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Pyrophobia: Euro-American Fear of Slaves and Fire in Charleston, South Carolina,

1820 – 1860

by

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Abstract

During the antebellum era, slaves constituted a majority of the population in Charleston. While politically powerless, slaves still had some influence over the society in which they lived. Resistance to slavery was one way to assert such influence. This thesis looks at Euro-South Carolinians' ideas about and attempts to control the use of fire as a means of slave resistance. While it is hard to know how often slaves intentionally used fire as a weapon, this thesis illustrates that the threat of fire produced pervasive fear. Through a survey of laws, newspapers, and personal correspondence this fear and its impact can be seen, allowing historians to consider how slaves helped to shape Charleston and South Carolina through the constant threat of resistance. Euro-Charlestonians limited their own lives and adjusting their laws in an attempt to minimize the damage slave could cause through fire and alleviate their pyrophobia.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Prior to the Civil War, fire ravaged Charleston on many occasions, which helped to generate the atmosphere of fear with which Charlestonians lived. A fire raged through Charleston in 1698 and fifty families were left homeless.¹ The first “great fire” struck Charleston on November 18, 1740. The fire quickly moved through the city because it was hot and dry, and the “fire found ready fuel among Charleston’s wooden buildings.”² In 1740, Charleston did not have an organized fire department or other means of battling a major fire. A fire located in the center of the city destroyed 300 homes and businesses. Although the fire was started by accident in a hatter’s shop, some Charlestonians initially suspected that black arsonists had started the blaze.³ A fire in 1778 either broke out in a bake house or “in a kitchen hired out to some negroes”, and destroyed 250 houses.⁴ Throughout the early nineteenth century Charleston continued to be damaged by fire. Fires swept through Charleston in 1800, in 1810 with 194 houses destroyed, in 1812 with 200 houses destroyed, in 1819, and at the end of 1825.⁵ Another forty buildings were destroyed by fire in 1833, and in 1835 sixty-three buildings burned, including St. Philip’s Church.⁶ Just four months after the St. Philip’s fire, Charleston’s second great fire

¹ Walter J. Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 16.

² Matthew Mulcahy, “The ‘Great Fire’ of 1740 and the politics of Disaster Relief in Colonial Charleston,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99:2 (1998): 138.

³ Mulcahy, “The ‘Great Fire,’” 138-139; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 69.

⁴ Marie Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan and the Great Charleston Fire of 1861,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 104:4 (2003), 262; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 157.

⁵ Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 263; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 192, 205.

⁶ Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 263; “Calamitous Fire,” *Greenville Mountaineer*, March 7, 1835;

destroyed 125 buildings.⁷ The third great fire occurred just three years later in 1838. The fire started at the corner of Market and King Streets and in the end nearly a third of the city was leveled.⁸

In the antebellum United States uncontrolled fire was a very serious concern – its potential to destroy property and take lives perhaps weighed on Americans’ minds even more than it does today. Fire was particularly a problem in urban areas, because of the ease with which fire could spread and the challenges of stopping larger conflagrations in cities. Firefighting has been a work in progress. In the late-eighteenth century many communities were only defended against fire by laws that required residents to keep buckets in their homes and to respond to the fire alarm ready to be a part of the bucket brigade. In the nineteenth century, devoted fire companies developed, first on a volunteer basis, and later as professionals, trained especially to fight fires with the latest technology. At the same time, firefighting equipment evolved rapidly in the antebellum period, with first pump trucks and later the steam powered fire engine, supported by water systems that made fighting fires away from immediate water sources possible. Construction technology was also developing, helping to keep buildings safe and stop the spread of a fire when it did break out. Whole cities could be destroyed by a major conflagration, but by encouraging people to avoid building with the most flammable materials – such as wood – the number of fires could be reduced. Also, the shape and features of a building could help reduce the spread of fire, and in the first half of the

⁷ Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 263.

⁸ Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 264; “Ruinous Conflagration,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, May 6, 1838; “Awful Conflagration,” *Greenville Mountaineer*, May 11, 1838; “The Late Fire in Charleston,” *Greenville Mountaineer*, May 18, 1838.

nineteenth century a number of architects produced so-called fireproof building designs. Almost as important was the increase in the planning that went into nineteenth century cities. Colonial urban infrastructure was not well developed – people built their homes where they wanted to, and not necessarily in ways that facilitated firefighting. Today there are strict building codes that need to be followed. Those building codes had their beginnings in the antebellum period; however, at first many people chose not to follow the codes for various reasons.⁹ While modern ideas about and techniques of fire containment had their roots in the early nineteenth-century, urban spaces in that period were, nevertheless, still extremely vulnerable to catastrophic fire.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the danger of fire was made more complicated to manage because, unlike many other American cities, there was a large population of slaves and free blacks who could potentially avail themselves of fire as a weapon of resistance to their oppression.¹⁰ The high number of slaves made Charleston a distinct place, even from most other cities in the slaveholding South. Charleston boasted the largest slave population of all slave cities, and by 1790 slaves constituted a majority of

⁹ L.E. Frost and E.L. Jones, “The Fire Gap and the Greater Durability of Nineteenth Century Cities,” *Planning Perspectives* 4:3 (1989): 333 – 347; Sara E. Wermiel, *The Fireproof Building: Technology and Public Safety in the Nineteenth Century American City* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800 – 1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seven Fires: The Urban Infernos that Reshaped America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006); Amy Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth Century City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,”; Mulcahy, “The ‘Great Fire,’” 135 – 157.

¹⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Stephan Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767-1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, ed., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Like in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

Charleston's population – roughly fifty-one percent of the population.¹¹ While Charleston may not be representative of most southern cities, the extremes the city provides to historians can help to identify patterns that were likely repeated in other cities to a degree.

There were many ways that nineteenth-century American slaves could choose to resist their captivity. Some ran away, feigned illness, sabotaged tools, and a few organized collectively, seeking to overthrow the system of slavery as a whole.¹² One of the most destructive ways that a slave could rebel against an owner, and ultimately the rest of society, was by using fire. Slaves could use fire as a weapon of resistance in a wide range of ways. A rebelling slave could easily destroy an owner's profit by burning a crop, could wrack havoc on production by setting fire to the tools of work, could take away an owner's comfort by scorching dwellings or out buildings on the property, or could level an entire community or plantation. In addition, especially in urban areas, fire had the potential to affect a great number of people at one time, whether they were slaveholders or not. Euro-Charlestonians were completely aware of the threat of fire as a form of slave resistance, and lived in fear of slaves and free persons of color acting against the slave regime in this manner.

¹¹ Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 5.

¹² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slave in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956); Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2007); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Norrece Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1990).

While laws existed to prevent slave resistance by limiting slaves' access to firearms and other weapons, those same sorts of laws could not be very effective in containing slaves' access to fire. Fire was an essential element of life in the nineteenth century. It was needed for cooking, heating, and light. This is one of the paradoxes of fire – people needed and used it in their daily lives, but fire could also take a life or burn wildly out of control.¹³ Whether in their own homes, or in their masters' homes, slaves always had access to fire. Lawmakers were left with few options beyond legislation to try to stop slaves' insurrectionary plans more broadly and to impose extremely high penalties on those who used fire as a weapon, as a warning to others.¹⁴ Slaves and free black people in Charleston were not legally permitted to gather in groups of more than seven, unless a Euro-American was present, and could not legally gather for the purpose of merriment or dancing unless permission was obtained from the Warden in the area. A curfew from sundown to sunup was also in effect to ensure that slaves and free black people would not be in the streets at night.¹⁵ By passing laws like these, the Euro-American population was hoping to stop any insurrection plots before slaves had a chance to get started.

¹³ Margaret Hindle Hazen and Robert M. Hazen, *Keepers of the Flame: The Role of Fire in American Culture, 1775 – 1725* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), ix.

¹⁴ McCord, David, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec. VIII (1690), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina; Edited, Under Authority of the Legislature, Volume Seventh Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves and Rivers* (Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 345. Also see: McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec. IX (1712), *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 354-355.

¹⁵ Negroes, An Ordinance for the Government of Negroes and other Persons of Color, Within the City of Charleston, and for Other Purposes Therein Mentioned, Sec. V, VI (October 28, 1806), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 170; Slaves and Free Persons of Color, An Act Respecting Slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes, for Enforcing the More Punctual Performance of Patrol Duty, and to Enforce Certain Restrictions on the Emancipation of Slaves, Sec. II (December 20, 1800), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 377.

This thesis is about Charlestonians' fears about slaves and retaining their control over the slave population. It uses as a case study Euro-South Carolinians' concerns about slaves and free blacks starting fires during the antebellum era. It will argue that Euro-South Carolinians, both slaveholders and non-slaveholders, lived in a constant state of concern regarding slaves' and free blacks' potential resistance against their oppressors. This thesis will identify the laws that were enacted to help eliminate the risks of slave and free black resistance, and how those laws were both enforced and ignored by the Euro-Americans. It will look at how fear manifested itself in South Carolina, and resulted in a constant state of alert in regard to fire. Charlestonians faced the same problems as other cities in the United States during the antebellum era in terms of fire danger, but they also had a large slave population, who, Euro-Americans feared, were always preparing to battle back, potentially using fire. This constant hyper-awareness of fire illustrated some of the tensions that existed in South Carolina and specifically Charleston. Slaves may not have intended for Euro-Americans to develop this sense of concern and agitation, but in the battle between masters and slaves, urbanites restricted their own freedoms through the laws that were designed to help protect them from the threat of fire, especially fire in the hands of slaves and free blacks.

Antebellum southerners prided themselves on their freedoms, and historians have also considered the slave South distinctive in this area.¹⁶ Southern intellectuals and political leaders repeatedly asserted that through small government and slavery they had made

¹⁶ Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

themselves free of the social conflicts that plagued the North, in terms of class struggles. Southerners crafted a proslavery argument, which was widely written and spoken about, that offered a critique of northern free labor. Many southerners argued that because most of the voting citizens in the North were poor Euro-Americans, property and civil order were in danger if the lower class majority voted against the “greater good” in an effort to improve their own position. Southerners viewed the North as being chaotic and dangerous because of the competition that existed between native and foreign workers, which had already resulted in riots, and tensions between rich and poor, which had already produced efforts at labor organization and even strikes.¹⁷ Southerners believed that a “tyrannical mob” could take over the North, and, over time, increasingly argued that the South had to separate in order to avoid mob rule and the disintegration of democracy.¹⁸ In contrast, southerners asserted that they had created a better society, safe from the mob, because their poorest citizens – slaves – were unable to vote, and were held in control by their masters.¹⁹

The South’s intellectual leaders claimed that slavery not only kept workers in check, but also improved the lot of poor and middling Euro-Southerners. They argued to non-slaveholders “that slavery blocked their downward spiral into hireling status.”²⁰ For example, J. D. B. De Bow, editor of the widely-read *Debow’s Review*, argued that lower-class Euro-Americans living in the South had better opportunities because of slavery, and

¹⁷ J. D. B. De Bow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder* (Charleston: Steam-Power Presses of Evans & Cogswell, 1860), 8.

¹⁸ Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 16.

¹⁹ Towers, *The Urban South*, 16, 25.

²⁰ Towers, *The Urban South*, 16, 25.

that competition between workers did not exist. Like most proslavery writers, De Bow believed that everyone's interest in the South was tied to slavery, and that people stood together by race, no matter what their class. Because slavery exempted southern Euro-Americans from working as servants, waiters, boot cleaners and at other "menial" tasks, they were unlikely to rise up against the wealthy and become a mob, in contrast to poorer northerners, who were subjected to these jobs and the low wages that came with them.²¹ Slavery, in sum, protected the South from the social ills of modern urban life.

This thesis looks beyond the proslavery argument for southern distinctiveness to the reality that southerners were nevertheless deeply concerned about the effect that slaves and free blacks could have on their society. The South's government was not small; instead, South Carolinians created elaborate laws to keep slaves and free blacks under control, and extensive systems of enforcement, which also included self-regulation. Self-regulation manifested itself in Charleston and South Carolina through the inception of citizen patrols that were responsible for looking after the city and countryside at night. In addition, it became everyone's duty to be on the lookout for groups of slaves or slaves that were wandering in the city without passes. This type of self-regulation was unique to slaveholding cities and states. As a result, laws placed restrictions on Euro-South Carolinians in order to minimize the fire risk. Southerners may have looked to the North with skepticism over the rights of the lower class citizens, and believed they could rise up as a mob, but South Carolina had their own mob to deal with – slaves and free blacks who were, in fact, not as well controlled as Euro-Americans wanted to believe. Through

²¹ De Bow, *The Interest in Slavery*, 5, 6, 9.

this thesis, suggestions can be made about how slaves indirectly exerted influence over the society in which they lived.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Frederick Douglass wrote, “[a] city slave is almost a free citizen.”²² This kind of thinking on the part of the slaves caused fear among Euro-Charlestonians. The literature on urban slavery suggests that there was some truth to Douglass’s observation – that urban slaves could have more freedoms than their rural counterparts. Some urban slaves were able to roam the city, interact extensively with other slaves, and procure their own work and living arrangements.²³ However, all of these freedoms ultimately threatened to erode the system of control that slaveholders had constructed. In response to this potential loss of control, city and state officials periodically sought to tighten the system. In many instances, Charlestonians were actively seeking to limit the slaves’ freedoms in order to maintain control and a safe city.²⁴

Through a case study of fire, Charlestonians’ concerns and control efforts become visible. Whether slaves actually posed a heightened danger, and particularly a fire danger, in urban Charleston is not the central focus of this thesis. It is hard to know from surviving records whether slaves, in fact, committed arson in many of the cases in which

²² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 147. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html> (5 July 2009).

²³ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South: 1820-1860, A Quantitative Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Philip Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth Century Charleston,” in *Perspectives in American History*, 1 (1984): 188; Bernard R. Powers, Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822 – 1885* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 3; Wallace, *South Carolina*, 522.

²⁴ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*; Midori Takagi, “*Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction*”: *Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

they were accused, or what a slave's specific intent may have been when he or she did start a fire. Unlike Euro-Charlestonians, slaves left very few written records that could explain the motives behind their actions, and almost all information regarding antebellum fires comes from records that reflect the perspective of the Euro-American who created it. These sources may misrepresent slaves' actual uses of fire in resistance. Instead, this thesis will examine existing sources left by Euro-South Carolinians to identify the indirect ways that slaves influenced life in Charleston, and how that affected slave control in the state.

In his article, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators", Michael Johnson seriously calls into question how much sources taken from the Euro-American perspective can actually tell historians about slave conspiracies and the people involved. Johnson was advancing an idea put forth by Richard Wade in 1964 regarding the validity of the 1822 insurrection attempt.²⁵ Johnson was specifically discussing the Denmark Vesey insurrection plot in Charleston in 1822, in which Vesey and his co-conspirators were executed for their involvement in the supposed plot. After reviewing the testimony of eyewitnesses, Johnson came to believe that there may not have been a conspiracy after all, and that Vesey and his co-conspirators were likely sentenced to death because of rumors and fears of the Euro-American slaveocracy.²⁶ This kind of historical work has forced historians to ask serious questions about the nature of resistance and equally

²⁵ Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (2001); Richard C. Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Southern History* 30:2 (1964): 143-161. Johnson's view was a follow up on Richard Wade's 1964 article on the Vesey Conspiracy, which also questioned whether the plot might have been, in fact, largely imagined by Euro-Charlestonians.

²⁶ Johnson, "Denmark Vesey," 916.

serious questions regarding the sources they are using in their work. It is important that historians determine whose agency is being represented in the sources and whose agency is, in fact, not. This approach shaped Donald Reynolds' recent book, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South*, which examines the ways that the southern secessionists used the accidental fires on July 8, 1860 in northern Texas to create a panic among Euro-American people. Newspaper editors, he argues, advanced their secession goals for the southern states by highlighting the connection between these fires and fears that abolitionists were assisting slaves in rebelling against slavery.²⁷ Finally, creativity when reading sources is also important, especially since obtaining the slaves' point of view is not always possible.²⁸

Like Johnson and Reynolds, this thesis looks at some well-known sources in a different way – not just to illustrate that the Euro-American population had power over the enslaved, or that slaves used fire to resist, but that the daily contest between master and slave had an impact on the shape of free, Euro-American society as a whole. Slaves had a certain degree of influence over South Carolina, which is discernible in terms of Euro-South Carolinians growing to fear slaves. The fear slaves invoked in Euro-Charlestonians manifested itself in the laws South Carolinians passed to try to secure their society. It was evident also in the narratives of everyday life, like newspapers, where common citizens were daily confronted with stories of resistance and rebellion, reprintings of the laws of slave control, and so forth. Most people were afraid of fire, but

²⁷ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*.

²⁸ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2, 8.

in South Carolina they had the added pressure of fearing what slaves and free blacks could do with such an unregulated weapon. Slaves and free blacks living in South Carolina were viewed as vengeful, negligent, and careless and Euro-Americans believed they had to protect their society from the danger they represented – especially in regards to fire. A fed-up slave or free black just needed to flick a burning cigar in the right place – like a pile of cotton, a barrel of unattended gunpowder, or a tinder-dry wooden building – to cause complete chaos. This was what many Euro-Americans imagined and feared, and lawmakers and citizens were constantly attempting to react to this pervasive atmosphere of fear.

Both Reynolds and Johnson illustrate the ways that eyewitness testimony could be skewed so vigilante committees could get the answers that they were searching for, even if as a result innocent people were hung.²⁹ Reynolds identifies ways in which rumors can affect the population of readers, and cause panic among the people, which is important to this thesis because the newspapers in South Carolina, perhaps less intentionally, were carrying a similar message regarding slavery and fire. Newspapers in South Carolina also reflected the mindset and the fears of the citizens. Slaves were viewed in the newspapers as being evil and dangerous, the same way many Euro-Charlestonians felt about them.

The primary focus of this thesis is the slaves in Charleston. However, lawmakers, newspapers writers, and the general public sometimes expressed ideas about race as a whole, and did not make the distinction based on condition of servitude. At times they

²⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Johnson, “Denmark Vesey”; Reynolds, *Texas Terror*.

dealt with slaves and free blacks together, and saw potential collusion between these two groups. In urban spaces, slaves and free blacks lived near one another and often associated together in various ways. Laws regulating those associations suggest that concerns about resistance were not entirely confined to the slave community.³⁰ Those concerns were visible, for example, during the rumored Vesey Conspiracy, in which slaves and free blacks were believed to be meeting together under the guise of religious worship to plan their plot. So, where relevant, free blacks are mentioned throughout the thesis as well.

The antebellum era, from 1820 to 1860, is the main concentration of this thesis. However, many of the laws that were passed and shaped life in Charleston during this time period originated in the colonial era. It is important to examine those laws in order to have a better understanding of antebellum South Carolina and how fear developed within the society, so this thesis addresses developments before 1820 at times, most particularly when considering the development of the legal system of slave and fire control.

Chapter Two will focus on the history of South Carolina and Charleston and the development of slavery in the city and state, and how slavery functioned in rural and urban settings. This chapter will also discuss the historiography of the major themes that

³⁰ An Act Respecting Slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes, for Enforcing the more Punctual Performance of Patrol Duty, and to Enforce Certain Restrictions on the Emancipation of Slaves, Sec. I, II (December 20, 1800), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston, from the Year 1783 to Oct. 1844, to which are Annexed The Acts of Legislation Which Relate Exclusively to the City of Charleston* (Charleston: Walker & Burke, 1844), 377; An Act to Alter part of an Act Entitled “An Act Respecting Slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes, for Enforcing the more Punctual Performance of Patrol Duty, and to Enforce Certain Restrictions on the Emancipation of Slaves,” Sec I (December 17, 1803), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 378.

appear throughout this thesis, and illustrate why Euro-South Carolinians believed they needed strict restrictions on slaves and free blacks. Chapter Three will focus on the law and slave control in both state law and city ordinances. The chapter offers particular detail on legislation related to fire, the case study of this thesis. This chapter argues that Euro-South Carolinians passed laws related to slaves to help ensure public security, and that these laws reflected the fearful mindset of lawmakers and their concerns about slave resistance. Laws born out of such fears, however, often restricted the personal freedoms of the non-enslaved as well. Chapter Four focuses on the case study of arson and Euro-American reactions to fire more broadly in popular media. It assumes that South Carolina's newspapers both reflected and reinforced the mindset of Euro-South Carolinians.³¹ This chapter argues that fire was a serious concern in the city and that slaves were seen as a particular threat. Newspapers characterized slaves and sometimes free blacks as dangerous, negligent, careless, and vengeful and cast them as a threat to public safety. Personal correspondence and insurance papers echo this link between Euro-Americans' fear of fire and the slaves and free blacks who may have started it.

This thesis illustrates how sources created by Euro-South Carolinians can allow historians to elucidate the actions of slaves and how those actions affected the lives of Euro-South Carolinians. It provides a starting point for further research regarding how slaves used fire as a form of resistance. More importantly, it suggests how the threat of fires started by slaves contributed to the development of various aspects of South

³¹ Brian Ray Gabriel, "The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement' Discourse about Slavery and the Social Construction of the Slave Rebel and Conspirator in Newspapers," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, United States of America, 2004). Needs to go in bib

Carolina society. Slaves in South Carolina collectively played a role in the development of the state. They influenced the laws that were passed, which reflected the threat that they posed to the Euro-South Carolina society. Slaves' actions helped to shape the way free people operated and even the very layout of the city. Building restrictions sought to reduce the risk of fire and were harsher than what was observed in other places.

Charleston also had far-reaching formal rules for policing and fire control that required the help of every citizen. Euro-Charlestonians spent a lot of time and effort watching slaves and questioning them about their actions and whereabouts. Euro-Charlestonians even restricted their own uses of fire in public because of the potential for slave resistance. Fire was a powerful tool for those looking to rebel, and slaves had unlimited access to fire. The potential for fire to either destroy property or harm individuals was high, which led to Euro-Charlestonians' fear of both fire and slaves.

Chapter Two:

The Development of Charleston's Slave Society

This chapter will focus on the history and development of South Carolina and Charleston. It also traces the development of slavery in the colony and Charleston, and the distinctions between rural and urban slavery, the nature of slavery in South Carolina and Charleston, and the ways in which slaves, and at times free blacks, resisted the institution. From the development of South Carolina's plantations, to the establishment of Charleston as a major seaport, slaves were seen as an important labor force for Euro-Americans to fulfill their dreams. However, the demography of South Carolina, and in particular Charleston, the development of the task system, both in urban and rural areas, the presence of a free black population in the city, and the particulars of urban slavery produced deep concerns about slave resistance. In order to understand slavery in South Carolina, and the fear that Euro-South Carolinians developed towards slaves, and sometimes free blacks, it is important to identify how slavery became prevalent in this society. From the beginnings of English colonization in the 1660s, slaves were seen as being essential to the success of South Carolina. Slaveholders and non-slaveholders engaged in mixed agriculture and stock raising for export to the sugar islands in the Caribbean. Slaves were responsible for growing their own provisions, which they could sell and trade for other supplies they required. Many slaveholders did not like the independence that this afforded to the slaves, and in 1687 the first slave law was passed

in South Carolina, restricting slaves to trading in the provisions they grew only with other slaves or servants.¹

Soon more and more settlers and slaves began arriving on the shores, most from the Caribbean, specifically Barbados. The first forty-two Barbadian settlers arrived on February 8, 1671, and eight days later another sixty-four arrived. Soon, the Barbadian settlers came to be almost half of the population. In the early 1670s slaves comprised approximately one quarter to one third of the population – South Carolina had a labor force, but no staple crop to support a plantation colony. Up to this time, slaves and their masters worked together in almost an egalitarian fashion.²

From the beginnings of the colony in the 1660s, South Carolina searched for a crop that would enrich slaveholders. In the early years, settlers experimented with cotton, indigo, and rice. Indigo and rice became popular crops for planters. After help from local natives – and many failed adaptation attempts – the lowcountry became a rice capital in the world by the mid-eighteenth century, and were importing approximately 2000 slaves a year from 1731 to 1738.³ One of the main reasons for this was slave labor. Through the sweat of slaves, woodlands and marshes were transformed into plantation landscapes for the cultivation of irrigated rice. Some slaves that were being imported

¹ Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1, 5-6; Berlin, *Many Thousands*, 65, 66, 68.

² Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1974), 8-9; Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press: 1998), 37-41; Rosser H. Taylor, *Antebellum South Carolina: A Social and Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 3; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 1; Berlin, *Many Thousands*, 71.

³ Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 78; Wood, *Black Majority*, 35-36; Charles W. Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 13 -14.

from Africa were experts at rice cultivation. Rice had been grown on the west coast of Africa, and Carolina planters preferred to buy slaves with this knowledge. The rise of rice produced a plantation society and ultimately transformed slavery in South Carolina. Beginning in the 1790s, short staple cotton production became more popular, following the advent of Eli Whitney's cotton gin, and slavery spread further inland because of the labor required to grow and process that crop.⁴ The three main crops, rice, cotton, and indigo, all relied heavily on slave labor, cementing South Carolina's reliance on slaves and their choice to continue bringing more slaves into the state. By the early 1700s slaves had become a majority of the colony's population.⁵ As more and more slaves came to the state, and more were born, their population kept growing, which caused many Euro-Americans to fear their outnumbered status.

With the growth in the production of rice, indigo and cotton, Charleston emerged as the port to ship the three crops back to England. Not only did Charleston become a major seaport and the center of South Carolina's economic interests, Charleston also became "a major cog in the entire British Colonial system."⁶ As Charleston was becoming a major seaport, a merchant group began operating out of the area to meet the exporting demands of the emerging planter class.⁷

Although this study does include other areas of South Carolina, Charleston is a major focal point. Charleston is located on a narrow peninsula that extends approximately three

⁴ David Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1940* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 3-4, 35; Wood, *Black Majority*, 35-36; Carney, *Black Rice*, 1, 78, 82; Edgar, *South Carolina*, 264.

⁵ Edgar, *South Carolina*, 49.

⁶ Gregory Allen Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants, 1815-1860: Urban Leadership in the Antebellum South" (PhD diss., University of California, United States of America, 1978), 17.

⁷ Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants, 1815-1860," 18.

miles into the harbor. The Ashley River on the west and the Cooper River on the east surround the peninsula. The Battery, at the tip of the peninsula, was built to protect the area from high tides and hurricanes. The Battery was also a distinctive marker for ships entering the harbor. Charleston occupied about one and a half square miles with swampland to the north of the peninsula. Across from the swampland was a suburban area known as the “Neck”. In their book, *Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828 – 1843*, William Pease and Jane Pease describe the city view from St. Michael’s church tower. From that vantage point most of Charleston could be seen. The streets were flat in an irregular grid. Along the Cooper River, wharves were piled “with cotton bales and rice barrels in transit from local boats to the coastal schooners and foreign-bound ships, which were at times two or three deep at the dockside.”⁸

Of course, being a peninsula city, Charleston had a very busy port system, supported by very profitable lowcountry plantations that were rich from rice and cotton. Charleston’s social structure was based on a hierarchy that also reflected the economics of the city. Euro-Americans, in general, were high on the hierarchy, and slaves and free blacks occupied the lowest levels. First, all inhabitants were divided by race, and then the Euro-American were further divided by “property, occupations, family, education, church, and leisure activities.”⁹ The Euro-American hierarchy was divided into five groups: retired and absentee planters were at the top; next, professionals like lawyers,

⁸ William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *The Web of Progress : Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1843* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1, 2, 7; Greb, “ Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants,” 17.

⁹ Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, 122.

doctors, ministers and teachers; the third level was for merchants; skilled artisans occupied the fourth level; and finally, unskilled workers were at the bottom.¹⁰ The title of “planter” held the most prestige in the city according to Euro-Charlestonians, because land and slave ownership was valued above everything else. Even men who were financially successful merchants would remain in the middle of the social hierarchy because they did not own land or slaves, though they may even have more money than some of the planters. Even though fewer than “one-fifth of the Charlestonians with high status were wealthy, nine-tenths of them had some planting interests and one-half owned large plantations.”¹¹ Because land and wealth were at the aristocratic core of Charleston, successful lawyers and doctors would often retire from their practices to invest in land and slaves in order to gain the powerful title of planter. Charleston’s education system did provide for some upward social and economic mobility. Through education some were able to gain access to the higher levels of the social hierarchy, even if they were not born into privilege. Charleston had instructive and utilitarian lectures in religion, philosophy, literature, political economy and applied chemistry; in addition, night classes were also available. Women were not given the same educational opportunities. A woman’s social status was tied to her father or her husband, and any upward mobility in standing would depend on them. Any education that a woman did receive was centered on domestic skills.¹²

¹⁰ John P. Radford, “Culture, Economy and Urban Structure in Charleston, South Carolina, 1860-1880” (PhD diss., Clark University, United States of America, 1974), 131-132.

¹¹ Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, 122.

¹² Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, 118, 119, 121-122; Radford, “Culture, Economy, and Urban Structures,” 133.

The economic structure of Charleston was tied to the port and the export of indigo, rice and naval stores. Like all cities, Charleston had booms and busts. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Charleston was in a boom, as exports of rice and indigo continued to grow and a large cotton market was also flourishing. Prices were high for all three commodities. A national panic in 1819, which caused a national depression, halted Charleston's prosperity. With the arrival of a huge cotton market, Charleston became heavily reliant on exporting cotton, even though they were still exporting rice. This dependence on a single commodity meant that when cotton prices fell, Charleston fell into a depression, from which the city never fully recovered. Not only did commodity prices and exportation affect the economy of Charleston, the city was also affected by disease, fire and hurricanes.¹³ Some Charlestonians blamed the decline in trade on the general health of the city. With the number of epidemics that swept through the city, many thought that other countries did not have confidence in the "health of this place."¹⁴ Others also blamed the national tariffs that went into effect in 1824 for the economic downturn. However, after years of being generally economically stagnant, from the mid 1830s until the Civil War Charleston's economy began to improve again. The demand for rice rose, people began buying merchandise, and businessmen had clients again. In addition, construction was also booming. Even with the boom in the economy, Charleston's large-scale manufacturing industry failed to grow. Charleston was reliant on the booms and bust of the commodities market for its wealth, and Charleston never became a manufacturing center.

¹³ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 178, 187; Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina," 18.

¹⁴ As quoted in Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 211.

Although the seaport and exports were still profitable, by 1860 the port at Charleston had dropped from first in volume to third in the South, and was now behind New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama.¹⁵

Charleston also emerged as the headquarters of the international slave trade for South Carolina. Between 1700 and 1775, forty percent of all Africans imported to the British colonies that would become the United States came through Charleston. This made the Charleston merchants dealing in slaves extremely wealthy and concomitantly politically powerful in the colony. British merchants, from Liverpool and London, dominated the slave trade and were responsible for supplying most of the slaves to the colony. Once the slaves arrived in South Carolina, they were turned over to South Carolinians merchants who were “more than willing to serve as local factors and make handsome profits.”¹⁶ The 1740s saw a temporary decrease in the number of Africans being imported because of the Stono slave rebellion. The Stono rebellion, in 1739, began when twenty slaves broke into a store, near the Stono River, seized arms, and killed the two Euro-American storekeepers. The twenty rebelling slaves then went southward burning plantations, killing Euro-Americans, and recruiting slaves to join them. The rebellion grew to about sixty people before well-armed planters stopped them. In April 1740, import duties were assessed on each African being brought into the state in an effort to decrease importation of African slaves. Because the Stono rebels were African, lawmakers believed that by decreasing the number of African slaves through duties, they could increase the number

¹⁵ Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, 41-42, 52; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 214; Greb, “Charleston, South Carolina,” 22.

¹⁶ Edgar, *South Carolina*, 63, 64, 67.

of South Carolina born slaves, thus reducing the chance of another rebellion. As years passed and the memories of Stono faded, the importation of slaves again resumed by 1750. From 1750 to the American Revolution, approximately 2500 slaves were imported each year.¹⁷ After the American Revolution, South Carolina was the only state to re-open its international slave trade from 1803 to 1807, which brought approximately 40,000 Africans into Charleston and South Carolina. After 1808, the international slave trade was abolished in the United States; however, extremist South Carolinians tried one more time to get it going again during the sectional crisis of the 1850s.¹⁸

Charleston was the largest city in South Carolina, and in the early nineteenth century South, it was also second only to Baltimore, Maryland, in population and commercial prominence, though it would gradually decline in relative terms by the time of the Civil War. The general population of Charleston was diverse. Charleston had a large slave and free black population that overshadowed the Euro-American population. This was a trend that began early in Charleston's history. For most of the eighteenth century, people of African descent congregated in larger numbers and in a more confined space in Charleston than anywhere else on the mainland.¹⁹ Slaves and free blacks in Charleston had outnumbered Euro-American people in seven out of eight decades from 1790 to 1860. While most Africans and African Americans in Charleston were enslaved, Charleston also boasted a significant free black community. This community emerged in

¹⁷ Edgar, *South Carolina*, 76, 77-78.

¹⁸ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slave in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 139 – 140, 154; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 188; Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 522.

¹⁹ Morgan, "Black Life in Eighteenth Century Charleston," 188.

the 1690s and by 1850 there were about 3,441 free blacks living in Charleston. The population of free blacks continued to grow because of natural increase, migration from other states and foreign countries, slave purchasing freedom by “hiring out” their services, and obtaining their freedom once their owner passed away.²⁰ However, some free blacks belonged to an elite class, and were never slaves.

Table 1

Charleston Population by Condition, Race and Sex, 1820 - 1860

	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Slave Women	6,957	8,577	8,339	10,901	7,346
As a % of city population	27	28	29	25	18
Slave Men	5,695	6,777	6,334	8,631	6,563
As a % of city population	23	22	22	20	16
Free Women of Color	852	1,293	975	2,086	1,990
As a % of city population	3	4	3	5	5
Free Men of Color	623	814	583	1,355	1,247
As a % of city population	2.5	3	2	3	3
White women	5,330	6,502	6,203	9,774	11,662
As a % of city population	21	21	21	23	29
White men	5,899	6,326	6,827	10,238	11,712
As a % of city population	23	21	23	24	29
Total city population	25,356	30,289	29,261	42,985	40,520*

Source: Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives*, 6. Kennedy’s original chart shows the total city population in 1860 as 40,522. However, this is a calculation error and the correct number is shown above.

²⁰ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 9-10, 36, 37.

Table 2
Slave and Free Populations (Free white as well as free black)

Cities	1820				1840				1860			
	Slave	%	Free	%	Slave	%	Free	%	Slave	%	Free	%
Baltimore	4357	7	58381	93	3199	3	99114	97	2218	1	210100	99
Charleston	12652	51	12128	49	14673	50	14588	50	13909	34	26613	66
Louisville	1031	26	2979	74	3430	16	17780	84	4903	7	63130	93
Mobile	836	31	1836	69	3869	31	8803	69	7587	26	21671	74
New Orleans	7355	27	19821	73	23448	23	78745	77	13385	8	155290	92
Norfolk	3261	38	5217	62	3709	34	7211	66	3284	22	11336	78
Richmond	4387	36	7680	64	7509	37	12644	63	11699	31	26211	69
Saint Louis	1810	18	8210	82	1531	9	14938	91	1542	1	159231	99
Savannah	3075	41	4448	59	4694	42	6520	58	7712	35	14580	65
Washington	1945	15	11302	85	1713	7	21651	93	1774	3	59348	97

Source: Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 52. Goldin's original chart includes population information for each decade from 1820 to 1860 and did not include the percentage of the population data. Author added percentage information to illustrate the comparison in population between Charleston and other slaveholding cities.

Slavery in Charleston was a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, urban slavery afforded more diversity of work and more self-direction than plantation labor. On the other, the city was carefully regulated and slaves were closely monitored. Slavery in South Carolina needed to be modified to fit in the urban environment. Some owners would "hire out" their slaves, which was a highly controversial practice because the slaves were no longer under the watchful eye of their masters. In addition, some slaves were allowed to procure their own work, negotiate their wages, hours, and possibly even living arrangements. Control was maintained not only by masters' regulations but also by Euro-Americans in Charleston, as a whole, constantly observing the slaves and free blacks, and monitoring their actions closely. Constables, sheriffs and slave patrols were responsible for controlling the slave and free black populations in Charleston, and were a

vital part of securing the city from potential slave and free black threats.²¹ From how they spent the money they had earned to the way they dressed and spent their free time, slaves and free people of color were always being watched for signs of insurrection.²²

In Charleston slaves held many different types of jobs. Like on plantations, urban slaveholders had house servants to care for the home. However, urban house servants were routinely sent out of the home on various errands for the master or mistress. Alternatively, rural house servants typically stayed on the plantation. This gave house servants in Charleston a chance to interact with other slaves as well, and made the Euro-American population nervous about how easily slaves moved around the city unattended. House servants could be young or old, male or female, but male slaves had more opportunities for work outside the home than women. Female slaves working outside of the home were mainly involved in needlecraft trades, which still required a fair amount of skill. Outside of the home, slaves could be employed in any number of specialized fields. By 1848, slaves living in Charleston were involved in thirty-eight different occupations, including bricklayers, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, bakers, plasterers, shoemakers, mechanical trades and maritime occupations. Urban slaveholders often trained their slaves in a skilled job for their own businesses. Other slaves were trained by artisans, who offered slave apprenticeship positions. Once the slave's apprenticeship was over, the slaveholder had the opportunity to hire out the slave and make a better return on the slave's labor. However, training a slave in some jobs would have gone against the slave

²¹ Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, 100-101; Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 82-83.

²² Morgan, "Black Life," 189, 190, 203, 206-207.

code, as it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write. If slaves were able to read and write, they might be able to forge travelling passes, or read the abolitionist material calling for the end of slavery – which could incite rebellion.²³

The hiring out of slaves by their owners was a common practice in both colonial and antebellum South Carolina; however, it was also a threat to security. Hiring out a slave was an arrangement or contract between the slaveholder and the potential employer. Contracts generally included the price, length of service, assurances regarding how the slave would be treated, and the nature of work. It was common in rural settings for slaveholders to loan an extra slave to another farm that needed extra help. This was also practiced in the city, but it was more common for slaveholders with extra slaves to loan slaves out to many different people at different times. These negotiated agreements were mainly for slaves that would be hired out to an employer for a longer period of time. As the practice became more popular, a system needed to be implemented for slaves working for many different people in an attempt to ensure security.²⁴

Some slaves were allowed to go and find their own employment and pay their master a fraction of their earnings; this was called hiring out their own time or self-hire. The contract or agreement was now between the slave and the employer. Most slaves were employed in the same city as their master, but slaves also had the option of securing

²³ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 29; Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 10-12; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XLV (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 413; McCord, ed., An Act to Amend the Laws in Relation to slaves and Free Persons of Color, No. 2639, Sec. I (1834), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 468.

²⁴ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 105-106; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 476, Sec. XXIX (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 380; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 586, Sec. XXVI (1735), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 393; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 38.

employment elsewhere; as long as there was money to give the master each month. This was a controversial practice and slave cities and states, including Charleston and South Carolina, tried to halt it, but they were all unsuccessful.²⁵

A consequence of hiring out was slaves living out, meaning they did not live on the same property as their masters. Living out was directly tied to the growth of hiring out and self-hire. As slaves began to earn their own wages, they could then afford to pay rent, and slaveholders who already had hired out slaves were often lenient.²⁶ However, this was a controversial practice as well. Slaves who lived out would not be under the watchful eye of their masters, especially at night, and the Euro-Americans believed that slaves could be out causing problems. Because slaves had the potential to live away from their owners, it was important that all Euro-Americans, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, worked together to keep watch and control over their activities to ensure the safety of everyone in Charleston.

Free black people were also a small part of the Charleston population. They had earned their freedom in a few different ways. Free blacks could earn their freedom by being emancipated by their owners, or by purchasing their freedom through the money they saved from self-hiring. Other free blacks were runaways who came to Charleston because the anonymity of city life, as they could easily blend in with the free black population. Some free black people, recently emancipated from their owners in the country, were drawn to Charleston because of the anonymity, to develop skills, or because of the sense of community. Charleston was also home to a group of upper-class

²⁵ Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 38-39; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 48-51.

²⁶ Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 40, 42; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 66.

free blacks, many of whom had only distant connections to slavery and had amassed family wealth over four or five generations. A few elite free blacks made their wealth on the backs of their slaves. Free black slaveholders were no more benevolent than their Euro-American slaveholder counterparts. A strict master/slave relationship was maintained and the severity of bondage was not mitigated by their common racial status. Even though free blacks did not answer to a master, and a few were themselves masters over slaves, the free black population in Charleston was only as free as the Euro-Americans would allow them to be, and were still viewed as a potential threat to security.²⁷

By 1860 free black males were involved in at least sixty-five different occupations, most of them skilled. Free black women, on the other hand, had far fewer choices, but were still employed mainly as domestics and needlecraft workers. Even though free black males were highly qualified to work in certain jobs, they still faced discrimination because of their color. Legislation attempted to make them subservient to their Euro-American employers. Charleston city council attempted to freeze their wages, and they were also paid at a lower wage than Euro-Charlestonians doing the same work.²⁸ However, Euro-American men also tried to avoid the work that free black men were doing, because they did not want to be stigmatized for doing the same jobs as free black men work.²⁹ Free black people had to attempt to distinguish themselves from the slave population to have any hope of becoming successful. The free black population had to

²⁷ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 36, 57; Marina Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 9, 73, 75, 80.

²⁸ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 41, 44.

²⁹ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 45.

walk a tightrope between distinguishing themselves from the slaves, but at the same time many of their friends and family were still enslaved.³⁰

The poor free black population commonly intermingled with slaves. This could be because relatives and friends were still enslaved. Free blacks and slaves also commonly intermingled at the grog shops that were common in all parts of Charleston, were employed in the same occupations and attended the same churches. Through the practice of living out, free blacks and slaves often lived side-by-side in Charleston. This interaction was evident in the supposed Denmark Vesey plot. Vesey was a free black person, and his plan was rumored to involve both free black people and slaves who met under the pretext of religious meetings.³¹

Life for slaves and free blacks living in Charleston was full of potential opportunities; however, even though opportunities existed, slaves and free blacks living in Charleston were still oppressed because of their color and their status. The opportunities that were available to them also created fear in the Euro-American population. Because of all the free time that slaves and free blacks had, Euro-Americans sought even stricter restrictions on slaves and free blacks to try to retain control.

Slaves in Charleston did not share a single, common experience, while at the same time slaves' experiences in Charleston overlapped and were interrelated with the countryside. Charleston is a major focus of this thesis; however, understanding slavery throughout South Carolina is important to understanding the urban situation, as the city

³⁰ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 45, 57.

³¹ Wikramanayake, *A World*, 74; Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison: Madison House 1999), 132.

was not cordoned off from the rest of the state. In the course of their lives, many rural South Carolinian slaves went to Charleston on work for their masters, to find work for themselves, or to market provision goods. Concerns about slave control and fires set by slaves were problems both in the countryside and in Charleston. Both rural South Carolina and Charleston were governed by the same state laws regulating slavery, which echoed common concerns across the rural/urban divide.

The systems of slavery that were used in the hinterlands of Charleston were distinctive and relevant to the Charlestonian experience. The gang system, which was dominant throughout the South, saw slaves being closely monitored and their time strictly regulated. However, slaveholders, and slaves, in the lowcountry used and preferred the task system. Under the task system slaves would be assigned a specific task[s] each morning. These tasks were designed to last a certain length of time, but if the slave completed their job[s] early, the rest of the day was theirs, and they could spend it any way they saw fit. However, if too many slaves were finishing their work early in the day, modifications would be made and the number of tasks assigned would increase. The slaves found certain advantages in this system. It allowed them a great deal of flexibility in determining the length of their day, and extra food could be grown in gardens, which the slaves would have time to cultivate and sell. In addition, with the task system came specialization – some slaves were trained and performed tasks that took them out of the fields. Skilled labor by slaves was male dominated. Slaves could work in many different roles on and off the plantation; occupations included, but were not limited to,

blacksmiths, carpenters, shipwrights, millers, and tailors. Slaves could also work away from the plantation and hire out their time in urban centers, like Charleston.³²

Under the task system in the lowcountry, it was common for slaves to have access to land in order to plant personal gardens. Slaveholders hoped that this would give the slaves an attachment to the land and produce a sense of pride and responsibility. Slaves were able to grow provisions for themselves and either sell them or trade them for items they needed. This created a slave market and broadened their worldview by being exposed to other slaves, in marketplaces or even in cities, particularly Charleston. By allowing slaves to earn money through gardens, slaveholders were losing a certain amount of control over their slaves, even while those gardens could function to attach slave to land and thereby serve as a means of slave control. It was hard to legislate marketing activity. Slaveholders would try to become their slaves' only retail outlet, but

³² Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750 – 1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 102; Larry E. Hudson, Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 2-7, 14-16; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 179, 185, 204-205; Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 – 1880," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39:4 (1982), 568, 586; Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 43; Negroes, An Ordinance for the Government of Negroes and Other Persons of Color, Within the City of Charleston, and for Other Purposes Therein Mentioned, Sec. V, VI (November 1, 1836), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 169; Negroes, An Ordinance to Amend an Ordinance Passed to Prevent Slaves or Free Persons of Color from Assembling at Military Parades, Sec. I (January 5, 1830), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 175; Negroes, An Ordinance to Amend an Ordinance on the Subject of Negroes or Other Persons of Color Assembling and Meeting Together for Religious Worship, or Other Purposes, Sec. I, II (November 22, 1836), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 176-177; Slaves and Free Persons of Color, An Act Respecting slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes, for Enforcing the More Punctual Performance of Patrol Duty, and to Enforce Certain Restrictions on the Emancipation of Slaves, Sec. I (December 20, 1800), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 376; Douglas R. Egerton, "Slaves to the Marketplace: Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (2006): 617-639; John Cambell, "As 'A Kind of Freeman'? Slaves' Market-Related Activities in the South Carolina Upcountry 1800-1860," in *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (New York: Routledge, 1995), 131-169; Harry L. Watson, "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political and Religious Expressions 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 43-73.

a “black market” of sorts in slave-produced goods arose in the region over time. Masters widely believed that it was important for owners to know what their slaves were either buying or trading goods for, and were concerned that slaves with cash could be acquiring weapons and planning an insurrection or rebellion.³³

The degree of freedom that the slaves had was a distinctive feature of the task system. Under the gang system, slaves would be supervised closely, worked from sunup to sundown, and could only work as fast as the slowest slave.³⁴ There was also no incentive for slaves to finish their work quickly, because they were in the field for a fixed period of time every day.³⁵ The gang system was generally seen as a harsher form of slavery, and slaves that worked in a gang did not enjoy the relative freedoms as those who worked under the task system. Planters who had historically operated their farms on the task system found it extremely difficult to implement gang labor with a disgruntled slave population and often chose to endure the liberties inherent in the task system by default.

It was common for lowcountry slaveholders to leave their plantations during the hot summer months, and take refuge in their Charleston homes. By escaping to Charleston, slaveholders were trying to avoid exposure to diseases like malaria that would strike in the summer time. As the slaveholders were not there to watch over their slaves, and their plantation sizes were too large to closely observe slaves, the task system provided slaves with a set routine and Euro-American overseers ensured the plantation’s security and that

³³ Hudson, *To Have and To Hold*, 2, 16-19.

³⁴ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 188, 191.

³⁵ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 191.

slave tasks were completed.³⁶ The task system created a rural environment that was very open to slave-mastery, similar to what was seen in Charleston, and this system produced a flow of slaves into the city – so Charlestonians could be concerned about slave control in the surrounding area as well as being concerned about the various “freedoms” that many slaves enjoyed under the task system.

Even though the task system was not as strict gang system, slaveholders also sometimes preferred this method for a number of reasons. After assigning tasks, slaves generally performed the same task[s] each day, which meant that the slaves became good at their jobs, leading to specialization. More than having specialized slaves, slaveholders believed in the incentives that the task system gave their slaves. Slaveholders believed that by allowing their slaves to have time to themselves to work on their own activities, slaves would be less likely to rebel against the system. So, even though the system allowed slaves more time to themselves, slaveholders believed that was also important to keeping them content in their role, and that contentment would actually minimize the chances of a slave rebellion.³⁷

Historians have long been researching the ways in which slaves resisted or rebelled against their oppressors. Early research denies that slaves resisted at all. Slaves were seen as being so damaged by slavery that resistance was beyond them – the harshness of slavery reduced them to a childlike state.³⁸ Herbert Aptheker’s 1943 book, *American*

³⁶ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 19; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 181.

³⁷ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 51, 59.

³⁸ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,

Negro Slave Revolts, was groundbreaking for the way it addressed slave resistance.³⁹ Aptheker's views towards slave resistance were literally ahead of his time, as his book was the only study of slave resistance at a time when racism, discrimination and segregation were commonplace. Through his work, Aptheker illustrated that resistance was widespread throughout the South and shows the slaves' discontentment, and the masters continued efforts to control the slaves because they were afraid. His research examined the ways that slaves resisted bondage, including sabotage, feigning illness, stealing, suicide, and self-mutilation. He also identified the planning and execution of more violent acts like poisoning, murder, arson and insurrections. Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* illustrated that slaves were not content in their bonded state and used many methods to attempt to gain their freedom.⁴⁰

It is important to highlight the research that Aptheker published, because later historians would take Aptheker's approach and present more nuanced research on various topics, still under the umbrella of slave resistance. Historians have concentrated their research on the specific rebellious acts of slaves to gain a better understanding of why a slave chose a certain way to show dissatisfaction. It was not only the specific slave resistance methods that were being researched; historians also thought it was important to know why slaves rebelled. The master/slave relationship in slavery is also an important dynamic for historians. Some historians have viewed that relationship as being paternalistic, others have characterized it as similar to an employer and a worker, and

1966); Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

³⁹ Aptheker, *American Negro*.

⁴⁰ Aptheker, *American Negro*, 141, 143, 145.

some even describe it as warfare.⁴¹ The changes to the characterization of the master/slave relationship reflect the evolving ways that historians view that relationship. Slaves are no longer viewed as helpless victims, instead scholarship now illustrates that active ways that slaves were involved in their lives and the world around them.

This thesis uses concerns about fire as a case study to illustrate both Euro-Americans' fears and the restrictions – upon slaves and themselves – that were imposed to quell those fears. This in turn pushes slave resistance historiography further to suggest that the potential of slave violence, in this case fire, was in itself a form of resistance. Changes were made to Euro-South Carolinian society that reflect the collective influence of slaves. This thesis takes as its premise the idea that slaves and free black people did not have to light a match to start a fire. The potential threat of that action was a serious concern in Charleston, and it was enough to make the Euro-American population fearful and reactive. Slaves and free black people held invisible power because of the destruction and chaos they had the capacity to cause. Because of the role that slaves and free blacks played in society, Euro-Americans were constantly afraid of what revolting slaves and free blacks might do. The high concentration of slaves and free blacks in the city, and the particulars of the urban environment, made it impossible to be sure that slaves were fully under the control of masters. As a result Euro-Charlestonians and South Carolinians went to great lengths to minimize the risk that slaves posed on their lives and property. It

⁴¹ Aptheker, *American Negro*; Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*; Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom*; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Egerton, *He Shall Go Free*; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*.

is to that system of regulation, and what that system can tell us about the mindset of Euro-Charlestonians, that we now turn.

Chapter Three:

The Tension Among Security, Personal Freedom, and the Law

According to accounts of the intended insurrection, on June 16, 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free black man, along with a number of slaves, planned to seize boats, burn down Charleston, and then sail away to the West Indies. Denmark Vesey was born a slave, most likely on the island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean in the mid-to-late 1760s. Vesey arrived in South Carolina with his master at the age of sixteen. On November 9, 1799 Vesey's life forever changed. On September 30, 1799, he had purchased a lottery ticket through his earnings as a "self hire" slave, and on a fateful November day, Vesey's number was drawn, and he won the top prize of \$1,500.¹ Vesey negotiated his freedom with his owner, the two parties settled on the sum of \$600, and on December 31, 1799, Vesey was a free man. Euro-Americans in Charleston, however, still regarded him as danger to the social order, because he was still black and therefore still tied in some ways to slavery. Vesey worked as an artisan in Charleston and joined the African Methodist Church around 1815, and became either a founding member, or at least an early member, of the second African Methodist Church in Charleston.² It was under the guise of Bible meetings, held at Vesey's home, that the plans for an insurrection were rumored to have

¹ *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of this City*, (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822); Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, *An Official Report of the Trials of the Sundry Negroes, Charged with An Attempt to Raise and Insurrection in the State of South-Carolina: Proceeded [sic] by an Introduction and Narrative and in an Appendix, a Report of the Trails of Four White Persons, in Indictments for Attempting to Excite the Slaves to Insurrection* (Charleston: James R. Schenck, 1822); Howell Meadoes Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina* (New York: Negroes Universities Press, 1968), 152; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 3-4, 26, 73.

² Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 76, 110-111.

come together.³ Ultimately, the alleged plot was discovered, and Vesey and many of his followers were found guilty and hung for their supposed role.⁴

Michael Johnson's article, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," raises questions about whether or not this plot, in fact, existed or was, rather, entirely an expression of the fears of the Euro-American population. Slaves and free black people who admitted to being involved may simply have been trying to save their own lives by registering a confession. Johnson's article came as a review of Douglas Egerton's book *He Shall Go Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, in which Egerton traces the life of Denmark Vesey and how he planned this now famous insurrection attempt. Egerton believes that a conspiracy did exist and that Vesey was in charge. This difference sparked a debate among historians regarding the existence of the Denmark Vesey insurrection plot. Some historians agreed with Johnson that the plot never existed and was a manifestation of Euro-American fears. Others, like David Brion Davis for example, believe in all probability that a plot was underway and that Vesey and his slave and free co-conspirators were involved. However, he does admit that a number of innocent slaves and free blacks were probably hung. Other historians did not take such a firm stance. While they agree that historians need to be mindful of their sources and the intentions of the author, which Johnson asserts, they still believe that a conspiracy was afoot in Charleston in 1822. No matter which side a historian takes, it is clear that Vesey and many slaves and free black people were hung in June and July 1822. What is not

³ In the early years of the 1800s, slaves and free blacks were still allowed to congregate together for the purpose of worshipping.

⁴ *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among A Portion of the Blacks of this City.*

clear is if there ever was an insurrection planned, or if the panic in 1822 was just the manifestation of Euro-Charlestonian's fears. Even if the plot did not exist, the imagined Vesey Conspiracy was successful in heightening the fears of Euro-Charlestonians and was expressed in the historical record in a number of different ways.⁵

In 1822, after the Vesey danger had passed, former governor Thomas Pinckney wrote a reflection regarding this troubled time in Charleston and South Carolina history. He believed that the then-current dangers in the city had five main causes that were the following:

-1st, The example of St. Domingo, and (probably) the encouragement received from thence. -2nd, The indiscreet zeal in favor of universal liberty, expressed by many of our fellow-citizens in the States north and east of Maryland; aided by the Black population in those States. -3dly, the idleness, dissipation, and improper indulgencies permitted among all classes of the Negroes in Charleston, and particularly among the domestics: and, as the most dangerous of those indulgencies, their being taught to read and write: the first being the powerful operation of the Press to act on their uninformed and easily deluded minds; and the latter furnishing them with an instrument to carry into execution the mischievous suggestions of the former. -4th, The facility of obtaining money afforded by the nature of their occupations to those employed as mechanics, draymen, fishermen, butchers, porters, hucksters, &c. -5th, The disparity of the numbers between the white and black inhabitants of the City.⁶

He also stated that slaveholders needed to pay great attention to the laws that were already in place to control slaves and free blacks in order for them to be effective.⁷ In response to the threat of Vesey and his fellow conspirators, South Carolina again changed the Slave Code. Free blacks who left the state were not allowed to return and those who

⁵ Johnson, "Denmark Vesey"; Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," 143-161; James Sidbury, "Plausible Stories and Varnished Truths," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:1 (2002), 179-184; Edward Pearson, "Trials and Errors: Denmark Vesey and His Historians," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:1 (2002), 137-142; Robert Paquette, "Jacobins of the Lowcountry: The Vesey Plot on Trial," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:1 (2002), 185 – 192; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 222.

⁶ General Thomas Pinckney, *Reflections, Occasioned by the late Disturbances in Charleston* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822), 6-7.

⁷ Pinckney, *Reflections*, 8-9.

stayed were required to acquire respectable Euro-South Carolinian guardians. Non-native free blacks had to pay a tax of fifty dollars a year, and slaves were not allowed to fire out their time. The freeholder guardian was to appear before the court to signify his acceptance of the trust in writing and “shall give the clerk aforesaid, his certificate, that the said negro, mulatto or mestizo for whom he is guardian, is of good character and correct habits...”⁸

Pinckney’s observations regarding slave control and resistance can be instructive for understanding some of the complex nuances of the system of slavery that Charlestonians and South Carolinians developed. On the one hand, Euro-Americans developed an extensive system in order to assert control over slaves and free blacks and calm fears. On the other hand, Euro-Americans persistently broke the laws and risked their lives and property in order to maintain their profits, self-interest, and lifestyles that benefited from slavery. In South Carolina during the antebellum era there was a constant push and pull between security and personal freedom. In *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina*, Steven Channing discusses the role that fear played in South Carolina prior to secession and the state’s response after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in Virginia in 1859. Channing asserts that John Brown’s raid succeeded in causing anxiety among the Euro-Americans living in South Carolina. South Carolina had always responded to slave and free black threats in the same way – with more legislation and vigilance – and John

⁸ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Regulation and Government of Free Negroes and Persons of Color; and for Other Purposes, No. 2277, Sec. I, II, VI, VII (1822), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 461-462.

Brown's raid was no different.⁹ South Carolina was in a constant state of reacting to perceived threats with more laws or reiterations of existing laws in order for the Euro-American citizens of the state to feel secure. In order for laws to be effective, however, they need to be followed. Even after John Brown's raid, and all the other threats that preceded it, South Carolinians were hesitant to relinquish their personal freedoms. For example, slaves continued to self-hire and live-out, and were occasionally being taught to read and write.

To understand South Carolina's system of slave control, one must begin with the colonial period. While the Carolina colony of the seventeenth century was a place of relative "sawbuck equality" between masters and slaves, with the emergence of a successful rice plantation culture beginning in the 1680s, and the rapid increase in African slave imports thereafter, the slave system changed dramatically. In the early years of the colony, African slaves made up between one-fourth and one-third of the colony's immigrants.¹⁰ As more and more African slaves were brought to ports in South Carolina, colonial officials increasingly came to believe that they needed to make sure that this population was kept in close check. Colonial officials began to pass laws that defined a system of control over slaves and free blacks. Officials appeared to be afraid of what slaves or free blacks could or would do if a system of control did not hem them in. As the plantation system in South Carolina developed, in sum, so too did the system of slave control.

⁹ Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 20, 22, 26.

¹⁰ Carney, *Black Rice*, 82; Wood, *Black Majority*, 25.

The first comprehensive slave code appeared in 1690. These laws defined the beginnings of the pass/ticket system, which demanded that slaves carry passes from their masters stating their name and their destination, essentially giving the slave permission to be away from the plantation. A slave found without a pass could be arrested as a runaway. The law also punished slaves for striking or hitting their masters. A slave who raised his or her hand to a master would receive a severe whipping by the constable for the first offense; whipping, nose splitting and burning the slave's face for the second offense and execution for the third offence.¹¹ Slave quarters were also to be searched at least once a month for weapons and other contraband. Slaves who committed murder or raised a rebellion would be sentenced to death. The basic care for slaves was also outlined in these early laws. Slaves were to receive "convenient" clothing once a year, and slaves who converted to Christianity were not to be freed. These early restrictions on slave movements and violence against the slaveholder illustrate that slaves were rebelling and resisting their enslavement from the beginning, or at least that there was concern that they might.

As the 1690 laws were revised, they became more complicated and thorough. Laws became detailed regarding runaway slaves and punishments for people who harbored them. From 1712 to 1735 the slave laws continued to evolve and become more complex. The Acts Relating to Slaves governed all aspects of slavery including how slaves were to be tried, compensation for wounded or maimed slaves, procedures for manumitting

¹¹ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec I (1690), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 343.

slaves, and most importantly punishment for slaves who committed crimes.¹² The Acts Relating to Slaves was the most important government document relating to the system of slavery in South Carolina. The laws were frequently revised in order to deal with new threats to the institution, both in South Carolina and abroad, and to protect Euro-Americans.

The Stono Rebellion in 1739, for example, was a turning point for how the colony dealt with slaves and also produced fear in the hearts of Euro-Americans of the harm that slaves could potentially inflict. On Sunday, September 9, 1739 Euro-Americans' fears were realized when the first major slave rebellion in the history of South Carolina occurred. A group of slaves gathered on the Stono River Bridge— about twenty miles southwest of Charleston – for the purpose of running to freedom in Spanish Florida. About twenty slaves gathered and broke into a store located near the river, seized arms, killed the two Euro-American shopkeepers and placed their severed heads on the front steps of the shop. The rebels then moved south killing Euro-Americans and looting and burning their houses as they went. Word of the rebellion spread and dozens more slaves joined the original rebels, and if slaves were hesitant to join they were coerced into it because then there would be less chance of betrayal. Later that afternoon, while stopped,

¹² McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec. I, II, III, IV, V, X (1690), 343-344, 345, 346; An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314 (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 352-365; McCord, ed., An Additional Act of an Act Entitled “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and all Other Slaves,” No. 344 (1714), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 365-368; McCord, ed., A Further Additional Act to an Act Entitled An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and all Other Slaves; and to an Additional Act to an Act Entitled An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and all Other Slaves, No. 388 (1717), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 368-370; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 476 (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 371-384; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 586 (1735), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 385-397.

the rebels encountered Lieutenant Governor William Bull on the road, who instantly realized that this was a slave rebellion. Bull turned, outran the rebels and raised the alarm. Militia companies were quickly formed, and after a battle, the rebellion was finally brought down. In the end, about seventy-five South Carolinians (Euro-Americans, slaves and free blacks) were killed. About thirty rebels escaped into the woods, which terrified Charlestonians and other residents in the area. Country planters actually moved their families to Charleston because they feared the rebels who escaped.

The next year a new and harsher slave code was introduced to South Carolina, to help curb the chances of history repeating itself.¹³ The 1740 Act Relating to Slaves was more comprehensive and also addressed fears raised from the Stono Rebellion. The new slave code incorporated the past slave codes and made them stricter, both on the part of the slave and the slaveholder. In addition to delineating more clearly who was a slave and how servitude could be inherited, the legislation also revised the ticket/pass system. After the Stono Rebellion, the 1740 section of the law included specific wording to be used on slave passes, either in Charleston or anywhere else in the state. The new pass had to state:

Permit this slave to be absent from Charleston, (or any other town, or if he lives in the country, from Mr. _____ plantation, _____ parish,) for _____ days or hours; dated the _____ day of _____. [and be signed by the slaveholder or overseer].¹⁴

¹³ Edgar, *South Carolina*, 74-75; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 66; Wood, *Black Majority*, 319; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 140; Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 7. The Stono Rebellion has been considered by historians as, in part, a response by slaves to the introduction of a new law that was expected to improve slave control.

¹⁴ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. III (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 398-399; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec. II, VIII (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 352, 354; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and

If a slave was found without a pass, he/she would be whipped up to twenty times on the bare back. Slaves who were without passes and not in the company of at least one Euro-American could be questioned by any Euro-American. If a slave refused questioning, Euro-Americans could moderately attempt to correct the slave through corporal punishment, and if the slave attempted to strike or assault the Euro-American who was investigating them, the slave could be “lawfully killed”.¹⁵ A Euro-American who was not authorized to write a pass for a slave – someone other than the slaveholder or overseer – was to be fined twenty pounds. This was an attempt to safeguard the Euro-American population from potential slave violence. On plantations, masters generally gave out passes for a couple of reasons. Some believed the passes were a powerful tool to reward or punish slaves for their work. Others believed that by regularly giving the passes, the slaves would be content and less likely to run away.¹⁶

Slaves and free blacks assembling for any reason was also made illegal. Any number of slaves and free blacks assembling together were to be dispersed by any Euro-American person who happened by, in order to maintain peace and safety, not only in Charleston, but any other parish in the colony as well. At the time that slaves and free black people were found together, Euro-South Carolinians or constables were to “search all suspected places for arms, ammunition or stolen goods, and to apprehend and secure all such slaves as they shall suspect to be guilty of any crimes and offences whatsoever, and to bring

Other Slaves, No. 476, Sec. II (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 371; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 586, Sec. II (1735), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 385.

¹⁵ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. III, V (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 399.

¹⁶ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. IV, V (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 399; Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 110-111.

them to a speedy trial.”¹⁷ The laws regarding slave trials and offences were also made more comprehensive and specifically mentioned more slave crimes. Slave crimes included in this code were destroying crops; setting fire to pitch, tar or turpentine; homicide; carrying weapons without a ticket; striking a Euro-American; and running away. Finally, the 1740 code spoke directly to the insurrectionists at Stono.

Charlestonians were afraid that the rebelling slaves who escaped would make their way to Charleston. As a response, any slave or free black who was believed to be part of the Stono rebellion would be immediately killed, without a trial, to stop the rebels before they could strike again.¹⁸

As harsh as the 1740 slave code was towards the slaves in South Carolina, provisions were also made for their care and protection. New penalties were introduced to owners who severely beat their slaves, and slaveholders would have to pay a fine, if convicted. Slaveholders would also be fined if their slaves were forced to work on Sundays, or not provided with sufficient and adequate food and clothing. Lawmakers sought to reduce the risk of slave rebellions both by limiting the freedoms of slaves and improving their living and working conditions. There were now penalties for masters who overworked their slave[s] or brutalized them. Slaveholders could no longer work their slaves more than fifteen hours a day from March 25th to September 25th, and fourteen hours a day from September 25th to March 25th. If a slaveholder was found to be in violation of this

¹⁷ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. VII (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 399-400.

¹⁸ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XVI, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, LVI (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 402, 404, 405, 408, 416.

law he would have to pay a fine between five and twenty pounds for each slave. However, his punishment was at the discretion of the judge who heard the case.¹⁹ Few slaveholders were actually charged with any of the above crimes, but lawmakers clearly believed that by making slaves' lives better, they would be less likely to attempt a rebellion. However, in reality, they did not necessarily enforce the laws, and the slaveholders did not necessarily deny themselves by complying with the law.

Even more than the Stono Rebellion, the American Revolution marked a dramatic disruption to the slave system that prompted Euro-South Carolinians to consider seriously the security of slavery. From 1775 to 1783, the American Revolution raged through British North America, creating a second "crisis point" for South Carolina slavery. Colonists living in the thirteen colonies had spent years being angry over the oppressiveness, real or perceived, of British policies. The American patriots fought against the British Loyalists and the British army and navy in a war that has been called America's first Civil War. The fighting in the southern colonies, and particularly South Carolina, was especially brutal and disruptive to slavery. Neighbors fought against neighbors and families were split apart.²⁰ The British Army invaded and marched through the countryside. The Southern Theater was heavily influenced by guerilla warfare and was fought mainly in the wilderness, rather than the more heavily populated areas of the colonies. The American Revolution in South Carolina can be divided into

¹⁹ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. IV, XXXVII, XL, XLIV (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 399, 404, 411, 412, 413.

²⁰ Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750-1815: Sources and Interpretation* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003), 85; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 5.

three parts. First, from May 1775 to March 1776, the war was basically fought at home with masters attempting to keep control over their slaves. The second part, from December 1778 until spring of 1780, saw the British military arrive in the lowcountry and the conquest of Charleston. Finally, 1782 saw the British defeat and subsequent withdrawal from Charleston.²¹

During this initial period, May 1775 to March 1776, slaveholders were very fearful of their slaves and what form a possible rebellion could take. While some slaveholders remained loyal to the empire, there was widespread concern among all slaveholders that royal ministers were planning to provoke a slave insurrection; however, “there were, in fact, few British officials and no British military forces present to implement such a design.”²² Slaveholders were fearful that slaves might hear rumors that the British military was arriving to liberate them, and instead of waiting for them to arrive, slaves might take the matter into their own hands and rebel. Slaves were very adept at communicating with each other through the slave and free black “grapevine”. Soon rumors circulated around South Carolina regarding slave insubordination and insurrections. Although the threat existed, slaveholders, as in the case of Denmark Vesey, may have been fearful over nothing, and the rumors of slave insubordination and insurrection may have been a projection of their own fears regarding the situation. However, as the British got closer to South Carolina, more and more slaves did run from their enslavers. In late 1775, only Sullivan’s Island and the Charles Town harbor were

²¹ Weller, “Irregular But Effective,” 120; Robert Orwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 225-226.

²² Orwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 229.

“still under the crown’s effective control.”²³ The fugitive slave population in those two places continued to grow, as slaves ran away from their masters to the waiting British forces. British officials flip-flopped on the idea of arming slaves, but the reality was that Britain did not have allies sharing the human burden of war; so arming slaves was a viable option to get more men on the battlefield. In the end, the British did arm runaway and fugitive slaves during the American Revolution. The British believed that by using slaves in service the lives of European troops may be spared, and they were more familiar with the local terrain and would be good scouts for the British. British officials proposed that in return for their service slaves would be set free; this would also encourage more slaves to join the fight.²⁴

For the patriot planters in the South, the idea of arming slaves for the cause would be the realization of all their fears. Southerners had a direct stake in slavery and did not want to lose their manpower. Arming the slaves would also highlight that slaves were capable of courage and honor, two things that the plantation system was hoping to suppress. More importantly, slaveholders did not want armed slaves turning their guns on their masters. South Carolina passed a law in 1776 directing all slaveholders to make available a certain number of able-bodied slaves for public services to help build defenses for the impending war with Britain. They never passed a law requiring slaveholders to arm their slaves for combat against the British and the loyalists. According to the

²³ Orwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 229-230, 239.

²⁴ Orwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 239; Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, “Arming Slaves in the American Revolution,” in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher Leslie Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 180-181, 187, 188, 190, 191; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 4.

Continental Army officers, the slaveholders were putting their private interests over the good of the country. Even though the Continental Army had formed two slave and free blacks units, South Carolina and Georgia held out and did not call on their slaves to fight throughout the whole war. On March 29, 1779 Congress recommended to South Carolina and Georgia that they should try to immediately raise three thousand slave soldiers to help defend against the British, part of a larger effort to mobilize slaves for service. In exchange for letting their slaves serve for the good of America, slaveholders would be paid no more than a thousand dollars for each able-bodied slave younger than thirty-five. Even though generals and Congress made many appeals, South Carolina and Georgia never allowed their slave population to take up arms for the cause.²⁵

The American Revolution had a devastating effect on slavery in South Carolina, both economically and socially. Although it is hard to estimate, approximately 80,000 to 100,000 slaves had been lost – from running away, fighting, disease, or British Loyalists leaving the colony with their slaves. In addition, slaveholders were returning to their devastated plantations, with few slaves to get them functioning, and making money again – rice, cotton and indigo plantations had been destroyed by the war. Socially, slaveholders were left feeling unconfident and unable to make money due to the slave shortage that was now crippling South Carolina plantations. However, like their forefathers, South Carolina planters saw slavery as their way back to dominance, and

²⁵ Morgan and O’Shaughnessy, “Arming Slaves”, 192, 201; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), vii, 60, 63-66, 67; McCord, ed., An Ordinance to Impose Direct the Manner of Procuring Negroes to be Employed in the Public Service, No. 1025 (1776), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 428; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82; Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770 – 1800* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 55.

after the American Revolution, South Carolina began to import slaves from Africa. They believed that their economic recovery was dependent on slave labor.²⁶ By importing thousands of African slaves, South Carolina, and especially the lowcountry surrounding Charleston, was again putting itself in danger. Soon, African and American slaves outnumbered Euro-Americans, and the threat of slave rebellions was again on the slaveholders' minds. The American Revolution may have been South Carolina's opportunity to end slavery; but from the patriot planters' point of view that was not an option. The slaveholders' fathers and grandfathers had made their wealth through slavery, and after the American Revolution, they believed it was their way back to power as well. American patriots were fighting for freedom from the British, but South Carolina was not going to arm slaves for the cause, because it risked their security. Slave control was more important to South Carolina than the creation of the United States itself.

While the Stono rebellion caused a major overhaul of the South Carolina slave code and the American Revolution illustrated that slave control was more important than freedom from British oppression, the Haitian revolution also increased the fears that South Carolinians had towards slavery. The revolution was the largest, bloodiest, and most successful slave revolt in the history of the Americas. Beginning in late 1791, the French island colony of Saint Domingue, which produced half of the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe and the Americas, was engulfed in a massive slave uprising. In the late 1780s Saint Domingue's population consisted of 500,000 slaves, 40,000 Euro-Saint Domingians, and 30,000 free black people, or *gens de couleur*. Unlike the free black

²⁶ Orwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 269-270; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 208-210, 211.

population in South Carolina, the *gens de couleur* in Saint Domingue constituted a majority of the middle class. Although they were still oppressed by the Euro-American population, some *gens de couleur* were rich planters, educated in France, and owned slaves; others held positions as prosperous artisans. Although some of the *gens de couleurs* were wealthy and had attained middle-class status, their legal distinction was similar to slaves, in that they had few if any rights and could not hold any real positions of power because of their color. Even though there were a large number of slaves in Saint Domingue, violent resistance had not been a common occurrence. However, runaway slaves had a long tradition of maroonage and had formed villages in the islands mountainous interior. Resistance though work slowdown was also a common occurrence.²⁷

At the outset of the uprising, slaves, armed with machetes, went from plantation to plantation killing, looting, and burning sugar cane fields. The revolt spread quickly from across the plains to the surrounding mountains. By the end of September, 1,000 of the nearly 8,000 plantations had been burnt and hundreds of Euro-Saint Dominians had been killed. In order to plan such an enormous rebellion, slaves met together under the guise of religious meetings. The uprising was a total surprise to both the Saint Dominians and free black population. Free blacks' own fight for equality had distracted them; Euro-Saint Dominians, in the meantime, were distracted by their own attempts to keep their privileges over the free black community. The slave revolt and ensuing civil war

²⁷ David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 5, 6, 7, 12; Tim Matthewson, *A Proslavery Foreign Policy: Haitian-American Relations During the Early Republic* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 3, 5.

between the free blacks and Euro-Americans lasted for thirteen years, until 1804. In 1804, Saint Domingue was renamed “Haiti”, its aboriginal name, and became the first independent black republic.²⁸

The Saint Domingue slave revolt had an enormous impact on the southern United States. After 1791, anti-slavery societies used the example of Saint Domingue to try to frighten slaveholders – warning them that if they did not abolish slavery, they would suffer the same fate as the slaveholders in Saint Domingue. Throughout the antebellum period, South Carolina newspapers continued to copy news articles on Saint Domingue, and other places in the Caribbean, as if to remind the slaveholders of the potential horrors that could be repeated in South Carolina at the hands of slaves and free blacks. One reality that soon came to the shores of the United States were refugees from Saint Domingue, many of whom were French creoles, free blacks, and slaves. As they were arriving on the shores, the refugees were telling their stories to people, including to slaves. Once again, Charleston and South Carolina officials sought to have tighter controls placed on slaves in order to retain control and not suffer the same fate as Saint Domingue. In 1792, laws were passed that directly prohibited the importation of slaves from Africa, the West Indies, or other places for the next two years. However, immigrants to South Carolina coming from other states were allowed to bring their slaves. In addition, as was the case in the aftermath of the Stono Rebellion, they also

²⁸ Geggus, *Haitian*, 3, 11-12; Matthewson, *A Proslavery*, 11; Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence of Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 2.

sought to make slavery more bearable for the slaves by providing better food, clothing and shelter, more leisure time, and making it illegal to abuse slaves.²⁹

The preceding examples of slave rebellions, or attempts, including the Vesey Conspiracy, are important to this thesis. Although slaves were rebelling against slavery all the time in many different ways, fear at key moments motivated local and state officials to rewrite or create laws to curb slave violence. The passage of those laws reflect both how lawmakers interpreted the dangers to community security and the power that the slave and free black population actually had over the Euro-Americans in spite of their position as slaves and oppressed free black people. Patriot Euro-South Carolinians in fact saw the risk of losing the war as being less than the risk of arming their slaves to protect their land. At most of these key turning points, fire was an evident tool of rebellion. As mentioned, in Stono slaves burned houses, in Saint Domingue they burnt sugar cane, and Vesey supposedly wanted to burn Charleston. The lesson was clear – fire could be an important way for slaves to both show their unhappiness, and also to interrupt the economy and cause tremendous distress to both slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike.

Arson and fire were both feared in South Carolina and in other states in the Union. In South Carolina, arson was a capital offense for Euro-Americans, slaves, and free blacks

²⁹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence*, 4; "No Title," *Charleston Mercury*, June 14, 1822; "Fire at Port-au-Prince," *Charleston Mercury*, January 10, 1823; "Fire at St. Thomas," *Charleston Mercury*, March 7, 1825; "Important from St. Domingo," *Charleston Mercury*, March 10, 1843; "The Revolt in St. Domingo – Further Particulars," *Charleston Mercury*, March 24, 1843; "Terrible Conflagration at Kingston, Jamaica," *Charleston Courier*, September 22, 1843; McCord, ed., An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves from Africa, or Other Places Beyond Sea, into this State, for Two Years; and also to Prohibit the Importation or Bringing in Slaves, or Negroes, Mulattoes, Indians, Moors or Mestizoes, Bound for a Term of Years, from any of the United States, by Land or by Water, No. 1544 (1792), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 431-432; Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 113.

alike. However, accused slaves and free blacks were not given the same trial and were not treated with the sort of leniency that was accorded to Euro-Americans. Euro-Americans and slaves, and free blacks, were held to two different standards before the law. Even though Euro-Americans could receive a death sentence for their role in an arson, slaves and free blacks were seen as more of a risk, and the law reflected fears of that risk. For the slaves and free blacks arson was defined simply as setting fire to any building, structure or crop.

The actual definition of arson in *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, on the other hand, was lenient towards Euro-Americans. Arson was defined as “the malicious and wilful [sic] burning of the house, or out-house, of another person.”³⁰ However, the crime was only considered a felony:

by willfully setting fire to one’s own house, provided one’s neighbor’s house is thereby also burnt: but if no mischief is done, but to one’s own, it does not amount to felony, though the fire was kindled with the intent to burn another’s; for no intention to commit a felony, amounts to felony.³¹

The above quote illustrates that arson was defined by one’s intent. If a neighbor’s house were burned by accident no crime was committed. If a person willfully set fire to his or her own house it was considered a high misdemeanor, which was punishable by fine, or imprisonment. If a landlord set fire to his property while another party was leasing it, it could be deemed arson because during the length of the lease the property belonged to the tenants. Finally, the “burning must also be malicious, otherwise it is only a trespass;

³⁰ Arson, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina: Containing the Public Statute Law of the State Down to the Year 1822* (Columbia: Telescope Press, 1822), 436.

³¹ Arson, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, 436.

and therefore no negligence, or mischance, amounts to arson.”³² This law provided many loopholes for Euro-Americans who may have been charged with arson. Euro-Americans, charged with felony arson, could be given the death penalty if they were:

lawfully convicted of maliciously, unlawfully, willingly, and secretly burning or causing to be burnt, or of cutting, or causing to be cut, or destroyed, any frame, or frames of timber of any other person, or persons, made and prepared for or towards the making of any house our houses, so that the same shall not be fit for the purpose, for which it was prepared.³³

In addition, it was also a felony for Euro-Americans, in the nighttime, to burn or destroy “ricks or stacks of corn, hay or grain, barns or other houses, or buildings, or kilns... horses, sheep, or other cattle.”³⁴ However, a person found guilty of burning “any wain or wains, cart or carts, laden with coals, or any other goods or merchandize... any heap or heaps of wood of another person, cut felled, and prepared for making coals, billets or talwood...” would have to pay the victim three times the value, and pay a fine to the state of forty-two dollars and eighty-five cents for each offense.³⁵ Clearly, Euro-Americans did not always pay with their lives when they used fire as a weapon. That this was the case is evident in the police records. Occasionally South Carolina newspapers would include the monthly arrest records of the Chief of Police. On the nine occasions in which arson arrests were reported in September 1857 and August, October and November,

³² Arson, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, 437.

³³ Crimes and Misdemeanors, Sec. X, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, 88.

³⁴ Crimes and Misdemeanors, Sec. XL, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, 96-97.

³⁵ Crimes and Misdemeanors, Sec. XXXIX, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina*, 96.

1858, slaves and free blacks were arrested all nine times, compared to no Euro-American arrests for arson.³⁶

The 1860 General Statutes of Massachusetts, by comparison, did not include such a double standard. Arson was defined one way for everyone and the laws did not contain any mention of different penalties for different races or classes. In addition, Massachusetts's arson laws were not punishable by death. Those convicted of burning the house of another were punished with a sentence of life in a state prison. A person convicted of burning a meeting house, church, court house, town house, college, academy, jail, other building of public use, bank, warehouse, store, manufactory, mill, barn, stable, shop, or office at night could also be punished with a sentence of life in the state prison. However, if a person burned any of the same buildings during the day, the maximum sentence could be ten years. Any person convicted of burning wood, grain, fence, bars, gates, hay, or other vegetable products not belonging to them could receive five years in a state prison or a \$500 fine and one year in a state prison.³⁷ By examining the laws of other states, particularly non-slaveholding states, different concerns emerge. Fire was a risk in Massachusetts, just like it was in South Carolina. However, the severity of their laws and punishments for arson, when compared to Massachusetts, suggests that Euro-South Carolinians viewed fire as a greater risk and needed laws and punishments that addressed the concerns of the population, especially since South

³⁶ "Proceedings of Council," *Charleston Mercury*, September 18, 1857; "Proceedings of Council," *Charleston Mercury*, August 19, 1858; "Proceedings of Council," *Charleston Mercury*, October 28, 1858; "Proceedings of Council," *Charleston Mercury*, November 11, 1858.

³⁷ Offenses Against Property, Sec. 1, 2, 3, 5 (1859), *General Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: Revised by Commissioners Appointed Under a Resolve of February 16, 1855, Amended by the Legislature, and Passed December 28, 1859* (Boston: William White, 1860), 796.

Carolina had an overwhelming slave population who rebelled against the system in a number of ways.

Slaveholders could petition the government to receive compensation for slaves who were executed for arson. However, they were never awarded the full value of their executed slave. The court petitions illustrated that slaveholders would lose the use of the executed slave and the majority of the monetary investment that he or she had made. The petitions suggest that the slaveholders' "punishment" for being unable to control their slaves was not a charge of arson or jail or death, but not being awarded the full value of the executed slave. In 1722, the slave code was revised and included a section regarding compensation for slaveholders of executed slaves. The justices would appraise a condemned slave, prior to execution, and a slaveholder could not receive more than eighty pounds. However, if a slave had been executed prior to this new Act, slaveholders could receive a maximum compensation of one hundred pounds. As the laws were revised, slaveholders could receive more money for executed slaves. The 1740 Act raised compensation to 200 pounds, current money, and by 1858 slaveholders could be compensated up to one half of the value of the executed slave.³⁸

Throughout the antebellum era slaveholders petitioned the government to receive compensation for slaves executed for arson. For the security of South Carolina, it was important for the courts to quickly execute slaves who committed arson. Slaves who

³⁸ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 476, Sec. XVIII, XXXVII (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 377, 383; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XVIII (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 403; An Act to Increase the Compensation to Owners of Slaves Executed, No. 4430 (1858), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Volume XII, Containing the Acts from December, 1850, to January, 1861* (Columbia: Republican Printing Company, State Printers, 1874), 633.

committed arson were seen as dangerous, and they further elevated the level of fear in a community. However, slaveholders were considered justified in attempting to recoup some of their lost investment. In addition, the following examples illustrate that slaves were often charged and executed for arson, perhaps more than Euro-Americans ever were, because of the differences in the law when a Euro-American committed arson, as opposed to a slave or free black. In 1841 Jane Horton sent her petition to Lancaster District asking for compensation for her slave Rhoda, who had been convicted of arson, but died in jail while waiting for her sentence to be carried out. Rhoda had been appraised at \$600. Ms. Horton did receive compensation for Rhoda from the government; however, she only received \$122.44, less than a third of Rhoda's appraised value. Similarly in 1845, Mr. Thomas R. McClintock petition the government for compensation for his slave Tom who was "convicted by a court of magistrates and freeholders of burning the dwelling house of Mr. John Cockrell of the district and state aforesaid and of sentence of the said court was executed in July 1838." Mr. McClintock's slave was appraised, and Tom was deemed to be worth \$800. However, like Ms. Horton, the government compensated Mr. McClintock \$122.44 for Tom.³⁹

³⁹ Horton, Jane, Petition for Compensation for her Slave, Rhoda, Who Died While Imprisoned in Lancaster District Awaiting Punishment for Arson, 11/02/1841 (S165015/00017/1841), South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Committee on Claims, Report on the Petition of Jane Horton for Compensation for her Slave Who Died in Jail in Lancaster District Awaiting Punishment for Arson, 11/30/1841 (S165005/00066/1841), South Carolina Department of Archives and History; McClintock, Thomas R., Petition for Compensation for a Slave, Tom, Executed for Arson, 11/20/1845 (S165005/00031/1845), South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Deveaux, Stephen G., of St. Johns Berkeley, Petition, and Supporting Paper, for his Slave, Tried and Executed For Arson in the Village of Pineville, with an Account of the Trial, 12/05/1840 (S165005/00037/1840), South Carolina Department of Archives and History; J. Jones petition for compensation for a slave executed for burning a gin house with an account of the court proceedings, (S165015/00030/1838), South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Both of these men petitioned the government for compensation for slaves executed for arson. However, there was no decision attached to the cases in the archives, nor any mention of the appraised value of the slave.

Although, slaves were the ones who ultimately paid for their crimes, slaveholders were still held, to a certain degree, responsible for their slaves' actions. The slaveholders may not have been brought up on arson charges themselves, but by losing their slaves, slaveholders lost the investment they had in the slave.

While the arson law that applied to Euro-Americans was very forgiving, the law regarding arson committed by slaves and free blacks was very strict. One reason for the strictness was that slaves would not have been able to pay a fine. The only viable option lawmakers had to try to stop slave and free black arson was to make them pay with their lives or other forms of corporal punishment like whipping, imprisonment, the workhouse, or being sold out of state. The first law regarding arson and slavery appeared in 1690, the year of the first slave code. The law stated that:

upon complaint made to any justice of the peace, or any heinous or grievous crime, committed by any slave or slaves, as burglary, robbing, burning of houses, killing or stealing of any neat or other cattle, or other petty injuries, as maiming one of the other, stealing fowls, provisions, or such like trespass or injuries, the said justice shall issue a warrant for apprehending the offenders, and for all persons to come before him that can give evidence, and if upon examination, it probably appeared that that apprehended are guilty, he shall commit them to prison.⁴⁰

After the preliminary trial three freeholders and the justice[s] would be summoned who were acquainted with the matter, and,

the offenders and evidences to come before them; and if they, on hearing the matter...shall judge adjudge the criminal or criminals guilty of the offence complained of, they shall give sentence of death, if the crime by law deserve the same, or such other punishment as the crime deserveth [sic].⁴¹

⁴⁰ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec. VIII (1690), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 345.

⁴¹ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec. VIII (1690), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 345. Also see: McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec. IX (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 354-355.

Although the above law may have allowed judges some leeway in their sentencing, the records on slaveholder compensation, newspaper articles, and personal correspondence indicate that many slaves were executed for the crime. Euro-South Carolinians may well have believed that if errant slaves were executed, safety would be increased, because the threat was dealt with. In addition, through the execution, Euro-Americans could make an example out of slave and free black arsonists. In this law there was a broad spectrum of crimes for which a slave could receive the death penalty – everything from arson and murder to stealing fowl. The punishment was the responsibility of the justice and freeholders who were summoned to adjudicate the case. The law also did not mention that negligence does not equal “burning of houses”; therefore, it was acceptable to sentence a slave to death for an accidental fire. Slaves and free blacks were held to a standard where there were no accidents, and negligence was a crime, unlike the Euro-Americans. The slave code became increasingly comprehensive as more problems with slavery arose, and the description of willful burning also expanded. By 1722, the law included the “burning of dwelling houses, barnes [sic], stables, kitchens, or stacks of rice, or tar kilns of pitch or tarr [sic]...”⁴² Over time, the slave code regarding slave crimes received some minor modifications. First, the law no longer only applied to slaves, but to slaves and “negroes”. Secondly, smaller daily crimes (including stealing or destroying

⁴² McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 476, Sec. VIII (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 373. Also see: McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 586, Sec. VIII (1735), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 387; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XVI (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 402.

goods, chattels or provisions) that slaves and free blacks committed were given different punishments.⁴³

Arson was a crime that could be committed by both Euro-Americans and slaves and free blacks. However, the different descriptions and different punishment illustrated that slaves and free blacks were held to different standards. Euro-Americans were given the benefit of the doubt and they would not be given the death penalty for the crime in cases of carelessness and negligence. In addition, slaveholders were not charged with counts of arson for being unable to control their slaves who set fire to property. Slaves and free blacks, on the other hand, were not given that same sort of leeway. Their actions were assumed to be malicious, they were deemed dangerous, and given the harshest possible penalty the law could allow, that being death. South Carolina implemented such measures to control slaves and free blacks. Though their actions, or the perceived threat of their actions, slaves indirectly exerted influence over the laws that were being passed and influenced the continuing evolution of the system of slave control in Charleston.

Slaveholders constructed a multi-layered system of policing to enforce the law. In the countryside, owners and overseers were the first line of defense. They were responsible for keeping control over the slaves and making sure the work was completed on a day-to-day basis. Their efforts were supplemented by the slave patrols, designed to manage the community as a whole, and ensure slaves, and free blacks, were not out causing trouble or away from the plantation without permission. Finally, city and county governments employed constables and sheriffs who were ultimately responsible for the law being

⁴³ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec. X (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 355.

enforced in the rural hinterlands of Charleston. However, it was still every Euro-American's responsibility, whether a slaveholder or not, to manage the slaves and free blacks residing on plantations or in the surrounding area.

As many slaveholders in the lowcountry plantation districts were absent for parts of the year, overseers were often the first line of defense against any potential slave violence. Overseers were common on South Carolina plantations to ensure peace and that slaves completed their work. In 1740, following the Stono Rebellion, the role of the overseer became defined in law to ensure that a plantation with an absent owner would not become a harbor for runaway slaves or slaves to plan another rebellion. The law required:

that no person or persons hereafter shall keep slaves on any plantation or settlement, without having a white person on such plantation or settlement, on pain of forfeiting the sum of ten pounds current money, for every month which any such person shall so keep any slaves on any plantation or settlement, without a white person as aforesaid.⁴⁴

Overseers were not part of the slave patrol, but were hired by slaveholders to keep a close watch over their slaves' activities; however, overseers could work for the patrol at night, provided there was a responsible Euro-American present on the plantation to watch over the slaves. Whenever the overseer was away from the plantation he had to return before sundown to ensure that slaves were in their houses by curfew and punish those who were not. They were also responsible for searching the slave quarters for weapons, recapturing runaways, assigning tasks, providing slaves with adequate food, shelter and medical care, but most importantly they were responsible for the plantation turning a profit at the end

⁴⁴ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XLVI (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 413.

of the season.⁴⁵ Overseers usually doled out “plantation justice” to slaves who broke the rules. The offending slave would not be arrested, but overseers punished the slave immediately, usually through brutal methods. Laws did exist to ensure slaves were treated fairly and not brutalized, but it is unclear if any Euro-Americans were ever tried or convicted for cruel or excessive punishments.⁴⁶

While overseers were responsible for keeping slaves under control on the slaveholder’s property, their responsibilities ended at the property boundary. Slave patrols were formed to protect white interests and to know the activities and movements of all slaves living in rural areas. Slave patrols were active at night, to alleviate the fears of Euro-Americans, to ensure that peace was maintained and slaves did not destroy any property. Patrols were also established to watch over the communities and ensure they were safe at night from potential foreign invaders. The community appointed them to limited terms of usually three to six months. Five years prior to the first Slave Code of South Carolina, in 1685, the state began passing laws to establish a night watch in order to maintain security in the new colony. The watch was to be made from a list of men in Charleston and the surrounding area, and that list was to be created and compiled by the constables. From the list, men would be assigned nights to watch, and would be on duty from ten o’clock at night until a half hour before sunrise in the morning. Fines were

⁴⁵ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 81-82; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves, No. 57, Sec. V (1690), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 345; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec. III (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 353.

⁴⁶ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 236; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 476, Sec. XXII (1722), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 378. Sec. XXII allowed for sufficient provisions to be provided for slaves. McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. VI, XXXVII (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 399, 410. Sec. VI imposed penalties against Euro-Americans who beat or mistreated their slaves.

levied against men who did not participate or work their scheduled night on patrol. Each offence was fifteen pence to be paid by the absent man. Even though these systems were put into place in order to ensure the security of Charleston and the surrounding area, and fines were implemented to ensure community support, the laws were re-written to deal with new ways that patrollers were violating the laws. For example, sleeping while on watch was made illegal and a fine of forty shillings was implemented, and drinking on duty was also made illegal – violators were to be fined twenty shillings and be subject to corporal punishment. As the law was rewritten, the patrol was given more responsibilities. For example, the law became specific about arresting slaves and free blacks who were out at night, and about watching for fires.⁴⁷ While patrols were designed to insure slave control, the law was adjusted and began to include fines for sleeping and drinking while on duty, leading one to assume that the patrollers were undermining the security of the community at times by failing to do their jobs.

Beyond the overseer and the slave patrols, South Carolina employed constables who worked for the town or county. During their one-year term, constables were responsible for summoning juries and witnesses, attending court sessions and keeping order in the

⁴⁷ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 82; McCord, ed., An Act for Clearing the Lotts [sic] and Streets of Charles Town, and for the Settlement and Regulation of a Night Watch in the said Town, No. 25, Sec. III, IV, V (1685), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 2-3; McCord, ed., An Act for Setting a Watch in Charlestown, and for Preventing Fires and Nusances [sic] in the Same, and for the Securing Twenty Foot on Each Side the Halfe-Moon [sic], for Publick [sic] Landing Places, No. 190, Sec. V (1701), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 18; McCord, ed., An Act for the Keeping and Maintaining a Watch and Good Orders in Charles Town, No. 207, Sec. VI (1703), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 24; McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charles Town, and for Preventing of Fires, No. 162, Sec. III, XIII (1698), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 9-10; McCord, ed., An Act for Setting a Watch in Charlestown, and for Preventing Fires and Nusances [sic] in the Same, and for the Securing Twenty Foot on Each Side the Halfe[sic]-Moon, for Publick [sic] Landing Places, No. 190, Sec. VI, XIII (1701), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 18, 19.

courtroom. However, their primary responsibility was to catch runaway slaves and take them to the jail. Constables had detailed knowledge of the area, which gave them an advantage while hunting for runaway slaves. Slaveholders could also privately contract constables to hunt for their runaway slaves. Although overseers might search for runaway slaves, they were unable to be away from the plantation for extended periods of time; so hiring a constable to find a missing slave was a viable option. Even though security was the responsibility of every man in Charleston, and the surrounding area, constables did not generate or keep their lists of eligible men up to date, and therefore, the law was not followed. The fact that this patrol law was reiterated in the Statutes at Large in 1698, 1701, 1703, 1708, and 1709 illustrates that some men were not willing to take part in the patrols when they were scheduled, and constables were not necessarily even making a schedule.⁴⁸ Many of the new acts begin with the statement, “as the constables have been very remiss and negligent in keeping the watch in Charlestowne [sic], which att [sic] all times ought to be duly strictly observed and preformed” or a statement similar to this.⁴⁹ This highlights the tension between security and personal

⁴⁸ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 82-83; McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charles Town, and for Preventing of Fires, No. 162 (1698), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7; McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charlestown, and for Preventing of Fires and Nusances [sic] in the Same, and for the Securing Twenty Foot on Each Side the Halfe-Moon [sic], for Publick [sic] Landing Places, No. 190 (1701), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 17; McCord, ed., An Act for the Keeping and Maintaining a Watch and good Orders in Charles Town, No. 207 (1703), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 22; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Regulateing [sic] the Watch in Charles Town, and for Settling [sic] and Maintaining a Watch at the Fort on Windmill Point, No. 276 (1708), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 49; McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charles Town, No. 282 (1709), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 54.

⁴⁹ McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charles Town, and for Preventing of Fires, No. 162 (1698), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 7; McCord, ed., An Act for Settling a Watch in Charlestown, and for Preventing of Fires and Nusances [sic] in the Same, and for the Securing Twenty Foot on Each Side the Halfe-Moon [sic], for Publick [sic] Landing Places, No. 190 (1701), *The Statutes at Large of South*

freedom. In order to maintain security South Carolina law called on everyone to take part in the watches; however, many did not want to participate.

As constables were responsible for apprehending slaves and free blacks, the state paid for constables who arrested and housed slaves during their trial, and possibly until their execution, could petition the court to recover their costs as well. Constables working in South Carolina often petitioned the government to receive compensation for housing slaves and free blacks charged with arson. Sterling Bowen, a constable in Abbeville District, petitioned the court on November 20, 1837 to recover his costs from housing prisoners, one slave and two free black people, during their trials. The three were charged with robbing the home of Willson Hodge and setting fire to it. Bowen's expenses not only included the room and board of the prisoners, but also additional officers to watch over them and transport them to the courthouse from the jail. His expenses totaled \$25.75. Similarly, Robert Cox, in December of 1843, and William Huff, in 1853, petitioned the state for compensation. Both involved cases in which slaves had been tried and convicted of burning dwelling houses. Cox was awarded \$31.00 in compensation and Huff was awarded \$5.10 to carry a defendant from jail to his trial.⁵⁰

Carolina, 17; McCord, ed., An Act for the Keeping and Maintaining a Watch and good Orders in Charles Town, No. 207 (1703), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 22.

⁵⁰ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XXI (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 403; Bowen, Sterling, Constable, Petition Asking Compensation For Expenses Not Covered in the Fee Bill, Incurred in Capturing and Jailing a Slave and Two Free Negroes for Stealing from the Home of Willson Hodge and Setting Fire To It, 11/20/1837 (S165015/00067/1837), South Carolina Department of Archives and History. The decision of the court was not included in the court papers; Cox, Robert, Magistrate for Greenville District, Petition Asking Compensation for Lodging Prisoners and Guards During Delays in Trials of Slaves for Murder and Arson, 12/08/1843 (S165015/00095/1843), South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Huff, William, Petition Asking Compensation for Arresting and Conveying to Union Jail the Slave Turner, Accused of Setting Fire to a Mrs. Edwards Home, 11/30/1853 (S165015/00124/1853), South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Once again, slaveholders were not held responsible for their slaves. It was not the slaveholders who were responsible for paying the expenses of constables, it was the government, and therefore the taxpayers at large.

Overseers, slave patrols and constables were all responsible for keeping control over country slaves. With owners absent for long periods of time, slaveholders had to find ways to ensure their interests were protected against the dangers that slaves could quickly inflict. The task system gave slaves more time to themselves, and potentially more time to create havoc. This potential frightened rural and urban slaveholders and made them come up with ways to combat destructive slave behavior. Just as the slave system became prevalent in the country, Charleston slaveholders also began to employ the practice, but the same fears were soon realized. In Charleston there were more slaves in a confined space, and some were free to roam about the city as they pleased. Urban slavery was different from slavery in the country, and the Euro-American slaveholders were adjusting the system to make slavery effective in the urban environment. However, those adjustments also caused a further tension between security and personal freedom.

Urban slavery was markedly different from rural or plantation slavery. As previously mentioned, slaves living in Charleston had more day-to-day freedoms, and many lived apart from their masters, which heightened the sense of danger. Charleston also offered slaves a certain amount of anonymity they did not have on the plantation. As such, the city became a haven for runaway slaves who could easily blend in with the population.

Friends and family could hide the runaway and even help him/her find a job.⁵¹ However, while it is important to note that urban slaves did have more freedoms and opportunities, they were still slaves and not always free to make their own choices. Frederick Douglass wrote in his biography that he was most unhappy in slavery when he was treated well and more comfortably. He wrote that, "I have observed this in my experience in slavery, - that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom."⁵²

The city attracted many slaves and free people of color alike. For constables in Charleston, Sundays were their busiest days. Rural slaves would come to Charleston, and towns in the surrounding areas, to sell the goods they produced in their gardens at markets and to visit with family and friends. This would increase the already large number of slaves and free blacks in Charleston. Constables were kept busy watching over the swollen numbers of congregating slaves and free blacks, as more slaves and free blacks lived in Charleston than anywhere else in North America.⁵³

To assert control over slaves in the more complex urban environment, a slave badge system was developed to regulate the slaves' activities when away from their masters. The pass system was more common on plantations, but in the urban environment, with slaves performing many different jobs, writing a pass for each job would have been

⁵¹ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 142; Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 127; Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives*, 24; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 52.

⁵² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1997), 64.

⁵³ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 83; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 51; Morgan, "Black Life", 188.

onerous for slaveholders. Charleston manufactured official badges that slaves were to wear, and they were valid for one year. Slave patrols looked for slaves' badges as proof of permission from their masters to be away; and slave patrollers no longer had to inspect badges for authenticity.⁵⁴

Charleston, like other urban slave cities – Savannah, New Orleans, Richmond or Wilmington – passed strict laws regarding slave badges; although according to historians Harlan Greene and Harry Hutchins, Charleston was the only city to actually manufacture badges. Slaves who had badges had a certain amount of freedom. They could hire themselves out for a day, a week or longer and act as though they were free. Even with this sense of freedom, slaves still had to adhere to certain rules regarding the badges. The badge had to be displayed visibly on their clothes; any Euro-American could demand to see the badge at any time. If a slave could not produce the badge they would be taken immediately to the workhouse and held. In addition, if a slave was found to be carrying a counterfeit badge, the offending slave could be whipped publically. The Euro-American population found the badge system to be an effective way to control slaves while out of their master's possession. And once again, this system effectively made non-slaveholders just as responsible for slaves as their owners, as they were to be on the lookout for badges and counterfeit badges and arrest offending slaves. Although Euro-Charlestonians may have believed this system was helping to protect them from the threat of slaves, the Denmark Vesey plot in 1822 illustrated that this system was not perfect. A slave who supposedly participated in the plot had a badge, was free to do daily tasks, and

⁵⁴ Hadden *Slave Patrols*, 113.

was not under the watchful eye of his owner. With his friends and family contributing money to him, he was able to still give his owner the appropriate share of his earnings each month and work exclusively on the insurrection plot full-time.⁵⁵

As numerous slaves in Charleston were hired out or self-hired, and many of them actually lived away from their masters, in 1740 the State, concerned over this practice, passed an act to stop living out and curb the threat that unattended slaves posed on the city. The law stated:

that no slave or slaves shall be permitted to rent or hire any house, room, store or plantation, on his or her own account, or to be used or occupied by an slave or slaves; and any person or persons who shall let or hire any house, room, store or plantation, to any slave or slaves, or to any free person, to be occupied by any slave or slave [sic], every such person so offending shall forfeit and pay to the informer the sum of twenty pounds, current money, to be recovered as in the Act for the trial of small and mean causes.⁵⁶

In response, Charleston implemented the ticket/permission system for slaves to live away from their masters. These tickets were separate from badges, and the slaveholder had to state the place where the slave was allowed to live and the length of time he or she was allowed to be living out. Once again, there were laws in place, but they were not necessarily followed. The truth was that living out was a viable option for urban slaveholders who had too many slaves to house on their urban property.⁵⁷

It was not only the urban hiring out and living out systems that made Euro-Americans fear slaves; it was also the urban environment in general. Euro-American merchants and

⁵⁵ Harlan Greene and Harry S. Hutchins, Jr., *Slave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston, South Carolina, 1783 – 1865* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 6, 7-8.

⁵⁶ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province, No. 670, Sec. XLII (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 413.

⁵⁷ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 62-63; Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 40.

employers could hire slaves for less money than they would pay to poor Euro-Americans, which created an environment of labor competition in the city. This created tension in Charleston as poor Euro-American laborers complained constantly about the unfair labor practices. Urban slaves had more opportunities to receive some sort of formal education in the city. As mentioned, the slaves had the opportunity to be trained in skilled trades, but they also sometimes learned to read and write through their training. Their large urban numbers also facilitated meeting together at church to learn to read and write. In their free time, slaves also had more access to “dangerous” forms of entertainment. Although it was illegal to sell alcohol to slaves without their owners’ permission, grog shops became popular. There, slaves could drink, gamble, play cards or dominos, and spend the whole night engaging in sinful activities, without the consent of their masters. Grog shops existed in most neighborhoods in Charleston, but an area known as “The Neck,” had more than most. The Neck was just beyond the northern edge of the city and was annexed to become part of Charleston in 1849. The justification for the annexation was that the area needed to be patrolled better for the safety of the people living there.⁵⁸

In order to maintain control over the slave and free black population, Charleston created a wide range of city ordinances specifically to deal with the threat. One of the principle ways that the Euro-Americans sought to restrict the lives of slaves and free blacks in Charleston was to limit how and when they could gather together. Slaves and free blacks were not permitted to meet together in a group larger than seven, unless a Euro-American person was present. If slaves and free blacks did congregate together

⁵⁸ Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 14-15, 24; Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 47-48; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 150; Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 58-59.

without a Euro-American present, any Euro-American, slaveholder or non-slaveholder, could apprehend the whole group and bring them before a magistrate. Having the power to arrest congregating slaves and free blacks brought non-slaveholders into the system, once again, by working on slave patrols in Charleston and the lowcountry, even if it was just to collect the monetary award. In order for slaves and free blacks to assemble for the purposes of entertainment, permission had to be given by the Warden living in the area of the party. The parties had to end, according to the City Ordinances, no later than 10:00 pm from March 20 to September 20 and no later than 9:00 pm from September 20 to March 20. Once again, any Euro-American person that came across a slaves and free black party being held without permission or later then the stated curfew had a duty to take the offenders to the Guard House. The ordinance was later amended to include religious worship, which were the grounds for the meetings that Vesey supposedly held in 1822. Any religious worship meetings that were held, had to have at least one responsible Euro-American man – who lived in the state for more than two years – and the meeting had to be approved by the pastor of the congregation to which the slaves and free blacks belonged. Once again, if the meetings were not authorized, participants would be arrested and sent to the guard house.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Negroes, An Ordinance for the Government of Negroes and Other Persons of Color, within the City of Charleston, and for Other Purposes Therein Mentioned, Sec. V, VI (October 28, 1806), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 170; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 260-261; Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 81; Negroes, An Ordinance to Amend An Ordinance Entitled “An Ordinance for the Government of Negroes and Other Persons of Color, within the City of Charleston, and for Other Purposes Therein Mention,” Sec. I (February 7, 1837), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 177.

Slavery made Euro-Charlestonians fearful for a number of reasons. The hire-out, self-hire, and living-out systems were all ways that slaveholders attempted to adjust slavery to make it successful in an urban environment; however, they also created a lot of fear among the residents of the city.⁶⁰ Laws were created to help secure the city from slave and free black threats, but in many instances slaveholders disregarded the laws for various reasons, revealing tension between security and personal freedoms. Slaves had more freedom in the city than on the plantation. Even if they resided and worked for their master, it was common for slaves to be out in the streets carrying on the master's daily business. Citizens of Charleston were fearful of the freedoms that slaves had, and the potential threat that caused to the city, especially through the activities that slaves engaged in during their free time. City ordinances and state laws were an important way to combat that fear; however, they were only effective if they were being enforced. Technically, slaveholders were breaking the law by allowing slaves to self-hire, and live out. The tension between security and personal freedom saw slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike exercising their personal freedoms over their concerns for security in some instances.

As slaveholders were sometimes not following laws designed to control the slave and free black community, which would ease Euro-American fears of slaves and free blacks setting fires, lawmakers in South Carolina passed other sorts of laws aimed at protecting the community from potential threats of fire by seeking to control its spread. South Carolina and Charleston lawmakers realized the potential destruction a fire could do to

⁶⁰ Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 48, 54.

both the state and the city. As such, from the beginning of the colony, officials attempted to enact laws that would protect their property and livelihoods. From laws regulating building materials to the storage of potentially combustible materials, and everything in between, officials tried their best to minimize the potential risk. Added to the general risk that every city faced, Charleston had the added pressure of controlling a large population of slaves who were attempting to undermine the system at any chance, and slaveholders who were inconsistently following many of the laws designed to keep the state and city safe. Perhaps state and city officials believed that by passing the following laws, security would have been heightened and citizens protected.

Wooden buildings were a source of contention in antebellum Charleston. While Euro-Americans wanted the freedom to build a house in any way they saw fit, city and state officials want to help secure the state from fire, and wooden buildings were fuel to a fire. Through advancements made in construction and building materials, city and state planners were aware of other materials and types of construction that were more fireproof or at least fire resistant. Masonry vaults, iron and brick were all viable and safer alternatives to the use of lumber. Although these were viable and safe options, building masonry vaults and building with iron and brick greatly increased the cost, and was out of reach for most people living in South Carolina.⁶¹ Through the creation of laws that prohibited wooden structures in downtown Charleston, lawmakers were hoping to curb the destruction that a fire could cause. In addition, through these same laws, slaves and

⁶¹ Wermiel, *The Fireproof Building*, 13, 30, 41, 46.

free blacks who set a fire would not be able to destroy the same amount of property if the buildings were constructed out of brick or stone.

In 1713, the State of South Carolina passed its first legislation banning the erection of buildings made out of anything but brick. The lawmakers identified that houses in Charleston, and other towns in South Carolina, were built either adjoining or very close together – which was not the case in the countryside.⁶² The law specified that “no dwelling house, shop, ware-house, barne [sic], stable or any other building whatsoever, of timber shall be erected or set up within the lines of the fortifications of Charlestown, but of brick...”⁶³ There were stiff penalties if someone did build out of wood. The owner of the framed building would enter into a “bond or recognizance” that the commissioners could order that the owner demolish the structure. If he or she did not comply, the owner could be committed to prison until the structure was demolished. If the owner was still defiant, then the state could demolish the structure and sell off the owner’s possessions to recover the costs.⁶⁴

During the antebellum era, changes were made to Charleston ordinances that regulated the banning of wooden buildings. In 1838, the City ordinances again reiterated the state law. It was unlawful to erect any structure in Charleston made out of wood. They also became more specific in regulating what constituted a wooden structure. A wooden building was described as being wood framed or if it had more wood on the

⁶² McCord, ed., An Additional Act to an Act Entitled “An Act to Prevent and Suppress Fire in Charles Town, No. 335, Sec. I (1713), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 58.

⁶³ McCord, ed., An Additional Act to an Act Entitled “An Act to Prevent and Suppress Fire in Charles Town, No. 335, Sec. I (1713), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 58.

⁶⁴ McCord, ed., An Additional Act to an Act Entitled “An Act to Prevent and Suppress Fire in Charles Town, No. 335, Sec. I (1713), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 58. In this instance, bond or recognizance refers to the owner signing that he acknowledges that he was in contrary to the law.

outside of the structure than what was required for “door and window frames, doors, shutters, sashes, porticoes and piazzas.”⁶⁵ The penalties for breaking the law were also increased. Any person caught building out of wood would be subject to a \$500 fine, and an additional twenty dollars for each week that the structure remained standing. In addition, people working on the construction of the wooden structure would also be fined. Their fine was \$5.00 for each day the worker was employed working on the building. The ordinances were again amended in 1844 to include the required thickness of walls, which were to be constructed out of brick or stone. Fines for breaking the laws were also increased to between \$500 and \$1,000, plus an additional twenty dollars per week that the illegal structure and wall were standing without being repaired or torn down. Workers on the structure were still fined five dollars a day, but the new ordinance included a fine of two dollars a day for slaves who worked on the building, which was to be paid by the employer.⁶⁶ In 1856, the state law regarding wooden structures within Charleston changed. Wooden buildings built on any “made, marsh, mud or water lot within the city” since May 8, 1838, could continue to stand. However, if they could be taken down if they were deemed a public risk, and they had to be covered with a non-combustible material within the next ten years.⁶⁷

The law required citizens of South Carolina to build structures out of stone or brick. However, for many people who were building, the more expensive materials were not an

⁶⁵ Wooden Buildings, (Construction of Prohibited), Sec I, II (May 8, 1838), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 306.

⁶⁶ Wooden Buildings, (Construction of Prohibited), Sec III, IV (May 8, 1838), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 306 -307; Wooden Buildings, (Construction of Prohibited), Sec I, III, IV (August 18, 1844), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 308 – 309.

⁶⁷ An Act to Amend the Laws in Relation to the Erection of Wooden Buildings in the City of Charleston, No. 4287, Sec. II (1856), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Volume XII*, 461-462.

option, or business owners wanted the freedom to build out of wood. Therefore, they sometimes risked their security to maintain their personal freedom.

The reiteration of previous state laws in the city ordinances of 1838 were directly related to a devastating fire that hit Charleston in April. The fire began in a small fruit store and quickly spread. The 700-member fire department attempted to blow up buildings to stop the fire's progression, but they were unsuccessful. In the end seven hundred acres in the heart of the city were leveled, and the fire destroyed an estimated 560 dwellings and 600 outbuildings. In May and June 1838 there were twenty-five more arson attempts in the city, and after each one, slaves and domestics were arrested and questioned, but none were convicted.⁶⁸ Euro-Charlestonians were aware of the added threat that slaves and free blacks posed on society; however, even after the devastation of 1838, they were still not willing to consistently follow the law regarding wooden structures to reduce the risk to their property. In fact, after the 1838 fire that struck Charleston, a petition circulated against the city ordinance prohibiting wooden structures. Although the petitioners were eager to see Charleston rebuilt, they viewed the prohibition as being against their individual rights. The petition stated, in part:

Your memorialists respectfully protest against the recent city ordinance prohibiting the erection of wooden buildings in any part of the corporate limits of the said city, as a gratuitous infliction and unjust invasion of their rights... It will not escape the observation of your enlightened Body that your memorialists own or inhabit a section of the city built almost exclusively of wood... As private residences wooden houses are not only cheaper, but more beautiful and comfortable... while they pay a higher insurance only on their value and the trifling value of the furniture within them... Many of them are under contracts entered into previous to the late calamity, many of them have buildings previously in progress, many of them own [unreadable] hold interest of considerable value, which will be rendered [unreadable] them valueless by

⁶⁸ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 216, 217.

the ordinances [sic]. Many of them have purchased lots, and collected materials to build comfortably to their inclinations, many of them are owners of lots that will be of only nominal value, under the inbound restriction, and most of them have made arrangements that will be deranged or frustrated by its operation.⁶⁹

Although Charlestonians viewed fire as a threat to their lives and property, wooden buildings were still preferred, for they were cheaper and easier to rebuild, as opposed to brick or stone, which would have been safer. The laws prohibiting wooden buildings both in the city ordinances and in the state law reflected the tensions that existed between security and personal freedom. In addition, the higher cost of building with brick and stone was prohibitive to many people because of their lower income levels.

In comparison with Charleston, Boston had a less strict building code. While Bostonians had similar fears regarding catastrophic fire, it did not have the same internal threats as Charleston and South Carolina, and their less strict building codes likely reflected this difference. In order to protect Boston from major fires, the city council began passing building code laws in 1818. The difference between Charleston and Boston is that Boston never prohibited wooden buildings. It enacted building codes that stated that wooden buildings must not exceed ten feet in height, unless the roof was covered with slate tile or another incombustible material. Moreover, in 1821, Boston suspended the above act in South Boston, and wooden structures were deemed acceptable at any height.⁷⁰ Boston did enact measures to help protect the city from fire. In addition

⁶⁹ Petition protesting the city ordinance prohibiting the erection of wooden buildings in the city, (S165015/05553/ND) South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Although this document does not have a specific date attached to it, the language, timing and the city ordinances that went into effect after the 1838 fire suggest that this petition was circulated in or around 1838.

⁷⁰ "Fire-Prevention [1] Sec. 1, [22] Sec. 4" in *The Charter and Ordinances of the City of Boston Together with the Acts of Legislation Relating to the City* (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, City Printer, 1834), 108, 115.

to incombustible roofs a brick partition had to be present in joining wooden buildings, out buildings had to have incombustible roofs, and no windows were allowed on the sloping parts of roofs.⁷¹ The penalties for acting in opposition to these laws were also not as harsh as in Charleston. The fine in 1818 for building a wooden house contrary to the act was fifty dollars annually until the building was properly secured against fire. By comparison, a wooden building in Charleston carried a penalty of \$500 and an additional twenty dollars for each week the building remained in violation of the act. Further, if the building remained erected over three months, the violator would be fined an additional one hundred dollars for neglecting the law.⁷² While it is impossible to know with certainty why Charleston and Boston differed so greatly in their antebellum fire codes, it may well have been the fear that Charlestonians had with respect to slave rebellion, and their tendency to see slaves and free blacks as careless, contributed to the construction of the more rigorous fire codes. In any case, a major difference between Boston and Charleston was the very significant presence of slaves and free blacks in the southern seaport. By removing the potential disaster that fire could create in Charleston at the hands of slaves and free blacks by trying to remove the wooden buildings themselves, officials may have been hoping to alleviate some of the fears that Euro-Americans felt towards them.

⁷¹ “Fire – Prevention [1] Sec. 1, [20] Sec. 2, [21] Sec. 3, [25],” in *The Charter and Ordinances of the City of Boston*, 108, 114 - 115.

⁷² *Wooden Buildings (Construction of Prohibited), An Ordinance to Prevent the Erection of Wooden Buildings, and to Provide Greater Security Against Fires, Sec. I (May 8, 1838), A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 306.

State and city lawmakers also strove to secure weapons and gunpowder from being improperly stored in order to maintain security and safety. Rural slaveholders who allowed their slaves to carry and use guns were also restricted in the practice. One reason why slaveholders allowed their slaves access to firearms was because it was part of their duty to hunt or kill livestock or help protect the plantation. It was illegal for slaves to carry a master's gun off the plantation unless they were given written permission to do so, or had a Euro-American with them to ensure the slave's actions were lawful.⁷³ While the firearms were not in use, the law required that slaveholders keep their guns in the "most private and least frequented room in the house."⁷⁴ As with other Acts Relating to Slaves that South Carolina passed, these laws were reiterated in 1740, after the Stono Rebellion.⁷⁵ This illustrates, once again, that slaveholders were willing to risk security in order to protect their households and freedoms.

Laws also regulated the storage of gunpowder in Charleston. There are a few reasons why guns and gunpowder needed to be regulated. First, like other American cities, in slave states or not, Charleston was situated close to the Atlantic Ocean, so safely storing gunpowder was important in case of an enemy attack by sea, and the risk of an attack was high until well into the nineteenth century. Locking up excess gunpowder would have provided a certain amount of security. Secondly, by securing excess gunpowder and limiting the number of pounds a resident could store in the homes, lawmakers were

⁷³ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec V (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 352.

⁷⁴ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 314, Sec VI (1712), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 354.

⁷⁵ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Slaves, No. 670, Sec XXIII (1740), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 404.

helping to secure the city against any slave or free black rebellion. If a slave or free black stole a weapon, there would not be barrels of gunpowder at their disposal. Instead, there would only be a limited supply, and the rest would be safely stored out of harm's way.

South Carolina State and Charleston City laws attempted to minimize this destructive element with legislation encompassing building codes for magazines and restrictions on the storage of gunpowder outside of the magazine. A central magazine was seen as being important to the security of Charleston. Not only were slaves and free black people a threat to their security, Charleston is a seaport and a magazine was important to the fortification of the city. It was essential for lawmakers to make sure gunpowder and other combustibles were properly stored and handled in South Carolina. As slaves had easy access to fire, improperly stored gunpowder could destroy a large area with minimal effort. The 1703 Acts Relating to Charleston called for a powder house to be built to safely and securely store gunpowder. As with other structures, a wooden powder house was illegal. For the safety and security of Charlestonians and the surrounding countryside, the powder house was to be constructed out of brick. Merchants were not exempt from laws regarding gunpowder. In 1719 merchants had to store gunpowder for sale in the magazine and pay for the storage and retrieval of the powder for sale. In addition, it became illegal for Charlestonians to store more than a quarter-barrel of gunpowder (or approximately 25 pounds) in their homes. If citizens breached this law they would be fined ten pounds. In 1809 another brick magazine was built in Charleston, which was to be controlled by the City of Charleston, not the State. Citizens and merchants of Charleston were still legally required to store surplus gunpowder in the

magazine as per the previous law and fines. As gunpowder posed such a threat to Charleston, the city again amended the law through a city ordinance in 1815. The ordinance was more specific than the original quarter-barrel from the 1719 Acts Relating to Charleston. City lawmakers determined that citizens and merchants could not keep more than thirty-eight pounds of gunpowder on hand. If they were found to be in possession of more than thirty-eight pounds, they would be fined one hundred dollars.⁷⁶ Although they were allowed to keep more gunpowder on hand, the new law legislated a specific weight and was not dependent on the actual barrel size, which could possibly vary.

Gunpowder was not the only combustible material that lawmakers attempted to control. Basically any combustible material or practice was subject to restrictions in order to reduce the threat of fire on South Carolina. Like other southern states, South Carolina was very involved in producing naval stores, specifically pitch, tar and turpentine. “Firing pine branches and logs in slow-burning kilns” produced tar, and it was used to reduce decay on standing riggings that held masts in place, and was also used as axle grease for wheeled vehicles, for rust protection on cannons, and to preserve fence

⁷⁶ McCord, ed., An Additional Act to an Act Entitled “An Act to Prevent the Sea’s Further Encroachment Upon the Wharfe [sic] at Charles Town;” and for the Repairing and Building More Batterys [sic] and Flankers on the said Wall to be Built on the Said Wharfe [sic]; And Also for the Fortifying [sic] the Remaining Parts of Charles Town by Intrenchments [sic], Flankers and Pallisadoes [sic], and Appointing a Garrison to the Southward, No. 219, Sec XIV (1703), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 30; McCord, ed., An Additional Act to The Act Now In Force, Relating to the Fortifications in Charles Town, No. 396, Sec. XVIII (1719), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 69; McCord, ed., An Act to Authorize the City Council of Charleston to Erect and Build, Within the Inclosure [sic] of the City Burial Ground, Lying Without the City, on the Borders of Ashley River, a Substantial Brick Magazine, for the Storing of Gun Powder, No. 1941, Sec. I, II, III, *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 127; Gunpowder, An Ordinance to Authorize the Appointment of a Board of Fire Masters, to Define Their Powers and Duties, and for Other Purposes Therein Mentioned, Sec XXIII (June 13, 1815), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 102.

posts. Pitch was produced by boiling the tar, and was applied to the sides and bottoms of wooden boats and ships to prevent leakage. Finally, turpentine was made from the gum secreted by conifer trees, and was used to waterproof leather and cloth. Fire was an important part of making both pitch and tar. Fires that occurred in abandoned turpentine forests caused the most damage, because no one was around to rake up debris and thick pine straws, limbs, resinous chips and pools of gum often surrounded the trees. In addition, the trees were covered with the hardened gum and bases coated with resin, both of which are extremely flammable.

Charleston is a seaport city with an active naval stores industry that was to be closely monitored to ensure public safety. Charleston's port exported more pitch, tar, and turpentine than the ports located in Beaufort, Brunswick, and Wilmington, North Carolina, which exported approximately seventy-five percent of the naval stores in North Carolina. In fact, South Carolina's naval store industry grew so steadily that by 1848 a Charleston turpentine distillery was at one hundred barrels production a day, with plans to expand the facility. In 1704 South Carolina began regulating the practice of boiling pitch, tar, and turpentine within the fortifications of the city. Any citizen caught breaking the law would be fined forty schillings. Charleston lawmakers expanded upon the original State law in 1786 and prevented shipments carrying pitch, tar and turpentine, or "naval stores" from landing at all but three docks on the wharf. The wharves belonging to Christopher Gadsden, William Gibbes, and Edward Blake were considered the safest wharves to receive naval stores and, therefore, protect the city against disaster. The actual boiling of pitch, tar and turpentine was again outlawed within the city limits of

Charleston, on any wharf, or low water lot in 1815. Specially designed buildings had been erected especially for this purpose, and failure to use them would cost an offender sixty dollars.⁷⁷

Adding to the danger of the naval stores industry was the number of slaves that were also involved in production. Many turpentine plantations employed slave labor – either the plantation owner used his own slaves, or would rent the slaves of other owners, or use a combination of both. Like the rice and Sea Island cotton plantations, turpentine producers preferred the task system; however, they were aware and fearful that this system did not allow for close monitoring. Turpentine plantations consisted of large longleaf pine forest holdings and were most common between the Cape Fear River and Charleston. The work on a turpentine plantation was harsh, and slaves working on the plantations often rebelled. Using fire was one of the most destructive ways a slave could rebel in naval stores production. In fact, many producers believed that slaves caused the fires that occasionally swept through the pine forests.⁷⁸ In his memoirs, James Battle Avirett wrote about his turpentine plantation. He stated that:

The great disadvantage in the crop, however, is that the distilleries, the spirits of turpentine, the resin, and in fine the whole plant and its yields are so combustible that no insurance company, domestic or foreign, will insure the property. The only protection against fire that can be had is to police the premises as thoroughly as possible. How is this done? By placing here and there all over the orchards double log

⁷⁷ Robert B. Outland, III, *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 6, 31, 101, 112; McCord, ed., An Act to Prevent and Suppress Fire in Charles Town, No. 234, Sec. V (1704), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 42; Pitch, Tar, Turpentine, An Ordinance to Prevent the Landing of Navel Stores on any of the Wharves in Charleston, Except such as are Therein Mentioned, Sec I (May 3, 1786), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 202; Pitch, Tar, Turpentine, An Ordinance to Prevent the Landing of Navel Stores on any of the Wharves in Charleston, Except such as are Therein Mentioned, Sec XXI (June 30, 1815), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 202.

⁷⁸ Outland, *Tapping the Pines*, 19, 47, 78-79, 93.

cabins for the families of some twenty or more white men. These people occupy these cabins free of rent, with as much land as they choose to cultivate... These men are required to do three things; first, they are to guard the orchards from fire, and if a small fire occur, as it often does in the summer time by lightning striking and igniting a resinous pine tree, they and their families must extinguish it. If it gets beyond their control they are to blow horns, summon the neighboring tenants and, sending all around for help, fight the fire fiend until it is put out.⁷⁹

Although Avirett does not mention whether or not slaves were used on his plantation, this example reiterates the danger of the production of pitch, tar and turpentine. In addition, by not mentioning slaves, Avirett illustrated that slaves may not have been trusted to watch over the combustible forests, in case they did attempt to start a fire.

Just as the law regulated pitch, tar, and turpentine, the storage of cotton was also a major concern. Cotton was transported on riverboats and schooners down both the Ashley and Cooper Rivers towards the city.⁸⁰ Like other materials, cotton could burn easily and create great destruction with little effort. The 1844 amendments to the city ordinances illustrate the fear that improper storage of cotton had on Euro-Americans. It became illegal “for any person to store, keep or pile loose, bagged or baled cotton” within the Charleston limits in any building not made of brick or stone. Fines for breaking this ordinance ranged from twenty to one hundred dollars.⁸¹ Charleston Fire-Masters were responsible and had the authority to enter any building, lot or enclosure where cotton might be illegally stored. If illegally stored cotton was located, Fire-Masters could

⁷⁹ James Battle Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely Co., 1901), 70. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/avirett/avirett.html> (21 June 2009).

⁸⁰ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 182.

⁸¹ Storing and Piling Cotton, Stables, &c, An Ordinance to Regulate the Storing, Keeping and Piling of Cotton, to Prohibit the Smoking of Segars [sic] on any of the Wharves, to Regulate the Employment of Lights in Stables or Cow-Houses; To Punish Injury to Wells, Pumps, Trees, Public Works or City Property, Sec. I (August 15, 1844), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 271.

demand the owner remove the cotton, or remove it and fine the owner if he or she did not comply. In addition, there was to be no smoking cigars or pipes on any wharves or the surrounding area. Any Euro-American caught in violation of the laws would be subject to a five-dollar fine, and any slave would be confined to the guardhouse and receive corporal punishment, unless the slaveholder agreed to pay the fine enforced by the mayor.⁸²

Finally, regulations were also enforced regarding lanterns and candles. Just as a carelessly discarded cigar or pipe could cause major damage, so too could a candle or lamp used as light. The 1844 city ordinances also enacted that it was illegal to carry a candle or a lamp within Charleston city limits, unless it was safely contained within a lantern. Once again, Euro-Americans caught breaking this law would receive a five dollar fine, and slaves were to be taken to the guardhouse to receive corporal punishment, unless their owners would pay the fines imposed by the mayor.⁸³ This law put additional pressures on the slave, through the threat of violence, and the master, through the threat of the fine, to try to contain the slaves' behavior.

Many of the laws that existed to protect South Carolinians and their property from fire had their beginnings in the colonial era. The antebellum era saw lawmakers in a constant state of reaction to possible threats to their community. The preceding laws

⁸² Storing and Piling Cotton, Stables, &c, An Ordinance to Regulate the Storing, Keeping and Piling of Cotton, to Prohibit the Smoking of Segars [sic] on any of the Wharves, to Regulate the Employment of Lights in Stables or Cow-Houses; To Punish Injury to Wells, Pumps, Trees, Public Works or City Property, Sec. II, IV, VII (August 15, 1844), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 271-272.

⁸³ Storing and Piling Cotton, Stables, &c, An Ordinance to Regulate the Storing, Keeping and Piling of Cotton, to Prohibit the Smoking of Segars [sic] on any of the Wharves, to Regulate the Employment of Lights in Stables or Cow-Houses; To Punish Injury to Wells, Pumps, Trees, Public Works or City Property, Sec. V (August 15, 1844), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 271.

were all designed minimize the damage a fire could cause. By adopting the regulation of wooden buildings, gunpowder, the boiling of pitch, tar and turpentine, the storage of cotton and use of candles, lawmakers were ultimately responding, in part, to simple ways a slave could start a devastating fire that could affect large numbers of people. At the same time, for many people it was less expensive to violate these laws and risk the fine. By taking the risk South Carolinians were also jeopardizing their safety and security. Wooden buildings and combustible materials light on fire easily and everything from a lightening storm, a carelessly discarded cigar, or a disgruntled slave or free black person could easily start an enormous fire. Many of these same types of laws and ordinances existed in different jurisdictions around the country; however, it was the large slave and free black population that made Charleston and South Carolina stand out. But even though this risk existed and Euro-Americans feared fire, slaves and free blacks, personal freedoms were more important to Euro-Americans, in many cases, than was security.

The origins of slave, and free black, control goes back to the colonial period. Slaveholders and lawmakers had spent over a century designing and revising the system to control slaves and free blacks. After many of the threats, at home or abroad, the Slave Code was revised to try to secure the safety of Euro-South Carolinians. Perhaps because Euro-South Carolinians believed that slaves and free blacks were hard to control, and fire was an ever-present danger, South Carolina sought to halt destruction by fire through laws aimed at Euro-Americans. In many aspects South Carolina was similar to other states and faced the same threats, especially the threat of fire leveling plantation, farm, town, or a part of a city. However, South Carolina also had the large population of slaves

and free blacks who, some feared, were hoping to undermine the system in any way they could. In addition, these laws also illustrate the influence that slaves had over Euro-South Carolinians. The slaves and free blacks received a certain amount of assistance from the Euro-American complacency. Because many Euro-Americans were unwilling to follow the laws regarding slaves and free blacks, the Euro-Americans were jeopardizing their own safety for their personal freedoms, which created an atmosphere of fear.

Chapter Four

Fear and Fire: A Case Study of Popular Media in Charleston

According to South Carolina court records, on July 6, 1838, slaveholder John Jones was notified by one of his slaves that his gin house was on fire. The next morning Mr. Jones visited the remains of the gin house. Arson was immediately suspected because of the footprints that were present around the burnt gin house. Mr. Jones also discovered a cap, which Jim, one of his slaves, was seen wearing the day before. Mr. Jones followed tracks from the gin house to Jim's home in the slave quarters. Jim fled and was captured on July 12, 1838, in the house of a Mr. Charles McKie. According to Mr. McKie and Mr. Isaac Vann, who took Jim back to his master's property, the slave admitted to burning the gin house and a quantity of lumber and tools a few days before. Jim was brought to trial on July 17, 1838 for the capital offense of arson, pleading not guilty. The prosecution presented their case. Mr. McKie and Mr. Vann recounted the slave's "voluntary" confession. Both men stated that Jim went to another slave's home, got the fire and carried it over to the gin house and kindled the fire with a pile of shavings. The prisoner, Jim, did not produce any evidence in his defense, and he was immediately found guilty and sentenced to be hung on August 10, 1838.¹

While Jim was executed for his crime, another slave, Michel, who was convicted of arson in 1827, had fared somewhat better. Michel was pardoned by the Governor of South Carolina, and was committed to a workhouse. An offer of one hundred dollars had

¹ J. Jones petition for compensation for a slave executed for burning a gin house with an account of the court proceedings, (S165015/00030/1838) South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

been made for Michel and the Intendent of South Carolina was to oversee Michel's purchase by a man from Kentucky who would immediately take him out of the state.² Likewise, a slave named Mary Ann was charged with arson; however, after her trial she was found not guilty. Immediately following the not guilty verdict, she was brought up on another charge for a high misdemeanor to which she pled guilty. Her punishment consisted of "twenty lashes on the first Friday's [sic] of three successive months, and to remain two hours in stocks each time; then to remain five years in solitary confinement – the owner being privileged, if so disposed, to run her from the State after the expiration of the first year."³

The preceding examples illustrate lawmakers' efforts to ensure that slaves who were suspected of setting fires were dealt with swiftly and severely. Slaves were often executed for the crime of arson even when evidence was thin, and even if slaves were legally pardoned they were still sometimes deemed enough of a threat to society that removal from the state seemed essential. Further, slaves found not guilty of arson could be brought up on new charges, implying that a slave was never truly innocent of arson. While laws existed in South Carolina to protect the citizens, dangerous fires still swept through Charleston and its environs, in part because no fire-prevention system was foolproof and in part because laws were not always followed. The previous chapter considered South Carolina and Charleston's legal system as, in part, a reflection of that society's fears and concerns about slave control, with particular attention to laws

² "Proceedings of Council," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, January 12, 1827. Also see: "No title," *Southern Patriot*, April 16, 1837.

³ "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, April 6, 1837.

pertaining to fire. This chapter moves beyond the relatively narrow social group that constructed the legal system, to consider those same fears as expressed in more popular ways. This chapter surveys South Carolina's, and especially Charleston's, newspapers with respect to reportage about fire and slaves,⁴ on the assumption that newspapers both reflected and reinforced the mindset or worldview of South Carolinians.⁵ Newspapers were the most common way for citizens in the nineteenth century to get the local and international news that may affect their lives, or the lives of their family and friends. Newspapers were directed at the Euro-American population and were also produced by them. Newspaper articles both reflect the worldview of the editors and writers who put them together and were "opinion-makers" that helped to shape how the readership saw the world around them.

While it is hard to know the effect that the fire stories had on the readers, an examination of personal correspondence suggests that there is a connection between the newspaper articles and their fear of slave and free-black arson, as the themes in both were

⁴ My survey for this thesis included both newspapers on microfilm and a Internet newspaper database. With respect to newspapers on microfilm I search through: The *Charleston Mercury*, January to December, 1822, January to December 1823, January to December 1824, January to December 1825, January to June 1835, July to December 1835, January to June 1838, July to December 1838, January to June 1846, July to December 1846, January to June, 1848, January to June 1850, July to December 1850, January to June 1852; the *Greenville Mountaineer*, November 22, 1834 to October 8, 1841; the *Edgefield Advertiser*, February 8, 1838 to November 15, 1838; the *Charleston Daily Courier*, July to December, 1846, January to June, 1848, July to December 1848; March 1, 1854 to September 13, 1854, September 14, 1854 to March 24, 1855, July 14, 1859 to January 27, 1860, January 28, 1860 to August 7, 1860, August 8, 1860 to April 9, 1861 (although I ended my search on December 31, 1860); the *Charleston Courier*, July to December, 1843, July to December, 1846, January to June, 1847, July to December, 1847, January to June 1848, July to August 1848. In addition I also searched the online database, "America's Historical Newspapers, 1690 to 1922". I searched both the antebellum and Jacksonian eras (roughly 1820 to 1860) newspapers in South Carolina. I used search terms that included: "fire", "arson", "conflagration", "colored", "negro", "black", "slave", "burning", "police", "proceedings of council", "fire reports", "chief of police", "Charleston", "Columbia", "South Carolina".

⁵ Gabriel, "The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement."

similar. Not only did newspapers show slaves and free blacks as being negligent, careless, and vengeful, but they also showed the persistent danger of their setting a fire. In addition, fire insurance policies from antebellum Charleston also highlight this risk to property and suggest a further connection between the fear of fire and slaves' accountability for destroying property.

Through an examination of South Carolina newspapers from 1820 to 1860 regarding fire, various themes appear that give insight into Euro-American life in South Carolina. In many respects, South Carolina, and specifically Charleston, was not much different from other cities in the United States like New York City, Boston, Newark, and Pittsburg in terms of being vulnerable to fire. South Carolina newspapers consistently carried fire reports copied word for word from other newspapers in the United States that can be used to suggest what fire reporting in other cities was like. Common concerns and fears, or themes, that are evident in non-southern newspapers include the use of wooden buildings, the dangers of improperly stored combustible materials, and the heroics of the fire departments and Euro-American citizens who helped stop or contain blazes. Stories from northern newspapers that were reprinted in South Carolina tended to recreate the dreadful events of fires in a way that allows readers to almost see in their minds what exactly happened – the path of the fire, the confusion, the excitement, and the horror. In many articles there was a certain dramatic tone in the way that the newspapers retold the story to their audiences.

Fire reports from both South Carolina and from other newspapers in the United States typically mentioned the type of building that was destroyed. For example, on August 28,

1848, the *Charleston Courier* carried a fire report from Brooklyn, New York, in which a fire started in a stable and destroyed the building as well as two horses at 38 Henry Street. From the stable “the flames communicated to the two-story wooden house[s]” on both sides of number 38. The fire continued down the block and destroyed “the two story wooden building” at number 34 and heavily damaged number 32 before the fire company could bring it under control.⁶ This illustrates how quickly a fire in a wooden building could spread out of control and affect not only one family, but also an entire block or community – especially if the whole block were built out of wood. Although not all of the reprinted articles stated directly that wooden buildings were the main cause of the amount of destruction, there was generally a longer list of buildings destroyed in fires where wooden buildings were present – more buildings than when brick structures were on fire. By telling people of the larger amount of property destroyed when wooden buildings were on fire, it subtly illustrated why wooden buildings were so dangerous.

Brick or stone buildings that were involved in a fire were also identified in stories reprinted from northern newspapers. However, these reports differed greatly from the

⁶ “Fire in Brooklyn,” *Charleston Courier*, August 28, 1848. Also see: “Fire!,” *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, September 4, 1820; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 28, 1824; “Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 14, 1825; “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 20, 1835; “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 25, 1835; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 9, 1835; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 6, 1835; “Dreadful Conflagration,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 28, 1835; “Very Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 4, 1835; “The Fire on Saturday Morning,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1835; “Still Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 7, 1843; “Fire and Serious Accident,” and “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843; “Great Fire in Wilmington, N.C.,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 3, 1843; “Destructive Conflagration,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 10, 1843; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, August 18, 1843; “Fire in Richmond and Manchester,” *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1843; “Fire in Brooklyn,” *Charleston Courier*, August 28, 1848; “Another Fire in Detroit,” *Charleston Courier*, September 2, 1848; “Fire at Sing Sing Prison,” *Charleston Mercury*, August 14, 1850; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 28, 1852; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 22, 1854; “No Title,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 14, 1854; “Destructive Fire in Atlanta – Loss Said to be \$150,000 – Two Entire Streets Burned, and Three Children Perished in the Ruins,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 19, 1859.

wooden building reports in that they describe the damage as generally contained to the originating structure or at least a smaller geographical area than was seen with wooden structures. In addition, when fire spread between brick or stone structures it was typically described as being transmitted by embers landing on the roof, and the damage to any secondary structure was less extensive than the destruction seen between wooden buildings. The reports did not necessarily point out that brick buildings were the cause for the containment or smaller area affected by the fire. As with wood, northern fire articles reprinted in South Carolina newspapers reported on the impact of stone and brick. On March 31, 1843, for example, the *Charleston Mercury* copied a report from Boston, Massachusetts, where a four-story brick building was on fire. The article stated that:

The fires and second stories were occupied by Wm. R. Summer, as a crockery establishment, by B.B. Wood, jeweler, and W.H. Dean, shoe-dealer. Their property was nearly all destroyed. The third and fourth stories were occupied by Wilkinson & Coy, Piano Forte manufacturers, whose large stock of materials, and several valuable Pianos were consumed. In the third story also, was the armory of the Hancock Light Infantry, who arms and appointments were entirely destroyed... The Fire Department, after great exertions, succeeding in arresting the flames, which came close to several buildings in the adjoining block.⁷

⁷ "Fire and Serious Accident," *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843. Also see: "Conflagration of the Theatre," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, April 11, 1820; "Fire and Loss of Life," *Charleston Mercury*, January 20, 1835; "Another destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 16, 1835; "Very Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 4, 1835; "Another fire in Philadelphia" and "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1835; "Another Destructive Fire in New York – Loss of Life," *Charleston Mercury*, September 2, 1835; "Disastrous Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 30, 1843; "Fire and a serious accident," *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843; "Fires in Richmond and Manchester," *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1843; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, March 6, 1848; "Fires at Savannah," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 22, 1854; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 14, 1856; "Another Destructive Fire in New York – Loss of Life," *Charleston Mercury*, September 2, 1835; "Disastrous Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 30, 1843; "Destructive Fire – Loss of Life," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 21, 1854; "Fire in Augusta, Ga.," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 10, 1854; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 2, 1854; "Fire on Blackwell's Island," *Charleston Mercury*, February 16, 1858; "Destructive Fire in New York – Coffee and Spice Mill Destroyed – Loss over \$70,000," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 11, 1859; "Large Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 20, 1860.

While the brick building still burnt and caused damage to the companies within the building, the fire did not spread beyond, and was stopped by firemen before neighboring buildings suffered the same fate.

South Carolina newspapers reported on local fires similarly in terms of building materials. On January 19, 1825, the *Charleston Mercury* reported on a fire in Columbia, South Carolina. A fire began in the square fronting Richardson Street, and before it could be brought under control, the fire destroyed almost all the buildings in the square. All of the buildings involved were made of wood.⁸ Articles like this one illustrate how quickly fire could spread in an area with a high concentration of wooden buildings. While the article might not have pointed directly to the wooden buildings as being responsible for the scope of the fire, by mentioning the type of buildings destroyed, the newspaper reinforced Euro-American fears of fire and wooden buildings.

Buildings made out of brick and stone in South Carolina also got attention when they were involved in a fire. However, the amount of property destroyed was less when a

⁸ "Extensive Fire in Columbia," *Charleston Mercury*, January 19, 1825. Also see: "Very Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 19, 1825; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, March 27, 1850; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 6, 1850; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, February 20, 1852; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 13, 1852; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 7, 1852; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 28, 1858; "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, April 24, 1833; "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, October 2, 1835; "Another Fire!!!," *Southern Patriot*, October 3, 1835; "Another attempt to set fire," *Southern Patriot*, June 1, 1838; "Conflagration," *Southern Patriot*, September 12, 1839; "Fire!," *Southern Patriot*, May 16, 1842; "Fire!," *Southern Patriot*, March 9, 1843; "Fire in Columbia," *Southern Patriot*, May 10, 1843, "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, September 3, 1847; "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, September 25, 1848; "Fire," *Greenville Mountaineer*, May 8, 1840; "Fire," *Charleston Courier*, August 10, 1846; "Fire in Georgetown, S.C.," *Charleston Courier*, September 18, 1846; "Fire," *Charleston Courier*, December 6, 1848; "Fires," *Charleston Mercury*, February 18, 1856; "Incendiarism," *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1856; "Another Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 21, 1856; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 3, 1859; "Fire in Orangeburg," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 12, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 5, 1860, "Fire at Mount Pleasant," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 24, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 7, 1860; "The Fire at Mount Pleasant," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 11, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 13, 1860; "Incendiarism and Narrow Escape," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 29, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 4, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 21, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 31, 1860.

brick or stone building was involved. South Carolina fire reports involving brick or stone buildings reiterated the safety of the structures, and minimized the amount of damage that was done. For example, the April 18, 1823 edition of the *Charleston Mercury* contained a report of a fire in Charleston. The article stated, “the flames quickly passed to the Kitchen and Dwelling-house on the same lot, which were entirely consumed. The Dwelling-house was of brick, or much other damage would more probably have been done...”⁹ The writer of the above quote made the connection between building material and fire damage, and readers probably made the connection as well. This article, and others like it, could serve as a reminder to people of why brick and stone were better than wood.

As the laws of South Carolina illustrated, the improper storage of combustible materials, like cotton, gunpowder, and pitch, tar and turpentine, were believed to have a devastating effect on the community. These flammable materials could easily make a relatively small fire worse, and destroy a large portion of land if they came in contact with the flames. Newspapers in South Carolina reinforced people’s fears of combustible materials by reporting when they were used, or involved in a fire. Additionally, South Carolina newspapers also copied the stories from other newspapers that dealt similarly with the same topic. The *Charleston Mercury*, on February 1, 1823, reprinted a fire article from Philadelphia in which “400 bales of Cotton were burnt. During the

⁹ “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 18, 1823. Also see: “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 8, 1824, “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, October 2, 1835; “Destructive Conflagration,” *Southern Patriot*, April 16, 1840; “Fire in Columbia,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 10, 1843; “Fire of Yesterday,” *Charleston Courier* March 18, 1848; “Conflagration,” *Southern Patriot*, September 12, 1839; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 13, 1854; “The Fire in Meeting-Street,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 1, 1854; “Disastrous Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 15, 1858;

conflagration a fellow was detected throwing a lighted segar [sic] into the hay loft, but he unfortunately was rescued by some accomplices.”¹⁰ Similarly, the *Charleston Mercury* covered a fire in Charleston and stated:

it originated in the cotton piled up in the passage at the rear of the building, where there was a lamp, a spark from which might have fallen, or a cigar might have been thrown there by carelessness and the fire smouldered [sic] unobserved [sic] for hours.¹¹

The newspapers were reflecting citizens’ fears about combustible materials and fire.

Firemen, both in stories copied from newspapers outside of South Carolina and those original to South Carolina itself, were described as heroes. After a fire in Baltimore, the newspapers reported “our active, vigilant, and energetic fire companies were soon on the

¹⁰ “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 1, 1823. Also see: “Great Fire in Philadelphia,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 11, 1850; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 14, 1835; “Fire in Brooklyn,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 9, 1835; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 23, 1843; “Another Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 7, 1843; “Destructive Conflagration,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 10, 1843; “Fire on the Central Rail Road,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 26, 1843; “Great Fire in Paterson” and “Great Fire in Ware, Mass.,” *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1848; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1848; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, December 4, 1848; “Great Fire in Philadelphia,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 11, 1850; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, Feb 3, 1852; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 25, 1852; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 13, 1852; “Arson – Escape of the Incendiary,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 16, 1852; “Fire in Petersburg, Va.,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 29, 1854; “The Fire at Columbus, Ga.,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 27, 1854; “No title,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 2, 1854; “Fire in the Lower Cotton Press,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 13, 1856; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 8, 1858; “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 9, 1859.

¹¹ “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 4, 1843. Also see: “Fire,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 15, 1838; “Firemaster’s Department – Gunpowder,” *Southern Patriot*, September 5, 1843; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, March 3, 1845; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, November 23, 1846; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, December 8, 1846; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, March 1, 1848; “No title,” *Charleston Courier*, March 9, 1848; “Loss by the Late Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 24, 1850; “Fire,” and “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 24, 1850; “Fires at Savannah,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 22, 1854; “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 31, 1854; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 7, 1856; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 21, 1856; “Proceedings of Council,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 23, 1857; “Disastrous Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 15, 1858; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1859; “Fire Near Sumter,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 3, 1860; “Fires,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 14, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 21, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 11, 1860; “Fires,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 19, 1860;

ground in great force.”¹² In addition to the firemen, citizens who also helped fight fires were given their just rewards in print. A fire at the capitol in Washington destroyed a portion of the Congressional Library, but because citizens quickly reached the building, they were able to stop the fire from spreading.¹³ South Carolina firemen and Euro-American citizens were also given praise for their work after fires. At a fire in Columbia, South Carolina, on February 26, 1852, the fire department was credited with vigilance so the dwelling house on the property could be partially salvaged.¹⁴ Similarly, at another fire in Columbia around January 23, 1860, the fire department and the citizens of Columbia were deemed heroes for helping and given a special acknowledgement:

In the absence of the Proprietor of the *Carolinian*, Dr. Gibbes, we in his behalf, offer our grateful acknowledgements to the “fire companies,” and the citizens generally for

¹² “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 20, 1835. Also see: “Conflagration of the Theatre,” *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, April 11, 1820; “Fire and a serious accident” and “Fire and loss of life,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843; “Large Fire in Maiden Lane and Liberty Street,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 22, 1858.

¹³ “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 30, 1825. Also see: “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 17, 1825; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 14, 1835; “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 30, 1825; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 20, 1835; “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 7, 1835; “Another Destructive Fire in New York – Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, September 2, 1835; “Fire and loss of life,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1835; “Fires in Richmond and Manchester,” *Charleston Courier*, October 7, 1843; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, May 31, 1848; “Fire in Brooklyn,” August 28, 1848; “Disastrous Conflagration – Sad Loss of Life – A Large Amount of Property Consumed,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, September 26, 1860.

¹⁴ “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 27, 1852. Also see: “Fire,” *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, February 21, 1820; “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 27, 1825; “Destructive Conflagration,” *Southern Patriot*, April 16, 1840; “Fires,” *Southern Patriot*, May 15, 1840; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, March 17, 1848; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, September 8, 1848; “Another Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 29, 1850; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 27, 1852; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 3, 1854; “The Fire in Meeting-street,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 1, 1854; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 1, 1858; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 4, 1858; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 12, 1858; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 25, 1858; “Fire on the Island,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 30, 1859; “Fire in Columbia,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, January 23, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, January 30, 1860; “St. Philip-Street Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 14, 1860; “Fire in Columbia,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 27, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 22, 1860.

the efficient aid rendered by them yesterday, by which alone, the Carolinian office was saved.¹⁵

It was everyone's responsibility to help with fires, especially in the early years, before there were fire companies. However, even as cities grew, citizens continued to help extinguish fires as a way to try to stop the devastation, and from the articles it can be inferred that the communities still required their support in extinguishing fires, especially large conflagrations.

While copied articles from elsewhere and the ones that covered fires in South Carolina had many common features and themes, there were also ways in which the reports were different, reflecting in some measure the particular concerns of a slave society. Reports of fires from places other than South Carolina had a certain tone. Through the descriptions of the fires, the reader could envision the path of the fire, the confusion of the citizens, even the excitement and the devastation. This dramatic tone was absent from many of the fire reports in South Carolina. The September 7, 1843 *Charleston Courier* copied a fire report from the *New York Commercial Advertiser* that read as follows:

The flames were rushing in a perfect flood from the front of the building, and dreadful screams from a woman and child were heard in the rear. It was discovered that the husband and father had escaped, but dared not return, and was wringing his hand on the sidewalk, in despair. Messrs. Bennett, Tibbels, Smith, and Freeman, of No. 22, rushed to the rescue, and with difficulty reached the unfortunate sufferers. They caught the woman just as she was about falling overpowered by the heat and smoke, and bore her and her child in safety over the rear buildings. In three minutes

¹⁵ "Fire in Columbia," *Charleston Daily Courier*, January 23, 1860. Also see: "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, December 27, 1825; "Disastrous Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 18, 1854; "Fires," *Charleston Mercury*, March 30, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 18, 1860; "St. Philip-Street Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 14, 1860.

more they must have perished. The woman soon afterwards sank, and required medical care, but she is now doing well.¹⁶

This dramatic tone helps to evoke a sense of excitement, chaos, and fear of the fire scene.

Articles about fires in South Carolina rarely displayed this same sense of drama that was evident in the fire reports from elsewhere. While the papers still described the fire, the path and the victims, the tone was often colder and not as dramatic. The *Charleston Mercury* on August 1, 1850 covered a fire in Charleston. The story detailed when and where the fire began, the progress it made in the store, and that “the building itself has not sustained material injury.”¹⁷ Instead, other themes seemed to dominate, that reflected the particular social order of Charleston and its environs.

¹⁶ “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, September 7, 1843. Also see: “Conflagration of the Theatre,” *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, April 11, 1820; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, November 28, 1825; “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Southern Patriot*, January 4, 1834; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 20, 1835; “Fire and loss of Lives,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 7, 1835; “Fire and Dreadful Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 20, 1835; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 21, 1835; “Fire and loss of lives,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 1, 1835; “Another Destructive Fire in New York – Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, September 2, 1835; “Incendiaries Arrested,” *Southern Patriot*, July 8, 1841; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 4, 1843; “Great Fire at Worcester,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 13, 1843; “Fire and Serious Accident” and “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1843; “Great Fire in Utica,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 11, 1843; “No title,” *Charleston Courier*, September 7, 1843; “Fire and loss of Three Lives,” *Charleston Courier*, November 15, 1843; “Fire in Brooklyn,” *Charleston Courier*, August 28, 1848; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, September 6, 1848; “Destructive Conflagration in Philadelphia,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 24, 1854; “Destructive Fire in Pittsburg,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 6, 1854; “Large Fire in Maiden Lane and Liberty-Street,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 22, 1858.

¹⁷ “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, August 1, 1850. Also see: “Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, September 20, 1822; “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 16, 1822; “No title,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 18, 1823; “Fire at Columbia,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 16, 1824; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 17, 1824; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 15, 1825; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, June 12, 1833; “Another Incendiary Attempt,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 2, 1835; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 4, 1835; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, October 2, 1835; “Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 5, 1835; “Destructive Conflagration,” *Southern Patriot*, April 16, 1840; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, October 10, 1843; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, March 25, 1844; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, November 7, 1845; “Fire in Columbia,” *Southern Patriot*, December 21, 1845; “Burglary and Arson,” *Southern Patriot*, February 21, 1846; “Fire at Coosawhatchie,” *Charleston Courier*, January 1, 1848; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, March 17, 1848; “Another Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 29, 1850; “Incendiaries,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 1, 1850; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, August 1, 1850; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 27, 1852; “No title,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 16, 1854; “Disastrous Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 18,

When reporters did invoke the sentimental language of the antebellum era it was only in relation to fires that affected Euro-Americans. This fire occurred in Charleston and was reported in the *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser* on February 21, 1820. It reported that:

They immediately ran to the window fronting on King-street, and gave the alarm. Before they could completely dress themselves, the smoke became so insupportable, that they were compelled to leap from the front window, (all other means of retreat being cut off) into the street.¹⁸

Through this article, the reader can see the chaos and fear that this family must have felt. However, the articles invoking a dramatic or excitable tone were not as frequent as those that just reported the facts of the fire. The difference in the two reporting styles could suggest a couple different things. First, it is possible that South Carolina papers only chose to reprint the stories that carried a dramatic tone because they related a better story with more excitement and chaos. After all, newspapers were businesses and wanted to sell papers. Secondly, South Carolina was a slave state and Charleston had a large slave population, and the distinctive tone could be read as reflecting those facts, in some measure.

1854; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 19, 1854; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 1, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 3, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury* November 7, 1856; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 16, 1858; "Fires," *Charleston Mercury*, March 30, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 4, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 12, 1858; "Incendiarism," *Charleston Mercury*, June 21, 1858; "A Fire Detected," *Charleston Daily Courier*, September 23, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 8, 1859; "Fire on the Island," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 30, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 18, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 9, 1860; "St. Philip-Street Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 14, 1860; "Fire over the River," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 10, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 22, 1860; "Alarm of Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 25, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 5, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 13, 1860.

¹⁸ "Fire," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, February 21, 1820.

Writers chose a writing style that conveyed the facts without the dramatic overtures especially when slaves or free black people were involved in the story. For example, the November 1, 1848 edition of the *Charleston Courier* covered a fire report from Columbia, South Carolina. It read:

Yesterday afternoon, at half-past six o'clock, as we learn from a Telegraphic dispatch, a fire broke out in Columbia, in a Carpenter shop, on the corner of Camden and Bull Streets. This building becoming enveloped in flames, the fire extended to an adjoining Blacksmith shop, and both buildings were entirely consumed. The property belonged to a free colored man, and his loss is estimated at about nine hundred dollars. How the fire originated is not known.¹⁹

The tone of the article was straightforward and to the point. There was little information regarding the victims or the nature of their possibly harrowing escape from the flames. There was no emotion for the anonymous free black man who lost his property. Slaves and free blacks lost property to fire often; however, they rarely received the same mention in newspaper articles that Euro-Americans received. Slaves and free blacks who lost property were not cast as victims, and they were sometimes considered part of the problem.

Newspapers from other locations focused on the improper storage of flammable materials, and how dangerous they could be, South Carolina newspapers also focused on another angle of the same story. South Carolina newspapers also reported on stories where Euro-American interests were threatened or destroyed when improperly stored combustibles were stolen and used to start a fire. South Carolina newspapers carried a number of stories that dealt with this threat, whereas this same theme rarely appeared in

¹⁹ "Fire in Columbia," *Charleston Courier*, November 1, 1848. See also: "Incendiary Attempt," *Pendleton Messenger*, April 26, 1820,

newspaper articles copied from elsewhere. The *Southern Patriot* reported an attempted arson in Charleston on June 1, 1838. The article stated, “[a]nother attempt was last night made to involve our city in conflagration, by placing a parcel of combustible materials within the weather boarding of a small wooden tenement.”²⁰ Similarly, another arson attempt was made and reported in the *Charleston Courier* on July 18, 1846. It read, “[a] quantity of combustible material was found in a keg under the house, on fire, which but for the timely discovery of one of the inmates, would doubtless soon have enveloped the building in flames.”²¹ It is possible that articles, like the above examples, helped Euro-Americans to interpret their world around them. Combustible materials were dangerous enough when they were improperly stored in a building. However, that danger became even greater when the potential existed for someone to steal the combustible material and set a fire elsewhere.

While fire stories in South Carolina, like those from northern newspapers had important similarities it is the differences in the local articles that allow historians to see South Carolina as a distinct place from the rest of the states, especially the northern States. While the emotion was often absent, South Carolina newspapers extensively reported on the races of people who were affected by the fires, which northern

²⁰ “Another Attempt to set fire,” *Southern Patriot*, June 1, 1838;

²¹ “Attempt to set Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, July 1, 1846. Also see: “No title,” *Southern Patriot*, August 8, 1835; “Burglary and Arson,” *Southern Patriot*, January 6, 1843; “A Gun Powder Plot in Roxbury Frustrated,” *Southern Patriot*, May 7, 1845; “No title,” *Charleston Courier*, July 22, 1846; “Incendiary attempt,” *Charleston Courier*, July 23, 1846; “Incendiaries,” *Charleston Courier*, July 27, 1846; “Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, December 6, 1848; “Incendiarism,” *Charleston Mercury*, March 31, 1856; “Incendiarism,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 22, 1856; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 9, 1860; “The Fire in Calhoun Street,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 10, 1860;

newspapers did not. Race was clearly marked in the fire reports from South Carolina, which illustrates how important the racial hierarchy was during the antebellum era. .

Slavery in South Carolina created a racial hierarchy and Euro-American lives and property were valued more by society than those of Euro-Americans of lower classes, and especially over the lives of slaves and free blacks. Race was not discussed in articles relating to Euro-Americans; however, if slaves or free blacks were affected by fire, their race was immediately identified and the story carried a different tone. These articles were more focused on the potential cause of the fire, rather than on how the fire affected the victim. In fact, the victims' names were rarely ever put in the newspaper. They were only referred to by their color, which further indicates the low esteem in which African Americans were held by newspaper editors and perhaps the reading public. An attempted arson was made at the home of a "free colored woman" in Charleston, for example, that was covered as follows:

Two attempts were made on Wednesday night, to set fire to a small dwelling in Cummin, opposite Bull-street, occupied by a free colored woman. The fire was first discovered about 8 o'clock in the kitchen, and having made but little progress, was easily extinguished. Before retiring to bed, the premises were examined by the inmates, and fire again found under the piazza of the house, and had it not been discovered, must have consumed the building.²²

²² "Attempt to set Fire!," *Southern Patriot*, February 27, 1835. Also see "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, February 19, 1840, "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, March 17, 1848; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, February 16, 1835; "Attempt to set Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, February 27, 1835; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, October 3, 1835; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 15, 1848; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 11, 1852; "Fire in Columbia," *Charleston Courier*, November 1, 1848; *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 15, 1854, "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 14, 1854; "Fire at Camden," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 3, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 3, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1860; "Daring Attempt to Set Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 2, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 1, 1860.

Even when a slave or free black was gravely injured or lost his or her life because of fire, their names were still rarely mentioned. For example, on January 20, 1843 the

Charleston Mercury reported that:

On Thursday afternoon last, the Cotton Gin, and sheds attached thereto, belonging to Col. Wm. H. Moss, within three or four miles of his village [Edgefield, South Carolina], caught fire, it is supposed from friction, and was entirely destroyed, with from twelve to fifteen bales of Cotton. A valuable mulatto boy, about 21 or 22 years of age, who was attending to the Gin was burnt to death. The loss is estimated at about \$2000. There was no insurance.²³

In the above passage, the slave was described as property and not as a person who lost his life – the slave was equal to the gin, which would not have had a name either. The January 9, 1856 edition of the *Charleston Mercury* covered the story of a fire in a “small hovel” on Coming Street. It was promptly extinguished, but its occupant, “a negro woman... was burnt severely.”²⁴ Once again this illustrated the belief that slaves and free blacks were all the same and were not worthy of an individual identification.

Further, the newspapers were less likely to mention the property losses of slaves and free blacks, especially if a Euro-American lost property at the same time. For example, the *Southern Patriot* on March 17, 1848 recounted a fire in Charleston that originated in a house at 173 King Street, occupied by Mr. Butler, an upholsterer. The fire then spread next door, which was “occupied by a colored woman, a pastry cook.”²⁵ The house, along with her small shed, were consumed in the blaze. These are the only details of her losses.

²³ “Fire and Loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 20, 1843. Also see: “No title,” *Carolina Gazette*, December 18, 1824; “Murder and Arson,” *Southern Patriot*, October 18, 1833.

²⁴ “Fires,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 9, 1856.

²⁵ “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, March 17, 1848. Also see: “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 16, 1835; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 3, 1835; “Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, February 19, 1840; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 15, 1848; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 11, 1852; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 14, 1854; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 3, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 13, 1860; “Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 11, 1860.

The rest of the article catalogs the effects of the fire on Mr. Butler, his business, and other Euro-Americans who were affected by the fire. The Free Black woman was, perhaps, not deemed important enough for public interest in the same way that the Euro-Americans were.

The potential threat of fires set by slaves and free blacks also weighed heavily on the minds of South Carolinians and their newspapers reflected that fact. Slaves and free black people were portrayed in very few ways in the newspapers, and none of the portrayals were flattering. The articles perpetuated common myths about slaves and free black people, as being dangerously negligent, careless, or reckless. Newspaper articles in South Carolina seemed to reflect the racially differential legal definitions of arson. Similar to how the law dealt with arson, Euro-Americans who accidentally started fires were treated as “unlucky” while slaves and free blacks were not understood as the victims of accident. Rather, many fires that involved slaves were deemed arson. For example, the *Charleston Mercury* printed this news item:

a female Servant sat up rather late in her room... [and] upon retiring, she left it in the care of a young negro girl about 12 or 13 years of age... there seems to have been no design, yet there was a degree of carelessness that amounted almost to criminality.²⁶

Similarly, the January 9, 1856 *Charleston Mercury* reported on a fire in Charleston at Mr. S. Alexander’s property. A quantity of moss was set on fire in a back building on the property. The firemen deduced that “the carelessness of a negro” had started the fire while carrying a spirit lamp into the room.²⁷

²⁶ “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 27, 1835.

²⁷ “Fires,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 9, 1856. Also see: “Caution,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 11, 1835, “Trial for Arson,” *Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1846; “A Woman of 107 Year Burned,” *Charleston Mercury*,

Conversely, a Euro-American in a similar circumstance was unlikely to receive the same description as careless, negligent or reckless. On January 7, 1856, for example, the *Charleston Mercury* reported on a fire and stated, "... a fire occurred in the residence on Mr. Wm. Carsten, on Line-st. It was fortunately extinguished before much damage was done. The fire originate [sic] from the heat of a stove [sic] in the room."²⁸ Instead, the article focused on how the fire started, and gave no ascription of blame, while the articles involving slaves and free blacks immediately assigned blame.

Revenge was imagined to be another reason why slaves and free black people would use fire against the Euro-American society. Fire was a handy tool for slaves and free blacks to use to fight back against the oppressiveness of the Euro-American attitude. Newspapers in South Carolina were not shy about announcing revenge as a motive for a fire set by a slave or free black. By announcing the intention of the fire to the general population, the newspapers were perhaps helping to warn the public to be watchful, and remind the slaveholding community that even the most trusted slave had the ability to commit such a horrid act. The *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser* ran a story

April 4, 1850; "Fire in Hamburg," *Charleston Mercury*, January 26, 1852; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 24, 1856; "Destroyed by Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 8, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 1, 1858; *Southern Patriot*, October 9, 1832; "Another attempt to Fire the City," *Southern Patriot*, December 7, 1841; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 15, 1854, "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1860; "No title," *Edgefield Advertiser*, January 16, 1840.

²⁸ "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, January 7, 1856. Also see: "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, January 22, 1825; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, March 24, 1835; "Another Attempt to set Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 16, 1835; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, July 14, 1846; "Extraordinary Case of Arson," *Southern Patriot*, August 17, 1846; "Robbery and attempt to Set Fire," *Charleston Courier*, May 30, 1848; "Fire," *Charleston Courier*, June 26, 1848; "Extensive Fire at Brooklyn," *Charleston Courier*, Sept 9, 1848; "Fire in Woodville, Miss.," *Charleston Courier*, November 17, 1848; "Incendiarism," *Charleston Mercury*, March 8, 1852; "Fire in Charlestown," *Charleston Courier*, December 12, 1843; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 4, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 26, 1856; "Fire at British Legation," *Charleston Mercury*, February 16, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 30, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 17, 1860.

on June 15, 1821 in which a young slave girl murdered her master's infant child, and was captured. However, her full intention was reported to include murdering her master and mistress and burning down the house. According to the article, she "appear[ed] to have been actuated by motives of revenge, to her master, on account of his having refused to permit her to continue to cook, for some men who were at work on the canal."²⁹

Similarly, Moses, a mulatto fellow, was imprisoned for the crime of burning a theater in Augusta, Georgia. The *Charleston Mercury*, which copied the story from the *Augusta Herald*, stated that, "... there is very little doubt that he [Moses] did it in revenge, on being discharged from the Theatre, in which he had been employed as a carpenter."³⁰ In both of these articles, the writers characterized the slave girl and Moses as dangerous. It is not clear what message readers took from the stories, but it can be suggested that the articles did reflect how Euro-Americans felt about slaves and free blacks, and their potential to use fire against their oppressors.

Articles also gave details of fires, or arson attempts, concentrating heavily on how the slave or free black was involved, perhaps to serve as a sort of warning to watch slaves and free blacks carefully. On May 30, 1838, the *Southern Patriot* wrote about the following fire, and stated, "[t]he fire must have been placed under the stairs, and when it was discovered, about six o'clock this morning, the flame was about the size of that of a candle [sic]. The slaves on the premises are now undergoing a close examination by

²⁹ "Murder!," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, June 15, 1821. Also see similar stories: *Charleston Mercury*, April 16, 1858; "No title," *Southern Patriot* April 6, 1837; "Arson," *Southern Patriot*, February 12, 1846; "Arrest of an Incendiary," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 11, 1860.

³⁰ "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 7, 1823.

Council.”³¹ Although there were no witnesses to the crime actually taking place, the slaves were immediately taken for questioning, tying fire to the potential threat that slaves posed. The July 25, 1846 *Charleston Courier* carried a story about an attempted arson in the city. A Euro-American man dropped a candle in sawdust and escaped. However, the article also urged Euro-Americans to keep their slaves on their property after dark. The article stated:

Servants should be kept on their own premises after hours, and provision made to give interlopers, white or colored, a warm reception should they be found trespassing. We will warrant that the shooting down of one or two of the criminals while in the act, or the capture of one, that he may be made an *elevated* example of, would deter these prowling midnight villains from pursuing their unlawful practices.³²

Even in cases in which an arsonist was clearly not of African descent, the lesson seemed to be partly that through vigilant watching of slaves the dangers of fire could be contained. Even though this article was about “white interlopers,” the warning was directed also to watching servants who were “colored.”

Details on how a slave or free black person started a fire were also common. The November 13, 1843 edition of the *Southern Patriot* contained a fire report in which the home of city watchman, Mr. Thomas Yates, was on fire. His son was home at the time and was badly injured by the intruder. The last person seen leaving the house was a “strange colored woman”, who came out of the house and left.³³ Similarly, an attempted arson occurred at the home of Mr. G.W. Olney, Esq. The attempted arsonist set a pile of combustible material under the house, and “a negro, who had been observed loitering

³¹ “Attempt to Set Fire,” *Southern Patriot*, May 30, 1838.

³² “The Recent Attempts to Fire the City,” *Charleston Courier*, July 25, 1846. Also see: “Incendiaries,” *Southern Patriot*, November 20, 1845.

³³ “Robbery, Fire and Death,” *Southern Patriot*, November 13, 1843.

around the premises, was seen applying the match and then [walked] quickly away.”³⁴ It can be suggested that these articles were highlighting the danger that slaves and free blacks posed to society, and that there was a risk they could use fire against Euro-American interests. Perhaps the collective message of these articles was to remind Euro-Americans of the danger.

Although slaves and free blacks were sometimes seen as a threat to public safety, they also worked for the Charleston Fire Department. As of 1815, slaves could be employed by the Fire Department to fire engines and were to be compensated twenty-five cents per day each for their services. They were also permitted to assist at fires. Then their compensation would rise to twenty-five cents an hour, though no more than forty free blacks and mulattoes were to be employed by the Fire Department. The axe-men were responsible for them and were to aid and assist in extinguishing fires. They were to be furnished with all the tools and marks of distinction in order to fulfill their duties to the Fire Department.³⁵ However, because Euro-Americans were fearful of slaves, their presence on the fire department was concerning to many. Charlestonians complained about the slaves’ “‘improper conduct... going to [and] returning from fires with public Engines by whooping, yelling, and running races’ which damaged the engines and

³⁴ “Attempt to Set Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 9, 1860. Also see: “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, April 7, 1823; “Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 13, 1824; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 8, 1824; “Attempt To Set Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 22, 1835; “Caution,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 11, 1835; “Attempt to set Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, March 30, 1848; “Daring Attempt to Set Fire,” *Charleston Daily Courier* August 2, 1860.

³⁵ An Ordinance to Authorize the Appointment of a Board of Fire Masters, to Define their Powers and Duties, and for other Purposes Therein Mentioned, Sec. IV (June 30, 1815), *A Digest of the Ordinances of The City Council of Charleston*, 65.

alarmed white Charlestonians.”³⁶ Although people were concerned, the fire department saw slaves as being serviceable to the city, especially in a time of a great fire.³⁷ In addition, when slaveholders, and society in general, needed slaves for service, they apparently could be understood as “trustworthy” in the eyes of the law.³⁸ In *Crisis of Fear*, Stephan Channing states that when slaves and free black were heralded for their efforts in helping to extinguish a fire, the newspaper articles were attempting to illustrate to northerners the idealized relationship that existed between slaveholder and their slaves.³⁹ These articles, though few, were, perhaps, an attempt to illustrate to the abolitionists how well the slaves were treated and that they would risk themselves to save their master’s property. This illustrates more paradoxes in slavery. There was a conflict that existed between concerns regarding slave resistance and the need to depend on slaves as workers. After all, slaves were used for many jobs in Charleston already. In addition it also highlights the conflict between fears of slave resistance and the public assertion that slaves were “happy” in slavery, and were compliant, and held well under control.

While slaves and free blacks were on the city payroll as trusted members of the fire department, that did not mean they were exempt from suspicion when a fire, or an attempted arson, occurred. Slaves who extinguished fires on their master’s property could still be investigated for the crime. On January 29, 1856, the *Charleston Mercury* wrote about an attempted arson at the home of Mr. Doar. A “negro man going into the

³⁶ As quoted in Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 265.

³⁷ Ferrara, “Moses Henry Nathan,” 265-266.

³⁸ McCord, ed., An Act for Raising and Enlisting such Slaves as Shall be Thought Serviceable to this Province in Time of Alarms, No. 237 (1704), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, Acts Relating to Slaves (1840), 347; McCord, ed., An Act for Enlisting such Trustworthy Slaves as Shall be Thought Serviceable to this Province in Time of Alarms, No. 278 (1708), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 349.

³⁹ Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 56.

yard” discovered the fire under the piazza, and he extinguished the fire before it did too much damage. Instead of being hailed as a hero, he was taken before the mayor for an examination, something that was extremely unlikely to happen to Euro-Americans in similar circumstances.⁴⁰ The May 25, 1835 *Charleston Mercury* applauded the efforts of the firemen for their heroic and fearless efforts while extinguishing the fire. In the process of fighting the fire a slave was seriously injured. The paper makes a point of saying that “[h]e is a colored man, the property of Colonel Bronn. Though from the lightness of his complexion, when exposed to a bright light, he was universally taken to be a white man.”⁴¹ While he may have acted heroically, it was still important for the paper to identify him as a slave, suggesting that his heroic actions were surprising because of his enslaved status.

South Carolinians were very aware of the risk that fires set by slaves and free black people posed to the state. When it was negligence on the part of Euro-Americans, the focus of the story was the loss and the victims; when slaves or free blacks were involved the theme of the story was carelessness or vengeance, not accident.

While it is impossible to fully assess how well newspaper articles truly reflected popular understandings of fire and race, there were similar themes echoed in some private correspondence that commented on fire. South Carolinians were not alone in experiencing the devastation of fire. However, some of the letters did not only refer to the dramatic events that surrounded them, they also illustrated the fear that the citizens

⁴⁰ “Attempt to Set Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 29, 1856. Also see “Attempt to set Fire,” *Charleston Courier*, March 30, 1848; “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, February 13, 1852; “Incendiarism,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 7, 1854.

⁴¹ “Fire!,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 25, 1835.

felt towards the potential dangers that slaves and free blacks posed to South Carolina. In Charleston, 1835 and 1838 were devastating years, where major conflagrations destroyed a large portion of the city. As with citizens living in other states, the retelling of the story through letters to loved ones and friends illustrated the effects that a major fire, or the potential of a major fire, had on the Euro-American population. After the Charleston fire of 1835 Erastus Hopkins sent a letter to his loved ones relating the horrors of the fire.

The fire commenced about 12 oclock [sic] last night and burned until 12 oclock [sic] this this [sic] morning and is still brightly burning. Our house was among the first that were leveled to the ground but thanks be to God we the inhabitants are all safe, and now quite distributed. I should have said houseless and not homeless for our friends have been so very kind to have had so many pressing invitations.⁴²

Likewise, in a letter from Josiah Bailey to Mr. N. Poe, Esq, Mr. Bailey related the events of the major conflagration that struck Charleston in April of 1838. His letter concentrated on the combustible nature of the wooden structures that were destroyed, and related the story of the fire in the same dramatic tone that was evident in copied fire newspaper articles from elsewhere in the United States. It reads, in part:

With feelings so harrowed that my pen almost drops from my hand, I hasten to inform you of a conflagration that for its extent, its unutterable horrors and misfortune has no parallel in this country. A long period of drought producing a scarcity of water and much combustible material for the devouring element gave it an intensity, that it spread over near one-third of our city with a rapidity unequalled to any thing I ever witnessed.⁴³

⁴² Erastus Hopkins, Erastus Hopkins correspondence, 1834-1838, (1289.00) South Carolina Historical Society.

⁴³ Josiah Bailey, ca. 1804-1838, Letter: to Neilson Poe, 1838 April 28, (43/386) South Carolina Historical Society. Also see Erastus Hopkins, Erastus Hopkins correspondence, 1834-1838, (1289.00) South Carolina Historical Society; Daniel Cannon Webb, 1782-1850, Daniel Cannon Webb plantation journals, 1817-1850, (1154.00) South Carolina Historical Society; Samuel Wilson, 1791-1861, Samuel Wilson journal, 1854, (43/298) South Carolina Historical Society; Louisa Lord, d. 1884, Louisa Lord correspondence, 1850-1862, (1065.00) South Carolina Historical Society; Henry Workman Conner, 1797-1861, Travel diary, 1838, (1256.02.01.02) South Carolina Historical Society.

These letters illustrate the distress that a fire would cause any individual in any city. They could have been describing a fire that happened anywhere. In addition, to better protect themselves and their property, some Euro-American citizens in Aiken, South Carolina, petitioned the House of Representatives of South Carolina to levy higher taxes.

The citizens of Aiken were petitioning for taxes on real estate, and vehicles so that:

the council may have it in their power to improve the town by digging wells... and provide for the better security of property for the citizens by organizing a fire department, purchasing a fire engine and other apparatus necessary for extinguishing fires... to render the town more secure.⁴⁴

However, as with the newspaper articles, there was another layer to some of the letters that pointed straight to the danger that slaves and free blacks were to the Euro-American population and their property.

The Vesey Conspiracy was an alarming event for many Charlestonians. Burning Charleston was imbedded as part of the insurrection plot. South Carolina newspapers carried extensive coverage of the trials of Vesey and his followers, which possibly made the whole conspiracy more alarming to Euro-Americans.⁴⁵ John Potter wrote frequent letters to Langdon Cheves that gave updates on the trials of the various slaves and free

⁴⁴ *Town council of Aiken, petition for increased power in collecting fines and levying taxes, also describing a recent fire*, (S165015/0079/1839) South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

⁴⁵ "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 3, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 10, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 12, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 13, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 19, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 23, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 26, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 27, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 29, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 31, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 3, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 9, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 19, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 20, 1822; "No title," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, August 21, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, September 18, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, September 24, 1822.

blacks who were implicated. In his letter of July 20, 1822, Mr. Potter informed Mr.

Cheves of the chaos Vesey and his conspirators were attempting to achieve. He wrote:

all the arms on the Neck were deposited in one place – to which a negro had access and was to deliver the key – 700 stand of muskets would also [-----?] been in their power – & there was enough powder ready at hand – and when the guard was overpowered – and arsenal taken, the torch was to give the signal of murder and blood – all those who were to go out on the cry of fire, which was to be multiplied, would meet their fate.⁴⁶

Mr. Potter was confident that none of his slaves were involved in the plot, but at the same time, he was sure that if the plot would have been successful that his slaves would have joined.⁴⁷

Likewise, Mary L. Beach extensively wrote to Elizabeth Gilchrist about the Vesey conspiracy, and referenced the aspect of fire in the plot as well. On July 25, 1822 she wrote, “I told Mary I believed that Satan in a more than common manner I believed was a work in our community at this time in setting these incendiaries the Negroes to work”⁴⁸ Later in the same letter she also displayed fears that her own slaves might be implicated in the plot. Mrs. Beach stated, “[Mr. Holinsby] paid me a visit that created some uneasiness about my people-- & he has some fears about Q_____ being suspected.”⁴⁹ As fire was a central feature of the supposed insurrection plot, Euro-Charlestonians were responding to newspapers articles and the concerns rose in them, and then echoed those concerns to other people. The Vesey Conspiracy prompted citizens of Charleston to send

⁴⁶ Langdon Cheves, 1776-1857, “Personal and business papers, 1777-1861,” (1166.01.01) South Carolina Historical Society.

⁴⁷ Cheves, “Personal and business papers.”

⁴⁸ Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach, 1770-1851, “Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach papers, 1822-1890,” (43/225) South Carolina Historical Society.

⁴⁹ Beach, “Mary Lamboll Thomas Beach papers.”

a petition to the president of the state senate asking for passage of laws to further regulate the actions of slaves and free blacks to provide defensive positions in anticipation of another slave insurrection. In the petition the citizens identify six ways laws could be strengthened to help guard against another insurrection. These suggestions included: free blacks living in South Carolina, who are not natives, should be forced out of the state; slaves and free blacks returning to South Carolina from non-slaveholding state should be denied entry, reducing the number of male slaves; the death penalty should be enacted for a Euro-American who is found to assist slaves and free blacks in rebellion; greater fortification for the city should be built; and finally, that the legislature should appropriate the land used for tobacco inspection for the projected citadel. The letters suggested that Euro-Americans were concerned not only about rebellions, but how to best safe guard the State from future attempts. The newspapers reported on the Vesey Conspiracy, and the details of the supposed plot were told to the people. Personal letters recount many details of the trials; however, fire was the one feature of the plot that was mentioned in both sets of letters.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Petition asking for the passage of laws to further regulate the actions, ect of slaves and free persons to provide defensive positions in anticipation of another slave insurrection, and matters relating to the fire proof building, (S165015/02059/ND) South Carolina Department of Archives and History; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 3, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 10, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 12, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 13, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 19, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 23, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 26, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 27, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 29, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, July 31, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 3, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 9, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 10, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 19, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, August 20, 1822; "No title," *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, August 21, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, September 18, 1822; "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, September 24, 1822; *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of this City*.

There was no clear indication of how the devastating fires that leveled large portions of Charleston in 1835 and 1838 started or who was responsible. In the papers of John Wroughton Mitchell, Mitchell wrote a letter to his cousin and discussed the state of life in Charleston. In the letter, his language reflected the same tone as the newspaper articles about fires in South Carolina where slaves and free blacks were involved. In the letter, Mitchell gave the details of the fire and related that:

Our honorable mayor with a salary of four thousand dollars is utterly unfit to preside over a slaveholding city... Since his administration [was elected] negroes and mulatoes [sic] [are] riding in carriages dressed in the height of finery... How is the matter now, Charleston at this moment [is] under military patrol [sic]. Oh my God, how easily could all this distress have been [avoided].⁵¹

Euro-Americans like John Wroughton Mitchell evidently believed that the slaves and free blacks might have had something to do with the start of these fires, in spite of no direct evidence to support this conclusion. In addition, he believed that the mayor was not doing enough to control these populations. His language illustrated both fear and frustration. Through his tone, it is discernable that Mitchell was fearful of what could happen if the slave and free blacks were not kept in line.

Memoirs of southern Euro-Americans also illustrated the fear that South Carolinians felt towards slaves and free blacks. In *Memorials of a Southern Planter* Susan Dabney Smedes remembered the carelessness of slaves and the potential harm they could create. She wrote:

When the fields were burned, in preparation for another crop, the fire, unless well managed, sometimes did mischief. Not infrequently, too, the negroes in their coon-

⁵¹ John Wroughton Mitchell, 1796-1878, *Papers* [microform] 1817-1865 (Chapel Hill: Photographic Services, University of North Carolina Library, 1990) (45-340) South Carolina Historical Society.

hunts left their half-extinguished torches about, with no thought of the dangerous proximity of valuable property.⁵²

This memoir illustrated the damage a slave could quickly achieve through fire. However, it also illustrated the mindset of the Euro-American and how slaves were careless, and in need of constant supervision.

The letters of Charlestonians to their families, friends, and government, illustrated the fear of fire that these people lived with, which was also echoed in the newspaper articles. In some instances, their language would have been similar to people writing letters in other cities and towns in the United States. However, there was something deeper than that in their letters. As with the newspaper articles regarding fire, slaves and free blacks were seen as a constant threat who needed to be maintained and controlled, and illustrated the influence that slaves had on the society. The language in their letters, once again, highlighted why in some ways Charleston and South Carolina were just like other states, and how, at the same time, they were unique.

While newspapers and personal papers reflected the fear that Euro-Americans had towards slaves and free blacks, insurance companies also interpreted daily life in South Carolina as being risky and also reflected the fear that slaves and free blacks could use fire to destroy property. Insurance company employees believed that slavery posed a particular risk to property, and many companies actually refused to insure property belonging to slaveholders. For example, the American Fire Insurance Company of

⁵² Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore: Cushings & Bailey, 1887), 115. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/smedes/smedes.html> (31 May 2009).

Philadelphia refused to insure properties in South Carolina and other slave states.⁵³ Even though insurance companies were wary of insuring slaveholders' property, policies were still available to South Carolinians. However, the policies explicitly stated when the policy becomes null and void. Mr. T.O. Elliott bought an insurance policy from Charleston Insurance and Trust Company on his property for \$52.50. Under the policy his three-story wooden dwelling on Savage Street was insured for \$3500 on April 23, 1844 against fire. Written in two places under the terms and conditions of the policy it states, "COMPANY shall not be liable to make good any loss or damage by fire, which may happen or take place by means of any invasion, insurrection, riot, or civil commotion, or of any military or usurped power". The second reference reads much the same as the first, except that "This Company will be liable for losses on property burnt by lightning, but not for any loss or damage by fire, happening by means of any invasion, insurrection, riot, or civil commotion, or of any military or usurped power". It continued to state that "[a]ny loss by fire must be accompanied by an oath that the fire was not set by the insured, or other evil practices. Money will not be paid until this has been received."⁵⁴ By specifically stating that fires as the result of insurrections were not covered, insurance companies were identifying slaves and free blacks as a potential threat

⁵³ Aptheker, *American Negro*, 144.

⁵⁴ Charleston Insurance and Trust Co. Fire insurance policy, 1844 April 19, (43/0974) South Carolina Historical Society. See also: Joel Roberts Poinsett, 1779-1851. Insurance policy, 1823, (33/116-02) South Carolina Historical Society [with identical terms and conditions]; and William S. Elliott, William S. Elliott fire insurance policy, 1859 May 11, (43/644) South Carolina Historical Society [with identical terms and conditions]; Jager family. Jager family papers, 1830-1929. (1235.00) South Carolina Historical Society [with identical terms and conditions]; Angel, Justiss W. J.W. Angel fire insurance policy, 1860. (43/643) South Carolina Historical Society [with identical terms and conditions].

to set fire to property and were, perhaps, protecting themselves from all the various ways slaves and free blacks could rebel against the Euro-Americans and their property.

While any fire as a result of an insurrection immediately made a fire insurance policy in South Carolina null and void, the wording in policies from other states illustrated that slavery in South Carolina presented a particular concern. As Massachusetts was not a slave state, it did not have the same fears regarding slaves and free blacks rebelling against the institution through fire. Similar to the South Carolina policies, Massachusetts's policies also had certain conditions that made its fire insurance policies null and void. However, "insurrection" was not mentioned in Massachusetts's policies. John Boott, William Lyman and Robert Ralston took out a fire insurance policy on December 5, 1828 to cover buildings "[at] their foundry situated on the southerly branch of the mill dam at Gravelly Point."⁵⁵ The buildings were insured for \$20,000, and the premiums were one hundred and fifty dollars. The policy states, "\$20000. against all loss or damage to the same by Fire, originating in any cause, except Invasion, Foreign Enemies, Civil Commotion, Riots, or any military or usurped power whatsoever..."⁵⁶

In the South Carolina fire insurance policies, the term insurrection must have referred to the potential actions of slaves, because civil commotion suggests an action by citizens,

⁵⁵ Fire insurance policy, December 5, 1828 (DC1615), The Bostonian Society.

⁵⁶ Fire insurance policy, December 5, 1828 (DC1615), The Bostonian Society. Fire insurance policy, May 28, 1840 (DC1618), The Bostonian Society; Fire insurance policy, September 27, 1854 (DC1616), The Bostonian Society. Both of these fire insurance policies also have the same exceptions, "...against all loss or damage to the same by Fire, originating in any cause, except Invasion, Foreign Enemies, Civil Commotions, Riots, or any military or usurped power whatsoever..." The three policies are also from different insurance companies. Fire insurance policy, December 5, 1828 and Fire insurance policy, May 28, 1840 are from the Merchants Insurance Company, and the third, Fire insurance policy, September 27, 1854 is from the Eliot Fire Insurance Company.

which slaves were not.⁵⁷ In Boston, the term insurrection does not appear, because there were no slaves in the population. In South Carolina it does appear, because there was a specific concern about slaves as fire igniters, distinct and in addition to all the other groups that were also seen as fire dangers.

Moreover, when reading through the survey of South Carolina newspapers it was more common for the stories copied from elsewhere in the United States to mention the potential loss, in dollars, and what, if any, insurance was held against the damaged or destroyed property. The *Charleston Mercury* reprinted a fire story from the *Bay State Democrat* on March 31, 1843. The article recounted the details of the fire, and stated that, “[t]he whole damage it is said, will amount to \$40,000... The following are the amounts of insurance effected at several offices – At the Merchants \$8,500; Firemen’s \$7,500; Suffolk \$3,500.”⁵⁸ There were some fire reports in the South Carolina

⁵⁷ McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves, No. 586 (1735), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 385; McCord, ed., An Act for the Better Security of this Province Against the Insurrections and Other Wicked Attempts of Negroes and other Slaves; and for Reviving and Continuing and Act of the General Assembly of this Province, Entitled “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province”, No. 702 (1743), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 417; McCord, ed., An Act to Prevent the Inveigling, Stealing and Carrying Away Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province; and to Prevent the Carrying Away of Schooners or Pettiaugars [sic]; and also, for Repealing so much of an Act Entitled “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province,” as Relates to the Time Within Which Offenders That are Apprehended Shall be Tried; and Giving the Justices and Freeholders a Power to Postpone the Trial of such Offenders, No. 822 (1754), *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 426. All of the following statutes refer to slaves and free blacks as being “generally of a barbarous and savage nature, and unfit to be governed by the laws, customs and usages of England” or a statement close to that. This general attitude of slaves being barbarians may be the reason why the term “insurrection” was used in fire insurance policies, to separate them from general civil commotions.

⁵⁸ “Fire and a serious accident,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 31, 1843. Also see: “Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, November 28, 1825; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 8, 1835; “Another Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 13, 1835; “Fire in Schogticode,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 27, 1835; “Fire and Dreadful loss of Life,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 20, 1835; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 16, 1835; “The Fire on Saturday Morning,” *Charleston Mercury*, June 29, 1835; “Destructive Fire at Niblo’s,” *Charleston Mercury*, September 25, 1835; “Destructive Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 4, 1843; “Disastrous Fire,” *Charleston Mercury*, January 30, 1843; “Great Fire at

newspapers that identified loss and insurance; however, it was not as common. For example, the April 16, 1840 edition of the *Southern Patriot* contained a fire story that did identify loss and insurance, along with the details of the victims and the fire, that read:

The loss of Messrs. Butler & Jones, in stock is about \$9,000 – Insurance \$10,000
 Lambert & Brothers, loss \$18,000 – Insurance \$10,000
 O.M. Roberts 7 Co., loss \$7,000 – Insurance \$5,000
 Mr. Oats' loss is trifling – Insurance \$2000.⁵⁹

Worcester," *Charleston Mercury*, March 13, 1843; "Great Fire at Utica," *Charleston Mercury*, April 11, 1843, "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 7, 1843; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, June 10, 1843; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, September 7, 1843; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, May 31, 1848; "Fire in Brooklyn," *Charleston Courier*, August 28, 1848; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, September 6, 1848; "Most Disastrous Fire in Brooklyn," *Charleston Courier*, September 15, 1848; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1848; "Fire," *Charleston Courier*, December 6, 1848; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, March 22, 1850; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 22, 1850; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, September 9, 1850, "Gin Manufactory Burnt," *Charleston Mercury*, September 25, 1850; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, March 25, 1852; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, April 13, 1852; "Fire in Petersburg, Va.," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 28, 1852; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 31, 1854; "Destructive Fires," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 14, 1854 (supplement 2); "Disastrous Fire in Americus, Ga.," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 22, 1854; "St. Paul's Episcopal Church at Baltimore Burned," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 2, 1854; "Destructive Fire at Louisville," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 11, 1854; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 14, 1854; "Destructive Fire at New Orleans," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 7, 1854; "The Fire at New Orleans," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 8, 1854; "The Fire at Troy," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 29, 1854; "Destructive Fire at Georgetown," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 30, 1854; "Destructive Fire at Pittsburg," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 6, 1854; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 2, 1854; "Fire in the Lower Cotton Press," *Charleston Mercury*, March 13, 1854; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 14, 1856; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 8, 1858; "Large Fire in Maiden Lane and Liberty-Street," *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 22, 1858; "Destructive Fire at Memphis," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 9, 1859; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 12, 1859; "Destructive Conflagrations," *Charleston Daily Courier*, September 19, 1859; "More Fires in Texas," *Charleston Daily Courier*, August 21, 1860; "Large Amount of Property Consumed," *Charleston Daily Courier*, September 26, 1860.

⁵⁹ "Destructive Conflagration," *Southern Patriot*, April 16, 1840. Also see: "No title," *Charleston Mercury*, April 18, 1823; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, March 18, 1835; "The Conflagration," *Charleston Mercury*, June 8, 1835; "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, October 2, 1835; "Fires," *Southern Patriot*, May 15, 1840; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, March 4, 1843; "Fire," *Charleston Courier*, December 7, 1846; "Another [sic] Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 29, 1850; "The Fire of Yesterday," *Charleston Mercury*, May 30, 1850; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, August 1, 1850; "Fire in Aiken – Mansion Burnt," *Charleston Mercury*, October 1, 1850; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, November 19, 1850; "No title," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 16, 1854; "Destructive Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 19, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 4, 1854; "Fire in Savannah," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 6, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 3, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, January 7, 1856; "The Fire in Meeting-Street," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 1, 1854; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 4, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 12, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Mercury*, May 25, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 1, 1858; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1859; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, January 30, 1860; "St. Philip-Street Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 14, 1860; "Fire – Destruction

Further, in fire articles that involved slaves or free blacks, insurance was rarely mentioned.⁶⁰ As insurance policies were expensive, were null and void in many instances, and some northern insurance companies refused to insure property in South Carolina, most citizens probably did not carry insurance on their property, especially if they were slaveholders. The insurance companies were not going to risk the potential threat that slaves and free blacks posed. The language in the insurance policies and what was not written in many South Carolina fire newspaper reports suggests that slaveholding was a dangerous business, and the risk of fire was too great to insure property in a city and a state where slaves and free blacks outnumbered the Euro-American population. Not only were citizens fearful but insurance companies also reflected a fear of their own.

The language of life in Charleston reflected the fear of fire that engulfed many Euro-Americans, and also how they interpreted the world around them. In some ways, South Carolinians' fears were similar to the fears that Euro-Americans felt in other cities. However, South Carolina also had a large slave and free black population that set them apart from both non-slave and other slave states, and those slaves influenced the rhythms of life in Charleston and South Carolina as a whole. Fears regarding fire had to incorporate the potential damage that slaves and free blacks could inflict with fire. The language that was used in newspaper articles, personal correspondence and insurance policies reflects that they were very aware of the risk that slaves and free blacks posed to

of Rikersville Flour Mills," *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 5, 1860; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 25, 1860,

⁶⁰ The amount of insurance or estimates loss was only mentioned in a few articles that involved free blacks. In most those few articles, the insurance and loss estimates related back to a Euro-American who owned the building or also lost property. See "Fire," *Southern Patriot*, March 17, 1848; "Fire and Loss of Life," *Charleston Mercury*, January 20, 1843; "Fire in Columbia," *Charleston Courier*, November 1, 1848; "Fire," *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 14, 1854.

the communities. Even though this threat existed, Euro-South Carolinians were wary to change or discard the slave system. As with the laws they enacted, they were in a constant state of reaction – the push and pull that existed between the laws and their hesitation to abandon slavery. Both slaveholders and non-slaveholders knew the dangers of the system, but reaped many benefits from it as well, and even though they were fearful, slavery remained ingrained in South Carolina until the Civil War.

Conclusion

There was no one, definitive, slave experience in the American South. Both urban and rural slavery produced opportunities for slave resistance and concerns regarding slave control that created particular atmospheres in which Charleston and South Carolina operated. Slave control in Charleston was distinctive and challenging, as slaves had opportunities, in both work and community building that were not available to most rural slaves, who were more closely regulated under the gang system. Urban slaves were constantly out and about in Charleston carrying on business for their masters. As slaves were involved in many different jobs, were hired out by their masters, hired out their own time, and/or lived away from their masters, an extensive urban system of control had to be developed to deal with the operation of slavery in Charleston. With the development of the badge system, it became easier for Euro-Charlestonians, slave patrollers, constables, and other forms of law enforcement quickly to identify a slave who had the right to be roaming Charleston unattended. As Frederick Douglass wrote, however, “[a] city slave is almost a free citizen.”¹ Even with the badge system, slavery in Charleston was hard to control since slaves were often away from their masters. It became every Euro-Charlestonian’s duty to watch over the slave population.

Slavery in the hinterlands of Charleston was similar in some aspects to the system of slavery that developed in the city. The task system’s predominance in the lowcountry gave rural slaves free time as well. Once their jobs had been completed for the day,

¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 147. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html> (5 July 2009).

slaves could turn their attention to their own gardens, which created a slaves' economy. This also produced unsupervised activities, which could lead to more resistance and rebellions. In addition, many rural slaves also had access to the city and contact with slaves living in Charleston, which meant that the rural slaves could also be involved in resistance in the city. Even though they required passes to leave their masters' property, many slaves had the opportunity to sell the provisions they grew in markets in and around Charleston. This also gave slaves the chance to earn money, which frightened slaveholders, as they tried to find ways of becoming their slaves' only retail outlet. Slaves with money would be able to purchase goods, which gave them a certain amount of power.

Euro-South Carolinians were constantly trying to find ways to control slaves. Laws were developed to attempt to control them and were refined over time. To a certain extent, the updating of the laws was a response to specific events that sparked a heightened sense of fear in South Carolina such as the Stono Rebellion, the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution and the Vesey Conspiracy. Slaves' actions produced fear in Euro-South Carolinians that in turn prompted stricter slave codes. However, even though Euro-South Carolinians were fearful, they sometimes chose to blatantly disregard laws that were designed to keep them safe – for example, allowing slaves to hire themselves out, to live away from the masters' homes, to learn to read and write, and to congregate in large numbers. Slaveholders wanted the right to use their slaves in the way they saw fit, though their choices sometimes jeopardized security. This created a tension between security and personal freedoms.

Restrictions were placed against Euro-South Carolinians that hampered their own freedoms in order to try to secure the city against fire. Laws relating to fire prevention became more specific and were refined over time. City and state laws specifically prohibited wooden buildings, improper storage of combustible materials, and the proper handling of candles and lanterns in hopes of reducing the risk of fire. In this, Charleston was like other American cities, but was somewhat more restrictive in legislating fire prevention. Although these laws were designed to keep Charlestonians safe, many may have viewed them as an infringement on their freedoms. There is evidence that even though people were afraid of fire, they sometimes disregarded the fire codes when it suited them.

While there is little direct evidence that fears about slaves prompted the refining of laws related to fire, it stands to reason that the presence of so many slaves in such a small and hard-to-regulate space would be a motivating factor. The differential treatment in the arson laws suggests that the people who wrote them imagined that slaves and free blacks never set a fire by accident and there was always a dangerous motive behind their actions. Meanwhile, Euro-South Carolinians who accidentally set fires were rarely charged with a crime. South Carolina newspapers illustrated a concern about slaves, fire and potential destruction, which reiterated the differential treatment under the law.

Popular media in South Carolina both expressed Euro-South Carolinians' concerns and fears, and Euro-South Carolinians' concerns and fears were shaped by the newspapers. It is hard to know what impact the newspapers had on the popular ideas of Euro-South Carolinians. However, an additional examination of personal

correspondence, diaries and fire insurance policies, further highlights the mindset of Euro-South Carolinians and suggests a strong link between their fears about fire and slaves, which echoed themes common in the newspapers. Some of the sources reflected the similar mindset that existed between South Carolinians and Americans living in other states. However, those same sources also echoed the strong relationship that existed in antebellum South Carolina between the laws, fire codes, slavery and restrictions on freedoms, which signals a different state of mind and set of concerns. By interpreting the themes found in the newspaper articles relating to fire, historians are provided with a context for reading the constantly evolving fire codes. In addition, historians can also discern Euro-South Carolinians fear of slave rebellions and general slave carelessness as a motive for the frequent modifications in order to prevent fires. Since laws were adjusted based on Euro-Americans' fears, it can be suggested that the concerns expressed in the newspapers and private correspondence reflected changes in the laws. As concerns regarding public safety shifted, so too did the laws – all in the name of hopefully decreasing the threat of slaves setting fires that destroyed property. This never-ending circle of cause and effect was directly related to the influence that slaves had over the South Carolina society.

Pro-slavery writings that southerners created claimed that their society was stable and that slaves were passive and under the control of their masters. They also expressed the belief that the northerners were going to become victims of lower-class mob violence, and that maintaining a small government was important for the southern freedoms. But to look at the city of Charleston, and in particular its fire control, suggestions can be

made that none of the things Charlestonians prided themselves on were necessarily true. South Carolinians were dealing with their own “mob” in the slaves, they were never truly in control of slaves, their freedoms were being restricted by the ever changing laws meant to render their society “safe,” and it took an activist government to create, revise and implement such laws.

Through this thesis, slaves’ influence on this society emerges in a different, subtle light – slaves helped shaped the city of Charleston in ways that they themselves did not necessarily always intend. Euro-South Carolinians were not only constantly reshaping laws to deal with various slave threats, it can be suggested that slaves were also helping to create and had influence over antebellum Charleston and South Carolina by making them places where fear was pervasive and by helping, therefore, to shape the very construction of the city itself. This thesis pushes the resistance historiography to assert that the threat of slave violence in itself can be viewed as slave resistance. Slaves had influence and power in society because of their large population, but also because their actions were causing Euro-South Carolinians to change their own lives.

Slaves like Tom, who was executed for setting his master’s gin house on fire, and Michal who was pardoned for arson but banished from the state, and the countless anonymous slaves and free blacks who committed arson, or who were convicted of arson, paid a high price in the name of trying to make South Carolina and Charleston as safe for Euro-Americans as possible, and to try to relieve Euro-South Carolinians of their pyrophobia.

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