
Pritchard, "Gullah" Jack

(? - 12 July 1822),

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conjurer and slave rebel, was born in East Africa during the final quarter of the eighteenth century. He was a native of the country of "M'Choolay Morcema" (possibly modern Mozambique), from which he was captured, taken to Zanzibar, and sold to Zephaniah Kingsley in 1805. At the time of his enslavement, he possessed a bag of conjuring implements and had been a "priest" in his homeland. Jack may have initially gone to Kingsley's plantation in East Florida but was purchased by the wealthy Charleston shipbuilder, Paul Pritchard, in April 1806 and worked on the docks as a joiner and caulker.

Jack's position as an urban and skilled slave allowed him a number of relative luxuries in a city and society that were dominated by slavery. Jack, who was single, lived by himself off of his master's property and received permission to hire out his time and move about the city with little interference from whites, who saw him as nothing more than an "industrious 'little man with large black whiskers'" (Edgerton, p. 119). But to the city's black residents, Jack was an African priest "of great power and magic" (his wild whiskers was one sign of his power) and an important member of the African Church, as both blacks and whites called it, in the Hampstead neighborhood of the city. Jack exerted immense sway over the black population because of his role as a "magician," "conjurer," or "doctor." His spiritual authority was firmly rooted in his manipulation of recognizably African tools and ceremonies of divination, healing, and supernatural control. Many African villages had at least one man or woman who acted as a healer, guide, or interpreter of the supernatural. Few blacks doubted his ability to heal or control people and events, a vivid example of the transplantation of African religious practices to America.

By 1817, Jack had befriended the fiery and revolutionary self-emancipated black carpenter Denmark Vesey. Each man saw in the other a powerful and complementary ally in their struggle against slavery. Vesey was free, wealthy, and a respected pillar of the black community; he had also developed a stinging antislavery message that was based on the Old Testament, ideas of the Age of Revolution, and abusive white control over sacred black religious life, especially an armed intrusion and arrest of black congregants in June 1818. Jack was a powerful and feared conjurer who provided a direct link to African spirituality that appealed to many blacks in Charleston. Together, these two men would allegedly spearhead the largest slave conspiracy in North American history.

If we believe the confessions—many extracted by torture—gathered by white interrogators in the summer of 1822, in late 1821 Vesey initially approached Jack to help organize a slave revolt in Charleston. Over the course of early 1822, Jack played a number of invaluable roles in the conspiracy and proved an active and effective recruiter holding regular secret meetings with slaves in and around Charleston. At these meetings, Jack made great use of his magical powers and apparently performed elaborate initiation rituals that were meant to assure loyalty and success. A number of the conspirators

would later claim that Jack had taken control of them through the use of magic. His role as African shaman was an essential ingredient in the recruitment and retention of slave rebels who gained immeasurable confidence from his supernatural powers.

Jack played such a vital role in organizing the rebellion that by the spring of 1822 he had stopped hiring out his time so he could devote all of his energies to plotting the insurrection. According to the confessions, he intended to poison the water supply of Charleston to weaken the white population. Jack also helped to acquire a powder keg and arranged to have a number of pikes made. When the date of the revolt arrived, Jack was to lead a detachment of armed rebels that who charged with the responsibility of seizing and distributing weapons from various stores and militias in Charleston.

Despite the careful planning, Vesey and Jack's rebellion was betrayed by a number of black informers. White authorities began to round up alleged conspirators on Monday, 17 June, but Vesey and Jack remained at large even as a hysterical Charleston began to try the first conspirators on 19 June. On 22 June, Vesey was captured. Jack continued to lead a group of devoted revolutionaries and allegedly devised a plan to rescue Vesey and his followers from the city's jail, but he gave up the plan and Vesey was hung on 2 July. Still, Jack sought to sustain the revolt by spreading the word among trustworthy slaves that the revolution would begin on 6 July. On 5 July, however, whites captured him, putting an end to the conspiracy.

Jack's trial quickly got underway and he was afforded no legal representation. A steady stream of slave witnesses testified to Jack's role in the conspiracy and to the fact that he had used his considerable magical powers to shape events and control participants. Jack's owner, Paul Pritchard, offered little defense of his property and Jack simply denied any role in the conspiracy or possessing any magical powers. On 9 July, white authorities unanimously sentenced him to death in a decision that invoked the strongest possible language, portraying him as a conniving and bloodthirsty master of the black arts.

In the prosecution of your wicked designs, you were not satisfied with resorting to natural and ordinary means, but endeavored to enlist on your behalf, all the powers of darkness, and employed for that purpose the most disgusting mummery and superstition. You represented yourself as invulnerable Your boasted charms have not protected yourself "Your alters [sic] and your Gods have sunk together in the dust."

(Edgerton, p. 192)

Although Jack never provided evidence against any other enslaved African Americans and he was probably tortured, his response to the death sentence was to plead desperately for one more week of life. He spent his remaining days in physical and mental anguish, locked in the top floor of the city's sweltering Poor House. On 12 July, Jack was taken beyond the central city to face the scaffold. He resisted, but his executioners dragged him up the steps and hung him, a stark testimony to other slaves that his magical powers were no more.

Further Reading

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Robertson, David. *Denmark Vesey* (1999).

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