RAISING THE VOLUME

Truth Be Told: Vesey Panel Discussion

Middle School and Up
Mastery of core subjects and twenty-first century themes is essential for all students in the twenty-first century. Core subjects include English, reading or language arts; world languages; arts; mathematics; economics; science; geography; history; and government and civics. In addition to these subjects, schools must move forward to include not only a focus on mastery of core subjects, but also an understanding of academic content at much higher levels by weaving twenty-first century interdisciplinary themes into core subjects.

**Global Awareness**
1. Use twenty-first century skills to understand and address global issues.
2. Learn from and work collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions, and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue in personal, work, and community contexts.

**Civic Literacy**
1. Participate effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes.
2. Exercise the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national, and global levels.
3. Understand the local and global implications of civic decisions.

**Work Creatively with Others**
1. Develop, implement, and communicate new ideas to others effectively.
2. Be open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives; incorporate group input and feedback into the work.
3. Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work; understand the real world limits to adopting new ideas.
4. View failure as an opportunity to learn; understand that creativity and innovation is a long-term, cyclical process of small successes and frequent mistakes.
5. Implement innovations.
6. Act on creative ideas to make a tangible and useful contribution to the field in which the innovation will occur.
Everyone has a story. It’s our place to take a moment to listen. Once you listen, your eyes open. You can put yourself in someone else’s shoes and try to comprehend their experiences. You may be inspired, you may come away with more knowledge, or you may find a bit of yourself in someone else.

“Raising the Volume” is a series of Black stories. These are stories about Black entrepreneurs, judges, authors, artists, and leaders in our community. These are stories that need to be heard. Led by the Gaillard’s Artists-in-Residence Charlton Singleton and Marcus Amaker, “Raising the Volume” gives a platform to Black community members whose lives matter.

As you introduce this series to your students, follow the bullet points below for discussion. Your students will find that they are challenged to think about uncomfortable things. Those conversations are what will help us change our world. In the words of Judge McFarland, “To break down racial barriers, start where you are.” So, let’s start where we are and see what change we can bring to our community.

For each lesson, split your class into small groups for discussion or discuss as a whole. Choose the model that is the most comfortable for your students so they feel free to discuss opinions openly.

Teachers, if you are interested in scheduling a cross-school discussion on Raising the Volume Episode XXV, please email Sterling devries at sdevries@gaillardcenter.org. Through cross-school Zoom calls, we can offer students from one school a different perspective on the video with students from a second school. We will schedule class-to-class meetings where whole groups can discuss various topics covered in Episode XXV.
Raising the Volume

Episode XXV:
Truth Be Told:
Vesey Panel
Discussion

(CLICK THE IMAGE TO WATCH EPISODE XXV)
The **Charleston Gaillard Center**, a leader for performing arts in the Southeast, partnered with **Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church** and the **International African American Museum (IAAM)**, to mark the **bicentenary of freedom fighter Denmark Vesey's planned uprising** to free the enslaved people of Charleston through three days of free and paid cultural performances and conversations. Taking place July 14-16, 2022, the Gaillard Center opened its doors to the Charleston community to acknowledge America’s difficult history of race and slavery, and used arts and entertainment to bridge divides, build dialogues, and support healing in a city that both historically saw some of the first enslaved men, women, and children enter through its port and, only six years ago, witnessed the racially motivated murder of nine congregants at Mother Emanuel AME Church.

Over a three-day initiative, this event consisted of discussion panels; musical and comedy performances; and installations. This event brought together prominent artists, scholars, educators, and the community to reflect on Denmark Vesey—a formerly enslaved man and respected, multilingual church leader and businessman—and redefine his place in American history. Attendees participated in a vital journey of acknowledgement and exploration of the past, present, and future with conversations that reckoned with the abominable truths and ongoing repercussions of slavery. The weekend included conversations and performances that aided in the facilitation of healing through the arts. This panel was the inaugural event.
WHO IS DENMARK VESEY

Denmark Vesey: Charleston’s “Slave Rebellion Organizer”
Written by Dr. Bernard E. Powers

Denmark Vesey was part of a radical trans-Atlantic antislavery tradition. In Africa and everywhere bondage existed, African people resisted enslavement. On plantations and in cities, slavery created a perpetual state of war, a battlefield where historian John Blassingame asserted “slaves fought masters for physical and psychological survival.” This reality shaped Denmark Vesey. Born enslaved approximately 1767 on St. Thomas, Denmark was purchased there by slave trader Joseph Vesey and relocated to Charleston in 1783. Denmark remained enslaved until 1799 when he purchased his freedom with money from a winning lottery ticket. Now free, Denmark worked as a carpenter, had three enslaved wives and numerous children. His inability to free his family members and widespread racial discrimination were continual frustrations. Denmark Vesey found some comfort in spirituality. In 1817, he was a communicant at the white Second Presbyterian Church. However, when Charleston’s African Church formed in 1818, Vesey joined, becoming a class leader. Led by free black minister Morris Brown, this congregation of slaves who left Charleston’s white Methodist Church affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) of Philadelphia. This act was revolutionary as a rejection of white authority and because the A.M.E. Church was an abolitionist denomination! Unsurprisingly, white citizens and officials harassed the church’s members and leaders, further radicalizing Vesey. In a bold plan, Denmark Vesey and a cadre of skilled, privileged slaves organized rural and city slaves to overpower the municipal guard, arm themselves, set fires, and escape to Haiti. Haiti was revered as the only place where enslaved people overthrew their colonial masters and created an independent nation. Offering legal protection to blacks who reached its shores, Haiti changed the geography of freedom in the Atlantic World. No wonder, Vesey’s compatriots tried communicating with Haitian leaders. However, their plans were betrayed. Trials followed, Denmark and thirty-four others were executed, and thirty-seven men were transported from the country. Municipal authorities also destroyed the African Church.

Haiti was revered as the only place where enslaved people overthrew their colonial masters and created an independent nation. Offering legal protection to blacks who reached its shores, Haiti changed the geography of freedom in the Atlantic World. No wonder, Vesey’s compatriots tried communicating with Haitian leaders. However, their plans were betrayed. Trials followed, Denmark and thirty-four others were executed, and thirty-seven men were transported from the country. Municipal authorities also destroyed the African Church. Denmark Vesey's impact survived his demise in part because white South Carolinians never recovered from his dreadful plans. That's why writer Edwin Holland urged vigilance, describing slaves as “Barbarians who would, if they could, become the destroyers of our race.” Countering the threat, Charleston’s police force expanded and the Citadel began in 1842 to provide white men with military training. The Negro Seaman Acts required jailing out-of-state free black sailors as dangerous antislavery influences. Abolitionists weren't easily thwarted and some antislavery messages relied on the memory of Denmark Vesey. Henry Highland Garnet’s 1843 “Address to the Slaves” used Vesey's example to encourage slave insurrection. Likewise, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* created a fictionalized insurrectionary son of Denmark Vesey. The foregoing developments and South Carolina’s black majority propelled the state into secession and war to protect white lives, to escape Denmark Vesey’s shadow; it failed and almost destroyed the nation. Today’s persistent racial ills two centuries after Denmark Vesey’s life reveal how limited his options were and the potent legacy of slavery. Vesey’s shadow persists and demands we confront that legacy or risk the health and stature of the nation.

Moderator, Lee Bennett poses the first question to the panel, “Denmark Vesey, has been discussed and written about in various ways: as a liberator, freedom fighter, a violent brutish villain, terrorist, a man merely a product of his times, and even just someone wrongly accused. He has been memorialized so differently by so many people. How do each of you see Denmark Vesey? What is the narrative you would embrace?” As a whole group, discuss who Denmark Vesey is to you. What narrative do you embrace? Following the discussion, break into small groups and direct each group to discuss one or all of the responses from our panel guests below to deepen the conversation.

-Dr. Tonya Matthews states, “His [Denmark Vesey] privilege has shown him that more is required for everyone else.”

-Dr. Tamara Butler states, “Denmark Vesey represents a dreamer. It all starts with dreaming of a bigger and better life.”

-Charlamagne tha God states, “For me, Brother Denmark quite simply represented a man who didn’t forget where he came from. If he’s a terrorist, who were the people that were oppressing him?”

-Kamau Bell states, “Denmark Vesey’s story is about what happens as a Black person once you get to the side of Black privilege. Now that I am through one door on that side, how can I keep the door open and pull other people who aren’t on this side of the door through?”

-Bamuthi states, “We have a right to literacy as a part of the American franchise....A family man was disassociated from his family and so he was not free because his wife was not, because...his children were not, and part of what constitutes that freedom, that sovereignty for this particular individual, was access to letters.”

-Dr. Bernard Powers states, “The choices that Vesey had before him were limited: he couldn’t vote his way into freedom, he couldn’t sit in his way into freedom, he couldn’t petition his way to freedom.”

In Dr. Powers’ summary, due to the failed revolt by Denmark Vesey, there were ramifications in the community on top of the punishment and death of participants. As a result of revolts, Black congregations were banned from meeting from 1834-1865. Since Black churches were shut down, they had to meet underground and were finally able to reestablish themselves after thirty-one years. Black churches were banned out of fear. What is your opinion of this decision and why it was put in place? Do you believe banning the gathering of congregations kept the enslaved from revolting? Were there other revolts? Discuss as a class and research other revolts of enslaved peoples in history. Report back to your small group with two to three sentences on what you found.
Our moderator, Lee Bennett, begins this section of the panel with the question, “Why were there so many narratives and how do we go about honoring figures like Vesey?” In your opinion, why do you think there were so many narratives? What are your thoughts on how we go about honoring important figures like Vesey from the past? Select one of the quotes below to further the discussion.

- Dr. Tonya Matthews discusses the matter of who was writing history, who was telling these stories, and why their stories put a different narrative on what Vesey was standing for. She states, “The reason you want to deny these Black people letters is so that they cannot write their own stories, so that there is not a counter narrative.”

- Lee Bennett asks the next question, “Lots has been written about Denmark Vesey before, during, and well after the Civil War. Men like Frederick Douglas and others wrote about Denmark Vesey in positive ways as a revolutionary, liberator, and freedom fighter. When did the commonly held narrative change from positive to negative?”

- Charlamagne tha God states, “This man was simply trying to liberate his people.”

- Kamau Bell states, “The people who write the history shaved off the rough edges because they want to believe the liberation of anybody can be done through hugs and handshakes not violent revolution in the streets.” He continues, “What can we do better or differently regarding how we discuss history to improve civility and a better understanding among all people and establish truth?”

- Bamuthi states, “I wonder where along the ark was the narrative positioned in such a way that my child’s freedom became an incursion upon his children’s freedom? How do we remove the humanity from a person that might look a little different or have a different political viewpoint?”

At this point in the panel, Kamau Bell discusses the Black Panthers and Ericka Huggins. The Black Panther Party, was originally founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seal. The original purpose of the African American revolutionary party was to patrol and protect African American neighborhoods from police brutality.* For more information about Ericka Huggins, visit here. Take five minutes of group time to research two facts about the Black Panthers and two facts about Erica Huggins. Report back to your small group on what you learned.

In this segment, Lee Bennett describes Denmark Vesey as a love story. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Write down two reasons why you support or do not support this statement and discuss within your small group.

Raising the Volume
Episode XXV: Truth Be Told: Vesey Panel Discussion

Lee Bennett asks, “On July 13, 2022, a historical marker was erected at the site of what was infamously known as the ‘Workhouse’ (21 Magazine Street, Charleston). A place where slaveholders could take the enslaved people and pay a fee to have them beaten, the same place where Denmark Vesey was most likely held before he was taken to the gallows for execution, a place that sat in the shadows of the City Jail where African American soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts Regiment were held after they were captured during assault on Ft. Wagner, and a place that was directly across the street from Mills Manor Public House. What has been and continues to be the long terms effects of these knowingly or unknowingly strategic decisions on people of color? How are historic issues of the past affecting our current lives and discourse?” Discuss the panel question with your whole group; break into small groups to unpack and discuss the quotes from the panelists below.

- Dr. Tonya Matthews states, “It is too easy to throw whatever we don’t want to see into the workhouse…we must change the historical narratives in order to deny our own humanity. We are giving ourselves the false privilege of not seeing.”

- Dr. Tamara Butler states, “The workhouse is no different than the prison industrial complex…because it’s the people we believe need certain kinds of punishment…the workhouse has never left America…think about abolition and its possibilities.”

- Charlamagne tha God states, “One of the main reasons these things are still impacting us is because there has been no atonement; you really can’t heal what you don’t reveal, so it makes no sense to keep trying to conceal history.”

- Dr. Bernard Powers states, “Excavating this experience that we are talking about, the African American experience. Since the 1960s, we’ve really been working to excavate the experience. The power of history is inside of us and it controls us in a variety of ways and it shapes us.”
Lee Bennett next asks, “It has been 200 years since the planned uprising of 1822 and the subsequent hanging of thirty-five Black men, twenty-two in one day. The recent racially motivated shootings and the resurgence of crimes all cloaked in hatred are still present today. How much do you believe has been done in reckoning with the growing danger of hate groups within this country and the recognition of the role slavery played in building our country? Many of you bring a contemporary ethos to the discussion. How can the arts and culture (including comedy) be used when addressing challenging figures in our history?”

Discuss the panel question with your group as a whole; break into small groups to unpack the responses below from our panel members.

- Dr. Tamara Butler responds, “The face of white supremacy is morphing.”
- W. Kamau Bell responds, “Has America gotten too woke?”

LESSONS Part Three (60 Minutes - 1 hour and 30 Minutes)


- Dr. Tonya Matthews poses the question, “Have we lost control of the narrative of hip hop?”
- Bamuthi states, “Art is the space that stewards public imagination.”
- Dr. Tamara Butler states, “The writers have their fingers on the pulse of the movement.”

LESSONS Part Four (1 hour and 30 - End)

Part four contains the questions from the audience discussed by the panel and moderated by Dr. Tonya Matthews. They include questions on dismantling racism and systematic racism. The panelists discuss unexpected small levers of movement as well as punishing and recognizing racism. As a closing to the panel, assign each small group the task of posing a solution to racism. Once the small groups establish their solution, they will create three action steps that can serve as the “unexpected levers” Dr. Matthews mentions. How can we impact change and be a liberator in our own community?
PLACES TO VISIT

Denmark Vesey monument

Denmark Vesey House

McCleod Plantation

Mother Emanuel Church

Emanuel Nine Memorial

Avery Research Center

International African American Museum
EXPLOR MORE

Denmark Vesey Bicentenary

History Returns to Charleston

The Work House

Books:
*Denmark Vesey’s Garden* by Ethan J. Kylte and Blain Roberts
*Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America’s Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* by David Robertson
*Denmark Vesey’s Bible* by Jeremy Schipper
INTERVIEW PANEL

Lee J. Bennett, Jr., *Mother* Emanuel AME Church Historian and panel moderator. Lee J. Bennett, Jr., is a native of Charleston, who grew up on the east-side of the city known as “Da Burra.” His African American neighborhood was a part of an urban renewal effort in the early 1960s that cleared homes for the construction of the then Gailliard Auditorium. He attended what was Buist Elementary School and lived less than a block away from Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Gadsden’s Wharf, which now is the site of the International African American Museum. He graduated from Burke High School. Lee served in the United States Army for over 24 years as an Infantry Officer. He held command and staff positions in a variety of infantry units that include the 82nd Airborne Division, the 101st Air Assault/Airborne Division, and United States Southern Command. Prior to joining ALIS, Lee held senior positions for four years in the Executive Office of the President at The White House as the Deputy Chief of Staff and Principal Personnel Assistant to the Director of the National Drug Control Policy.

W. Kamau Bell, Comedian, Director, and Executive Producer

INTERVIEW PANEL

Charlamagne tha God, media Mogul and TV Personality
Lenard “Charlamagne tha God” McKelvey is a multimedia mogul, Radio Hall of Fame inductee, and bestselling author. He co-hosts the hottest radio show in the U.S., The Breakfast Club, heard by over 4.5 million listeners daily, as well as hosts Tha God’s Honest Truth, a late-night show on Comedy Central co-created with Stephen Colbert. With nearly two decades at the pulse of culture in TV and radio, Charlamagne has grown his media empire with several partnerships including The Black Effect Podcast Network with iHeart Media; his scripted audio company SBH Productions with his partner renowned comedian, actor, and writer Kevin Hart; and his publishing imprint Black Privilege Publishing at Simon & Schuster. He also is a prominent figure as an executive producer for numerous television and film projects.

Dr. Tamara Butler, Executive Director of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture.
Dr. Tamara T. Butler is a vintage clothing enthusiast, a plant mom, and an educator who draws upon lessons learned growing up on Johns Island, South Carolina. Currently, she serves as the Executive Director of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and Associate Dean of Strategic Planning & Community Engagement for the College of Charleston Libraries. In February 2022, the Post and Courier named her one of “12 Black Leaders to Know in South Carolina.”

BAMUTHI (Marc Bamuthi Joseph), Vice President and Artistic Director of Social Impact at the Kennedy Center, librettist, and poet. Bamuthi is a 2017 TED Global Fellow, an inaugural recipient of the Guggenheim Social Practice Initiative, and an honoree of the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship. He is also the winner of the 2011 Herb Alpert Award in Theatre and an inaugural recipient of the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award. In the spring of 2022, he was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Formerly the Chief of Program and Pedagogy at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) in San Francisco, Bamuthi currently serves as Vice President and Artistic Director of Social Impact at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.
INTERVIEW PANEL

**Dr. Tonya M. Matthews**, President & CEO of the International African American Museum. Dr. Tonya M. Matthews is a thought-leader in institutionalized equity and inclusion frameworks, social entrepreneurship, and the intersectionality of formal and informal education. Her background as both poet and engineer have made her a highly sought-after visioning partner on boards and community building projects. She has been asked to be a public speaker and presenter for communities across all ages and venues. A non-profit executive leadership veteran, Tonya is currently President & CEO of the International African American Museum (IAAM), located in Charleston, South Carolina, at the historically sacred site of Gadsden’s Wharf, one of our nation’s most prolific former slave ports. IAAM is a champion of authentic, empathetic storytelling of American history and, thus, is one of the nation’s newest platforms for the disruption of institutionalized racism as America continues the walk toward “a more perfect union.”

**Dr. Bernard Powers**, Founding Director of the College of Charleston’s Center for the Study of Slavery in Charleston. Dr. Powers earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in American history at Northwestern University, and in 2018, he retired as Professor Emeritus of History from the College of Charleston after twenty-six years. Currently, Bernard is the founding director of the College of Charleston's Center for the Study of Slavery in Charleston. He has presented papers on various aspects of African American history at conferences and reviewed books and manuscripts for journals and presses. His work appears in book chapters and in both scholarly and popular periodicals. His article “Community Evolution and Race Relations in Reconstruction Charleston, S.C.” was included in the “Century of Excellence Centennial Volume 1900-2000” of *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* in July 2000.
https://www.ccprc.com/1447/McLeod-Plantation-Historic-Site


Sponsors and Supporters

Funding for the Raising the Volume program provided in part by:

The Martha & John M. Rivers Performance Hall Foundation

Puffin Foundation

Daniel Island Community Fund

The Mark Elliott Motley Foundation

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