Resource #13. Denmark Vesey

One important example of resistance in Charleston was the planned revolt of Denmark Vesey. Nearly forty years before the beginning of the Civil War, a free black man and former slave, whose wife and children were still enslaved, organized a plot to take violent actions against the institution of slavery in Charleston. Denmark Vesey is said to have recruited free and enslaved black people from Charleston and the surrounding area, arguing that the violent overthrow of slavery was a righteous Christian cause. He was accused of having plotted to capture the arsenal, kill the governor, set fire to the city, and kill as many whites as possible, before boarding ships and fleeing for refuge in Haiti. The rebellion was set for July 14, 1822, but a few weeks beforehand a few enslaved people who knew of the plot became nervous and told their masters. Vesey and several of his co-conspirators were captured, tortured, and ultimately hanged.

By the end of the investigation, thirty-five black people accused of involvement in the plot had been hanged. Severed heads of the hanged men were left on stakes along city roads. White Charlestonians responded to the threat of rebellion by passing laws that further restricted the rights of South Carolina's African American men and women, free and enslaved, and by cracking down on black churches, which had been the main centers of organization of the rebellion.

Questions for Students:

- How do you think this historical example influenced African Americans in Charleston when they considered whether to resist?