, struggle and be unpopular to do that.”

After the April police shooting of Walter Scott, which was captured on video and stirred an international outcry, Rev. Pinckney rallied with pastors in North Charleston and participated in vigils demanding changes in policing.

He became a legislative leader on behalf of a plan to make body cameras mandatory for police officers across South Carolina, declaring, “I think that if my colleagues will be moved by the fact that other people are moved by the need for body cameras, and also that there will be persons that will give testimony as to why body cameras are important. Body cameras help to record what happens. It may not be the golden ticket, the golden egg, the end-all-fix-all, but it helps to paint a picture of what happens during a police stop.”

The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, which distributed an image of Rev. King at Mother Emanuel in the 1960s sent messages Thursday morning, mourning the tragedy in Charleston and urging people to tonight “light 9 candles and say a prayer for justice, for true justice.”

“At this point,” said the King Center, “it should certainly be beyond clear why #BlackLivesMatter is an earnest cry and an affirmation.”

### **John Nichols**

\* The Nation on June 18, 2015 - 9:23AM ET:

<http://m.thenation.com/blog/210321-attack-historic-african-american-church-contemporary-champion-lost>

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## **Charleston’s ‘Mother Emanuel Church’ Has Stared Down Racist Violence for 200 Years**

The more you read about Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, otherwise known as “Mother Emanuel,” the more awe you feel for its historic resilience amidst white-supremacist terror.

This church is now known as the scene of a massacre, which is being investigated as a “hate crime.” Nine are dead, but this institution will not fall. We know this because it has stood tall amidst the specter of racist violence for 200 years. Next year, in fact, was to be the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the church. It was 1816 when the Rev. Morris Brown formed “Mother Emanuel” under the umbrella of the Free African Society of the AME Church. They were one of three area churches known as the Bethel Circuit. This means that a free church in the heart of the confederacy was formed and thrived 50 years before the start of the Civil War. It had a congregation of almost 2,000, roughly 15 percent of black people in what was, including the enslaved, the majority-black city of Charleston. Because the church opened its doors to the enslaved and free alike, services were often raided by police and private militias for violating laws about the hours when slaves could be out among “the public.” They were also raided for breaking laws that prohibited teaching slaves to read at Bible study sessions. (It was at one of these Bible study sessions that the shooter opened fire Wednesday night, after sitting among the people for over an hour.)

More violence against the church was to come, as one of its founders was Denmark Vesey. If you don't know that name, then your US history class failed you. Vesey was born into bondage on St. Thomas Island where he was known as Telemaque. At age 32 in 1799, Vesey won a city lottery of \$1,500 that allowed him to buy his freedom from slavery.

But his former master would not sell Vesey his wife or childre . Under patriarchal master/slave law, this also meant that any future children they had would also be in bondage. This was not a state of affairs Vesey was willing to let stand. He achieved financial success as a skilled carpenter. He became a city leader. He also looked at Charleston, this majority-black city amidst lush plantations, and planned an insurrection. He said, "We are free but the white people here won't let us be so; and the only way is to raise up and fight the whites."

In 1822, Vesey was executed on charges of attempting to organize this unprecedented slave revolt. The plan—organized in meticulous fashion and involving thousands of adherents—was to sack the area plantations, liberate the slaves, and sail to Haiti, which had liberated itself from slavery 20 years earlier in its own revolution. The plan was audacious in its scope and remarkable in its reach, and as a result provoked mass hysteria throughout Dixie.

Vesey was one of five insurrection freedom fighters executed on July 2, 1822, two days before Independence Day. The proximity was said to have inspired Frederick Douglass's speech delivered almost exactly 30 years later on July 5, 1852, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," [\[9\]](#) where he thundered,

*"What, to the American slave, is your 4<sup>th</sup> of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages."*

Douglass would later invoke Vesey to recruit for the all-black Civil War 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment, featured in the film *Glory*.

Even though Vesey's plan never extended beyond the planning stages, there was a call by the genteel city leaders of Charleston for even more blood. Thirty more were executed that month, legal mass lynching meant to strike fear in the hearts of Charleston's black community. What is remarkable is that more were not arrested or executed. This is attributed to a remarkable level of solidarity amongst Charleston's black population. No one would talk about a popular campaign that turned slaves into active insurrectionists. As part of this campaign—which combined legal and extralegal terrorism—Mother Emanuel Church was burned to the ground. That did not stop people from gathering. It did not end the church.

The violence of this week will not end the church either. The killing of nine people inside Mother Emmanuel calls backward to the 1960s civil rights-era church bombings. It also calls to a present in 2015 where video after video is showing white America a policing system that sees black life as having little value, a present in 2015 where mass media relish black death but do not acknowledge black life, and a present in 2015 where Charleston's Walter Scott can be calmly shot in the back by police. It also calls to a present where police officials and South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley speak solemnly about the Mother Emanuel martyrs, under that enduring symbol of racist terror the Confederate flag. This demonstrates with utter clarity that the past that Charleston leaders try to

tuck away with a statue of Denmark Vesey [10] - amidst the city's lucrative plantation tourism - is far from past.

In moments such as this, few words from the present can resonate as powerfully as the words of Frederick Douglass in his Fourth of July speech when he said,

*"Oh! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake."*

This is not history. It's a guide to action. This action can be heard in the words of Mother Emanuel Reverend and South Carolina State Senator Clementa Pinckney. The Reverend was one of those killed on Wednesday. In a 2013 speech about "freedom," Pinckney said, "...sometimes you've got to make noise.... Sometimes you may have to die like Denmark Vesey.... Sometimes you have to march..."

### **Dave Zirin**

\* The Nation on June 18, 2015 - 11:13AM ET:

<http://m.thenation.com/blog/210313-charlestons-mother-emanuel-church-has-stared-down-racist-violence-200-years>

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### **Footnotes**

- [1] [http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/06/shooting-emanuel-ame-charleston/396209/?fb\\_ref=Default](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/06/shooting-emanuel-ame-charleston/396209/?fb_ref=Default)
- [2] [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting.html?_r=0)
- [3] <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/18/us/charleston-south-carolina-shooting/index.html>
- [4] <http://emanuelamechurch.org/#>
- [5] <http://www.emanuelamechurch.org/churchhistory.php>
- [6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Carolina\\_General\\_Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina_General_Assembly)
- [7] <http://www.postandcourier.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?date=20101128&category=ARCHIVES&lopenr=311289929&Ref=AR>
- [8] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/clementa-pinckney\\_n\\_7610780.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/clementa-pinckney_n_7610780.html)
- [9] <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass.htm>
- [10] [http://media.iadsnetwork.com/quickpageimage/57439\\_xlarge.jpg](http://media.iadsnetwork.com/quickpageimage/57439_xlarge.jpg)