Dismantling the Master's House: How Freedom Seekers Claimed and Shaped a Landscape of Liberation during the U.S. Civil War

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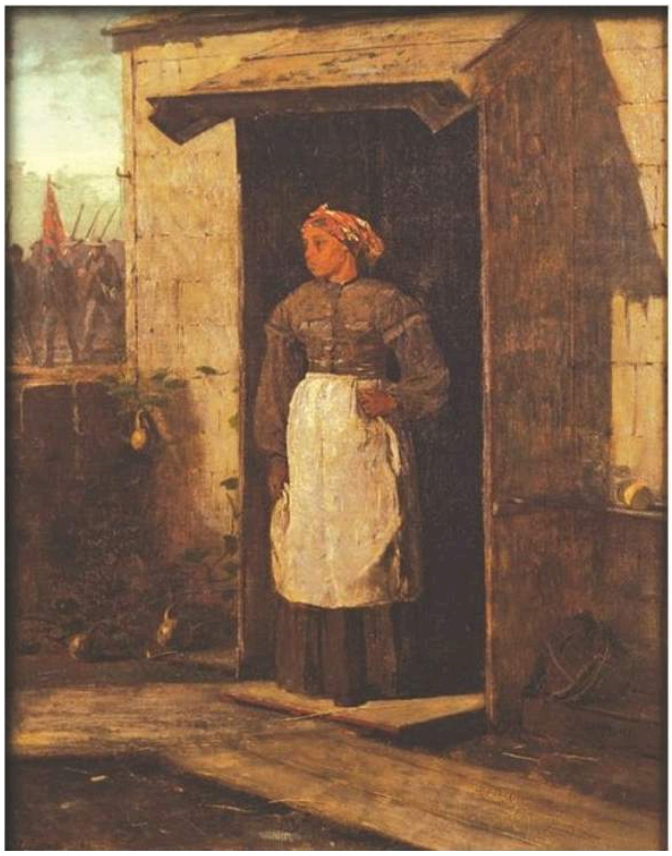 [1]

They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat...my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.
– Isaiah 65:21-22[2]

Every day shows how many mansions there are in this hell.
– Harriet Martineau, 1838[3]

[1] Winslow Homer, Near Andersonville, 1865–66, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/850799
[2] Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), Isa. 65:21-22.
[3] Harriet Martineau and Ebook Central - Academic Complete, Retrospect of Western Travel, new ed. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000)

Introduction: “It ought to be burned”

Louisa wanted the Jones’s house to burn. She said so. In the years leading up to the completion of her enslaver’s “ornate new mansion” in 1864, Louisa had taken note of the violence meted out to bring the house into being. Louisa had seen the toil and labor of her fellow bondsmen and women as they suffered under the increased application of the lash. She had seen some of them beaten nearly to death. She was keenly aware that this manifestation of her enslaver’s wealth was tainted by the blood of human beings. She was conscious that each dollar required to raise this princely dwelling had been extracted, by force, from Black bodies. And all for what? For peanuts. Peanuts, corn, and potatoes: all cultivated in abundance here in addition to the cotton grown on Jones’ other plantation elsewhere in Burke County, Georgia.[4]

In the antebellum era, Burke County was one of the state’s top producers of both food crops (corn and sweet potatoes) and the most important cash crop of the period, cotton.[5] This productivity and wealth was largely generated by the enslaved population who made up more than seventy percent of the county’s inhabitants.[6] Joseph B. Jones, a member of Georgia’s Confederate legislature, was an ambitious man from a wealthy background. Like other landowners in his family, he was accustomed to displaying his prosperity partly in the number of humans he held in bondage, and partly in the dwellings he could afford by his profits from chattel slavery.[7] Jones’s initial residence was located near Waynesboro, the seat of Burke County. His desire to establish a country estate roughly twenty miles south of Waynesboro was

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[4] Henry Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman: Passages from the Letters and Campaign Diaries of Henry Hitchcock*, ed. M.A. Dewolfe Howe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1927), 121-125.
[5] *Burke County Background*. Georgia Southern University Libraries, accessed April 12, 2024, https://georgiasouthern.libguides.com/c.php?g=1211169&p=8982567 .
[6] Ibid.
[7] Hitchcock, *Marching With Sherman*; Philip Herrington, "Forgotten Plantation Architecture of Burke County, Georgia" (master's thesis, University of Georgia, 2003), https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/herrington_philip_m_200308_mhp.pdf..; J.B. Jones’ Father was a wealthy enslaver and landowner also living in Burke County who owned another plantation house and estate known as Birdsville.

likely motivated by both social and economic concerns. Historian James Oakes argues that "the zealous pursuit of wealth" through expansion of property in land and slaves was characteristic of most antebellum planters like Jones.[8] Scholar Jon Vlach adds that the wealthiest of the 19th century planter class in states like Georgia held "manorial aspirations" to replicate the kinds of aristocratic dwellings "as impressive as any back in old Virginia."[9]

The brand new Jones house was the embodiment of these aspirations. Built from the rich abundance of pine in the surrounding woods, the three-story, double framed exterior boasted "wide piazzas" on the front, left, and right sides of the house and a delicate glass cupola on the roof.[10] Painted white with green shutters on the numerous exterior windows, the outside of the house was merely an overture to the main theme which unfolded in the interior of the home. Sixteen spacious rooms flanked broad halls and each floor, accessed by winding staircases, lofted in high ceilings. The frescoed arches, intricate woodwork, and decorative molding that adorned the dining room, parlors, and bedrooms, were all surpassed by what was considered the greatest treasure of the home: the Jones' library filled with hundreds of volumes of books, some published before the Revolutionary War. To Jones' peers, it was an awe-inspiring and magnificent dwelling.[11] But to Louisa it must have looked very different. Southern plantations like Jones's were constructed for both practical and symbolic reasons. Architectural historian Dell Upton argues that slaveholders built grand homes to display their wealth and exert control over enslaved people: "the great planter intended that his landscape would be hierarchical,

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[8] James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 64

[9] John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 5.

[10] "A Great Old Landmark Gone," *The True Citizen* (Waynesboro, GA), May 28, 1879, Digital Library of Georgia: Georgia Historic Newspapers.<https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn89053289/1901-11-23/ed-1/seq-4/>

[11] Ibid.

leading to himself at the center."[12] Increasingly throughout the 18th and early 19th century, large slaveholders crafted the built environment of their estates to centralize and amplify their power, maintain surveillance of the enslaved population, reinforce social hierarchies amongst all the individuals on the plantation, and hide slavery's unsavory and increasingly controversial role in sustaining their wealth. For Louisa, the elaborate and costly details incorporated in the Jones's mansion may have cemented the connection in her mind between the exquisite house enjoyed by the Jones family and the horrors inflicted on enslaved bodies to produce it. To add insult to injury, Louisa was required to spend most of her days laboring inside this haunted dwelling. Among her other duties, Lousia cared for the children who expected to one day take ownership of this house and of Louisa herself.[13] In the waning days of Autumn 1864 — more than three years into the Civil War — the construction of the Jones's house was finally complete. Soon after, the mansion, so conspicuously built for impressing and entertaining other elite families of the South, was visited by a storm of uninvited guests whose arrival was a source of inspiration for Louisa and a source of trepidation for the Jones family.

In December 1864, William Tecumseh Sherman and his 60,000 man army were on the march through Jones's home state. Though not a soldier himself, Jones was heard swearing that he "would wade in blood knee-deep" before allowing the "Yankees" to despoil his home.[14] Yet, when Sherman's army approached Burke County, Jones fled to Savannah. "The man owning the house, one J. B. Jones, had absconded taking nearly all of his furniture but leaving his wife &

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[12] Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 1985): 58-59.

[13] Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman,* 121. Louisa states that she had been the wetnurse for at least one of the Jones Children who she identifies as "Hattie", possibly a nickname for the "Henrietta Jones" identified on the 1860 Census Record in the Jones household. Henrietta Jones would have been around 12 years old at the time of Sherman's occupation which indicates that Louisa also gave birth around 1852.

[14] Hitchcock, *Marching With Sherman,*123; In his thesis on plantation architecture in Burke County, Georgia, Philip Herrington notes that at least three architects from Northern states were living in Burke County in 1860, brothers John and William Trowbridge originally of Massachusetts and Frank Foster originally of New York. One or more of these three could have been commissioned to work on the Jones house.

children" recorded one of Sherman's officers.[15] Prioritizing his own life and prized furnishings, Jones left Louisa behind to care for his bed-ridden wife and numerous children.[16] The absence of the family patriarch, the illness of Mrs. Jones, and the splendor of the Jones house may have inclined Sherman toward mercy. Perhaps there was even an element of pride by association, as more than one soldier noted in their recollections of the occupation that the Jones's mansion had been designed by "yankee" architects.[17] Rather than destroying the house, as the army had done to some of the neighboring estates, Sherman chose only to make the dwelling his headquarters.

Was Louisa disappointed? Whether totally true or somewhat exaggerated, Louisa, the other enslaved people, and the remaining members of the Jones family, had surely heard stories of a vengeful Union army grasping muskets in one hand and wielding torches in the other, waging war on both the battlefield and the homefront. Sherman in particular had become infamous for his scorched-earth tactics. Yet, on this occasion, the army seemed ready to move on after doing no more than burning the Jones's barn, an act that another of Sherman's officers, Henry Hitchcock, decried as unsanctioned. Hitchcock was preoccupied with the reputation of the army and, in conversation with Lousia, said he was certain that the Jones family "would abuse us as much as if we *had* burned the house." "It *ought* to be burned," Louisa retorted. "Why?" Hitchcock inquired, surprised at the bitterness in Louisa's voice given how "she had been showing much affection for the [Jones] children and no love for [the army]." "Cause there has been so much devilment here…whipping niggers most to death to make 'em work to pay for it," Louisa explained.[18]

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[15] Charles J. Brockman, "THE JOHN VAN DUSER DIARY OF SHERMAN'S MARCH FROM ATLANTA TO HILTON HEAD," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1969): 220–40, accessed on JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40579129.
[16] Hitchcock, *Marching With Sherman*. There are 12 children listed as part of the Jones's household on the 1860 census. "1860 U.S. Federal Census," database, Ancestry.com (http://www.ancestry.com : accessed 30 November 2023) search for Sarah Thompson; Home in 1860: District 73, Burke, Georgia, USA
[17] Hitchcock, *Marching With Sherman,* 123
[18] Ibid; "A Great Old Landmark Gone" *The True Citizen*.

Without this record of Louisa's declaration, Hitchcock and other Union soldiers' accounts of the Jones's house highlight only its aesthetic qualities as "a very aristocratic mansion -- beautiful in every sense of the term."[19] Joseph Jones and the unknown yet still referenced northern architects are given credit, respectively, for financing and constructing the house. Louisa insisted that the Black labor ultimately responsible for the creation of the house also be acknowledged. She foregrounded what houses of this magnificence and scale were deliberately designed to conceal: their total dependance on forced Black labor.[20]

Hitchcock later discovered that Louisa wasn't just holding out hope for the destruction of the embattled dwelling; she was planning an escape. Louisa had been in conversation with one of the army's Black attendants, Sam, inquiring what the treatment was like for Black people with the Union army. Hitchcock instructed Sam to dissuade Louisa from the idea of joining them, noting that they "didn't want women to come, and have all along tried…to prevent them."[21] As historian Elizabeth Varon notes, "when it came to the liberation of slaves, Sherman was at best a grudging deliverer."[22] Thus, Louisa's efforts to escape the Jones's house and the Jones's ownership were thwarted by her would-be liberators. She likely remained in that house until the end of the war and possibly even after, even though what she really wanted was to see it burn and to leave it behind.

Perhaps the sympathetic reader is equally disappointed that the house remained standing. Histories of slavery and enslaved peoples' resistance to it often favor those we perceive to be the most bold. But, as historian Stephanie Camp wrote regarding enslaved women, "the valorization of the organized and the visible veils the lives of women, who rarely participated directly in slave

[19] Brockman, 230
[20] For more on the concealment of Black labor in antebellum entertainment culture, see Anthony Szczesiul, *The Southern Hospitality Myth: Ethics, Politics, Race, and American Memory* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017).
[21] Hitchcock, *Marching with Sherman*.
[22] Elizabeth Varon, *Armies of Deliverance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 381

rebellions…it is, therefore, necessary to look to the subtler forms of resistance."[23] Understanding what liberation meant to enslaved people, especially in the context of wartime, requires the more nuanced approach to the historical record which Camp models. There were many ways to dismantle the master's house.

This essay expands upon the existing literature on landscapes of bondage and how they mediated the experiences of enslaved people. In addition to being considered property themselves, enslaved people were also bound or connected to constructed property such as domestic laborers to big houses, cooks to kitchens, and all to their respective quarters. Stephanie Camp emphasizes how enslaved people subverted these spaces of containment in ways not intended by their owners.[24] Historian Thavolia Glymph explores plantation landscapes as arenas for labor and power struggles between Black and white women. Glymph illustrates how, during the Civil War, white mistresses grew increasingly apprehensive of enslaved women's potential for violence against both people and property, noting "the longer the war lasted…the more they feared that their homes would be burned down over their heads."[25] In addition to highlighting how enslaved people participated in the destruction of plantation property, I also seek to interpret accounts of enslaved people defending the plantation house from destruction. This essay also delves into the historiography surrounding the destruction of civilian property during the Civil War. Charles Royster's *The Destructive War* and Mark Grimsley's *The Hard Hand of War* focus on the policies, strategies, and consequences of destruction during the civil war as enacted primarily by white military actors. These works don't fully examine the role of enslaved and free Black people as agents of destruction during the Civil War; neither do they seek to account for

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[23]Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105

the other ways that Black actors laid claim to and reshaped the built environment of slavery during this period.

In this essay, I explore how Black southerners understood and acted toward the landscape of slavery during the Civil War. I argue that free and enslaved Black southerners sought to affect the material and social transformation of the built environment of slavery in three ways: destruction, preservation, and appropriation. I consider how formerly enslaved soldiers destroyed plantation buildings and crops in order to disrupt the economic structures that relied on their labor and sever the bonds between people and property. I also interrogate the actions of enslaved people who preserved plantation buildings by interceding to prevent them from being destroyed. Finally, I attend to the social and political dynamics of enslaved and free Black bodies appropriating white spaces and using them in subversive ways, highlighting the example of Robert Smalls in Beaufort, South Carolina. Throughout this paper, I draw attention to how Black southerners' claims over sites of slavery were different from and often in direct opposition to those of white citizens and military actors, including those who claimed to be their liberators.

Destruction: "...it is not light that is needed, but fire!"

Colonel William Heyward fixed a spyglass to his eye and studied the figures moving up the banks of the Combahee River less than a mile and a quarter away from his position. In the dim light of dawn on the morning of June 2, 1863, Heyward was watchful and wary as he could just make out a banner of stars and stripes waving gently over a boat from which the unknown figures had just disembarked. He focused on a double line of "Yankee" soldiers marching in unison, advancing toward a nearby plantation with determined, unwavering steps. Minutes later, the buildings on one of his neighbor's estates were ablaze. Perhaps the conflagration illuminated the early morning sky just enough for Heyward to finally notice something he was not expecting.

This group of soldiers, the same men who had just put his neighbor's home to the torch; they were Black. Black soldiers? Heyward struggled to reconcile this novel concept even as he was faced with an even more alarming realization. They were coming for his home next. Heyward waited as long as he possibly could for reinforcements. But no help came. So, he took the last good option left to him: he leapt on his horse and fled. The next time William Heyward saw his riverfront home, it was in ashes.[26]

Historian Mark Grimsley argues that federal policy during the Civil War gradually shifted from a conciliatory approach to an increasingly punitive one. According to Grimsley, U.S. policymakers promoted a program of "directed severity" ultimately seeking to demoralize the planter class and ruin the Confederate economy.[27] The raid on Combahee river plantations fits within this paradigm. These rice plantations were among the most productive in the region. By targeting these wealth-generating estates, the Union aimed to strike a blow against the Confederate economy, weakening its ability to sustain the war effort. As an enormously labor intensive crop, rice also relied on the labor and expertise of many hundreds of enslaved people. The destruction of these crops, therefore, also tangibly undermined the institution of slavery in this part of the state.

But the actors ultimately involved in executing the raid add new layers of depth to the strategic elements and a new angle from which to view the symbolic elements of the plantations' destruction. If burning down William Heyward's property was not an unusual military action at this point in the war, the people responsible certainly were. The men of the 2nd South Carolina volunteers were among the first regiments of Black soldiers to be mustered after the 1863

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[26] Calvin D. Cowles et al., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1880), accessed on HathiTrust, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924080782182., 307-308

[27] Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War:Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Emancipation Proclamation. Their regiment was composed mostly of formerly enslaved men whose first experiences with fighting would be among the very rice and indigo fields where they once labored. The formation of "contraband" troops in 1863 coincided with the release of General Orders No. 100, a policy commissioned by the executive branch that framed the confiscation or destruction of private property in the language of "military necessity."[28] Scholars have noted how this policy, ostensibly meant to curtail excesses, was, in practice, quite malleable to the interpretations of officers and soldiers. Historian Megan Kate Nelson writes, "Through adept wordsmithery, any officer or soldiers…could justify destruction as necessary and just retribution." Nelson highlights how some soldiers explicitly channeled their more destructive impulses toward certain states. "I have never burnt a house down yet, but if we go to South Carolina, I will burn som[e] down if I…get a chance," wrote one white soldier from Illinois, voicing Union hostility to the state that was the seedbed of secessionism.[29] Historian Charles Royster documents that even General Sherman didn't mince words about his army's particular vendetta against South Carolina, writing "The truth is the whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South Carolina. I almost tremble at her fate, but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her."[30] While these accounts portray the actions and motivations of white military actors, they inadvertently overlook the role of Black soldiers in facilitating the destruction of planters' property. The stakes were significantly elevated for the men of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers, who, despite facing substantial personal risk, actively participated in undermining plantation infrastructure as an integral aspect of defeating the Confederacy and liberating those still in bondage.

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[28] More commonly known as the Lieber Code after its orchestrator, Francis Lieber.
[29] As quoted in Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 68.
[30] As quoted in Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 5.

On that June morning in 1863, the newly formed Black regiment may have had minimal experience with warfare but they were guided by experienced leaders, Colonel James Montgomery and Harriet Tubman.[31] Fiercely abolitionist and a former ally of John Brown, Montgomery was a shrewd choice to lead a unit of freedmen turned soldiers. Tubman's critical role consisted of gathering and deploying crucial information from a network of local scouts familiar with the waterways and plantations on the Combahee.[32] Tubman's skilled espionage and Montgomery's military prowess were the navigating force, but the Black soldiers were the ones entrusted with landing the most pivotal part of the plan: destroying Confederate planters' physical property and liberating their human property. William Heyward's account of the raid is indicative of his own panic and lack of direction as well as the order and preparedness exhibited by the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers. They moved deliberately from plantation to plantation dealing destruction in their wake while Heyward and a Confederate artillery unit stationed a few miles away scrambled to respond. "Returned to plantation…too late" Heyward's account concludes, "they burnt every building on plantation except the negro quarters."[33]

For Heyward, the sight of Black men bearing arms and burning houses must have felt like the ominous fruition of fears that had increasingly plagued the southern slaveholding elite for over a century.[34] As historian Jason Sharples argues, the Haitian Revolution in particular undermined 19th century white Americans' already tenuous confidence in their ability to control

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[31] Montgomery was stalwartly anti-slavery and had been a close associate of John Brown before Brown's execution. It is unclear if Montgomery and Tubman met prior to the Civil War but given Tubman's friendship with Brown, it is likely they would have been familiar with one another at least through reputation.

[32] Jeff W. Grigg, *The Combahee River Raid: Harriet Tubman & Lowcountry Liberation* (United States: History Press, 2014). Also, Edda Fields-Black's 2024 forthcoming book *Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War* promises to illuminate this history even further.

[33] Cowles, et. al. *The War of the Rebellion,* 307-308

[34] The destruction of planters' property had long been a tool of slave resistance in the U.S. South and the Caribbean. Even if the sting of South Carolina's own Stono Rebellion in 1739 had faded by the time Heyward was a child in the 1810s, he almost certainly would have heard stories of the slave rebellion on Saint-Domingue in 1790 as well as the failed Denmark Vesey rebellion in 1822 and Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831.

insurrection. The birth of a Black republic from the ashes of burned plantations forced American slaveholders to confront their fears over "new levels of destruction of white lives and property", Sharples writes.[35] Other slave revolts in the Caribbean and the southern colonies ultimately led to the codification of arson or attempted arson by an enslaved person as a capital offense commensurate with insurrection, murder, and rape of a white woman.[36]

Despite the threat of execution, the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers were far from the first enslaved people to destroy the homes of southern planters. During a WPA interview recounting his life in antebellum Buckhead, Georgia, a formerly enslaved man, Henry Wright, recalled that one of his fellow bondsmen attempted to burn down the dwelling of their enslaver, ironically named Mr. House. Wright interpreted the actions of the unnamed arsonist as revenge on House who had reneged on a promise to free the young man on his twenty-first birthday. Wright's final word on this incident is a tragic one. He recalled that the young man was hauled away by the local sheriff and later hanged.[37] The Civil War created a new field of engagement within which enslaved people could facilitate the destruction of plantation property and mitigate some of the risk of reprisal. Some enslaved people used the Union army as a proxy to enact this destruction. Royster notes that enslaved people often successfully encouraged the destruction of plantation buildings by citing the cruel treatment they had been subject to as a stimulus for Union soldiers to act. Although still not totally without risk of retaliation, this method at least created a plausible barrier between the enslaved person's desires and the act of destruction, carried out by a third party.

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[35] Jason Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (2020), 244-45

[36] Betty Wood, "'Until He Shall Be Dead, Dead, Dead': The Judicial Treatment of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1987): 377–98, accessed on JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40581695.; Matthew H. Jennings, "Slave Codes," *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, August 23, 2022, https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/slave-codes/

[37] Henry Wright *Georgia Narratives*, part 4, p. 303 Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Administrative Files. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn001/

The actions of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers represented a kind of amalgamation of these occurrences. As representatives of the formerly enslaved, these soldiers donned more than just a uniform; they embraced a mission and a mandate to reshape the built environment of slavery en route to claiming freedom.[38] The goal of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers was not just one of destruction but of liberation. Even as the homes of the erstwhile planters burned, more than 750 Black men, women, and children fled to the Union boats waiting to receive them. One of the older, newly freed men expressed his feelings on the raid, stating: "De brack sojer so presumptiuous, dey come right ashore, hold up dere head. Fus' ting I know, dere was a barn, ten tousand bushel rough rice, all in a blaze den mas'r's great house, all cracklin' up de roof. Did n't I keer for see 'em blaze? Lor, mas'r, did n't care notin' at all, I was gwine to de boat."[39] Some historians have noted that enslaved people made a direct connection between the destruction wrought by the Union army and the accomplishment of their liberation. However, it is significant that at the moment that this man's memory of liberation is being fused, it is not a white army of freeborn men but a Black army of formerly enslaved men that were his liberators, accomplished and facilitated by many layers of destruction. In their "presumption" as the elderly man calls it, these Black soldiers burned down the homes of the enslavers, destroyed future profit of the Combahee planters, and broke the bonds connecting enslaved people to property.

Accounts of the raid in both Confederate and Union affiliated newspapers took note of the destruction of private property and emphasized that it was enacted by Black soldiers. The

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[38] Some of these soldiers were likely family or friends of those liberated or even had been formerly enslaved on the very plantations they returned to destroy. Further research is required to explicitly make this connection but one connection in favor is that one of Harriet Tubman's scouts was a Samuel Hayward who likely escaped from William Heyward's plantation and aided Tubman in the raid. Grigg, Jeff W. *The Combahee River Raid: Harriet Tubman & Lowcountry Liberation*.

[39] Thomas Wentworth Higginson. 1970. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. (Boston Beacon Press), 173. At this stage, I have chosen to transcribe Higginson's rendition of this freedman's speech exactly as recorded in his memoir. Given the Lowcountry location, it is possible Higginson was attempting to transliterate the man's Gullah Geechee dialect. However, it should not be taken as an objective representation of the freedman's accent.

tone of the coverage differed based on the loyalties of the publication. On June 4, 1863, The *Charleston Mercury* noted that "the vandals whose force consisted mainly of three "contraband" companies" destroyed the property of numerous South Carolina "gentlemen," "pillaging…set[ting] fire to the residences, outbuildings and whatever grain…they could find."[40] The piece also notes the loss of human property in enslaved people, agricultural property in the multiple thousands of bushels of rice that were destroyed, and, makes special note of a planter's library of rare books that was burned. By framing Black troops as lawless "vandals" attacking Southern "gentlemen", the *Mercury* contributed to an ongoing discourse on civilized versus uncivilized warfare, slotting Black soldiers in the latter category.[41] The *Commonwealth*, a Boston-based newspaper, by contrast, struck a jubilant tone in their coverage. Their piece introduced the company as "Col. Montgomery and his gallant band of 300 black soldiers, under the guidance of a black woman." The piece openly celebrates the destruction of "millions of dollars worth of…lordly dwellings" as a "glorious consummation" that "struck a bold and effective blow." [42]

One of the most intriguing depictions of the raid came a month after the event in the midsummer issue of *Harper's Weekly* which published the now infamous photograph of Peter Gordon. This gripping image, which most prominently features Gordon's back, scarred from vicious whippings, is but one engraving on the page which tells a larger story. When seen as a whole, the images and text indicate how the editors of the publication may have been encouraging their readers to consider the destructive toll of the Civil War and why, ultimately,

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[40] *Charleston Mercury*, June 4, 1863, Thursday, Page 1, "The Enemy's Raid on the Banks of the Combahee"
[41] Thank you to Jake Calhoun for his thought partnership on this aspect of how Black soldiers were characterized during the Civil War and for helping me consider the changing tone of news coverage by Harper's Weekly. In the early days of the publication, Harper's took a moderate tone regarding slavery, earning the nickname by some as "Harper's Weakly" (see: Robert C. Williams, *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2006)). Publishing images like that of Peter Gordon represented a sea change for the publication in favor of more explicit antislavery messaging.
[42] *The Commonwealth*, July 10, 1863, Volume 1, Issue 45

the cost was one worth paying. Flanking the larger picture are two additional images that are also of Gordon. Read from left to right, the pictures convey a story of transformation from a bedraggled and downtrodden Gordon wearing nothing but rags when he first escapes enslavement to an upright and resolute figure robed in a Union uniform. The accompanying text says as much, noting "one of these portraits represents the man as he entered our lines, with clothes torn and covered with mud…another shows…his back furrowed and scarred with the traces of a whipping…and the third represents him in United States uniform, bearing the musket and prepared for duty." The final image on the page bears the caption, "Raid of Second South Carolina Volunteers (Col. Montgomery) Among The Rice Plantations of The Combahee. The sketch of the raid shows several aspects of activity including a union boat and flag in the port, freedom seeking Black people running toward the boat, and, in the distance, several buildings actively on fire.[43]

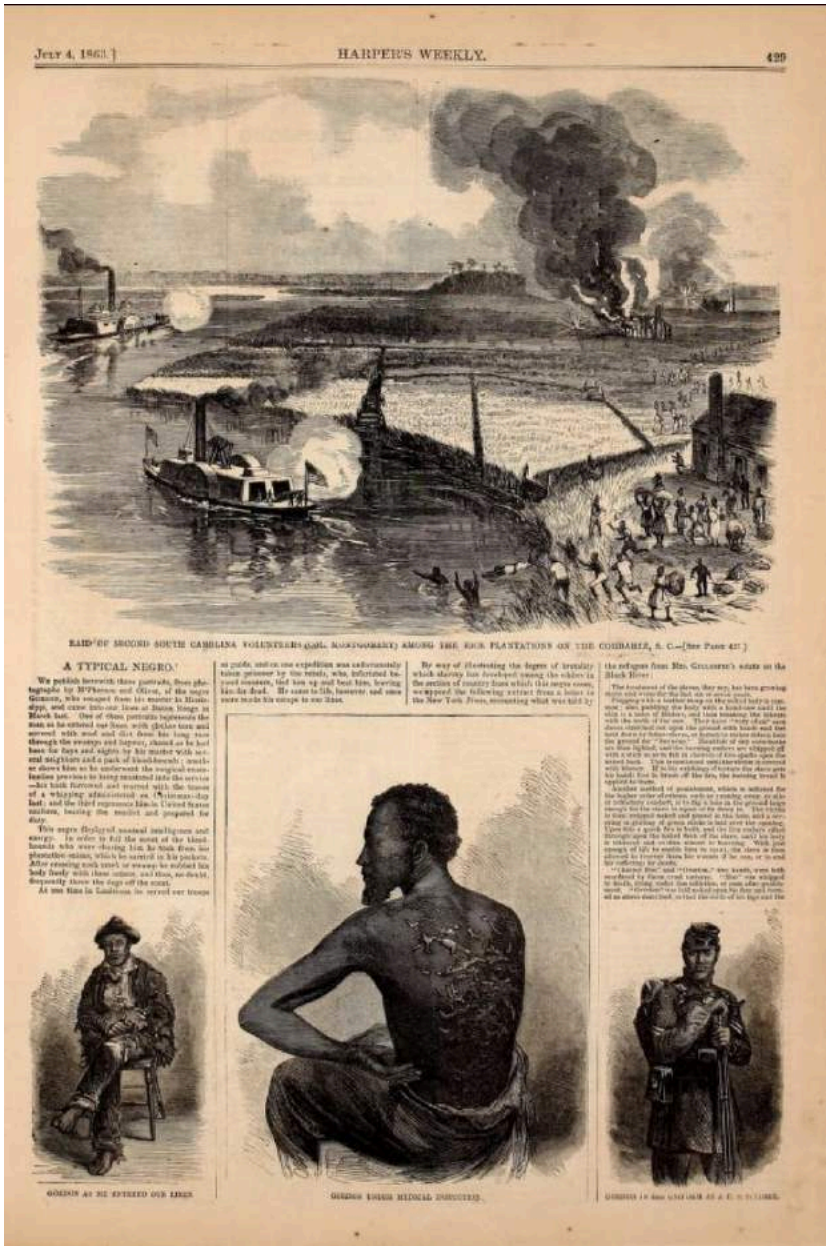
Zooming out to look at this spread as an effort to tell a holistic story, one can read the placement of the Combahee image raid at the top as emblematic not just of the destructive nature of war but of a particular military action executed by Black soldiers. In the text describing the raid on the previous page of the magazine, each time the unit is mentioned, the word "colored" is added in parentheses. The reader is compelled to take note of something new occurring in the shifting tide of war; Black men (like Gordon), who suffered under bondage were being transformed into soldiers in the U.S. army. And, as an extension of their social transformation, they were sanctioned to transform the built and ecological environment in which they were once enslaved through destruction and occupation. Looking at the images from the top down, they

[43] "A Typical Negro". United States, Baton Rouge Louisiana, 1863. New York: *Harper's Weekly*, July 4.. https://www.loc.gov/item/2014645368/

almost seem to tell the reader that *this action* (burning up plantation houses and flooding rice fields) is in retribution for *these actions* (the cruel abuse of enslaved people). Looking at the images from the bottom up, they also convey that *this individual* (the abused Black man formerly considered property now transformed into a Union soldier, as represented by Gordon) has the right to wreak havoc on the buildings and lands of those who would have him enslaved.

Finally, the editor's choice of date may also reveal some deliberate intent. This story was published on July 4th, 1863, the first national independence day since the emancipation proclamation had been signed, the first since Black men had been mustered into Union regiments, and, nearly eleven years to the day since Frederick Douglass delivered his Independence Day address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York.[44] Were the magazine editors familiar with Douglass' searing and prophetic words when he unflinchingly declared "...it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder"? Did they recall hearing of Douglass' comparison of America to a biblical city that was "thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin"? On July 5th, 1852, Douglass had asked "what, to the slave, is the fourth of July?" On July 4th, 1863, with a spread showing the radical transformation and radical action of former bondsmen, Harper's Weekly appeared to be providing an answer.

[44] BlackPast. 2007. "(1852) Frederick Douglass, 'What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July.'" Black Past. January 24, 2007. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1852-frederick-douglass-what-slave-fourth-july/.



Mcpherson & Oliver, photographer. *2nd South Carolina Infantry Regiment raid on rice plantation, Combahee, South Carolina, Gordon as he entered our lines, Gordon under medical inspection, Gordon in his uniform as a U.S. soldier*. United States Baton Rouge Louisiana, 1863. New York: Harper's Weekly, July 4. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2014645368/

Like Louisa, the 2nd South Carolina volunteers undermined the built environment of slavery. While Louisa's intervention was rhetorical, the Black soldiers' intervention was material. By flattening Hewyard's house and leaving the slave quarters intact, they upended the

hierarchy embedded in the infrastructure of the plantation.[45] Like the biblical land of Goshen, untouched by deadly plagues sweeping through Egypt, empty slave cabins remained standing behind the smoldering remains of big houses, their former occupants led to freedom across the Combahee river by Black soldiers and a Black Moses.

Destruction was one dramatic way that enslaved and newly freed Black southerners reshaped the built environment of slavery. In the case of the Combahee River Raid, the destruction that the 2nd South Carolina volunteers enacted facilitated the freedom of hundreds, many of whom joined the USCT in becoming soldiers themselves. As Elizabeth Varon highlights, the most important aspect of the Combahee raid to Harriet Tubman was that "so many of those she liberated joined the ranks of liberators."[46] Though rhetorically powerful, the story *Harper's* told wasn't necessarily representative. Most enslaved people remained on plantations throughout the war and found their own ways to renegotiate their relationships with sites of bondage during a time of both extreme conflict and uncertainty. In the next section, I attend closely to the ways that enslaved people prevented or attempted to prevent destruction on the plantation landscape and consider what factors informed their decision making.

Preservation: "Give it to me and my children"

Caesar saw a house on fire. It wasn't his house. In fact it belonged to the man who also owned Caesar, Gustavus Hendrick, a Confederate officer from Butts County, Georgia. As Sherman passed through Butts County in 1864, a detachment of troops from the right wing of his army had destroyed every other building on Hendrick's plantation. Caesar had witnessed the

[45] Freedmen's Bureau Records after the war indicate that the plantations burned during the Combahee River Raid had not been repaired or rebuilt. "Freedmen's Bureau Land Reports, Combahee Ferry, South Carolina, Sept. 1865." Lowcountry Africana. Accessed November 30, 2023. https://lowcountryafricana.com/final-slaveholders-combahee-ferry-south-carolina/.
[46] Varon, *Armies of Deliverance,* 277

soldiers burning the brick mill, the cotton press, and even the slave cabins. Nearly everything was gone. As Caesar watched his master's house burn, his reaction was not delight, it was desperation. Perhaps to Caesar, this house represented the last physical barrier between sustenance and ruination for the remaining living souls on the plantation. As a man of faith, Caesar took the action that felt most natural to him. He fell to his knees and prayed that the house would be spared. Although directing his petition to a divine authority, the oral nature of his prayer was also meant to fall on the ears of the still-present Union soldiers. Evidently moved by the older Black man's request, the soldiers put out the flames and the house survived.[47]

In the recollections of white southerners, behavior like Caesar's was explained using the paternalist logic of the day. The discourse of the "loyal" or "faithful" slave was deployed to suggest that bondspeople saved their enslavers' property due to mutual affection, even love. Caesar's story, as it was recounted by a local historian of Butts County over a century after the events,, states that Caesar's prayer was inspired by "his master [being] much agitated for his house to which the Yankees had set fire."[48] This framing did more than echo the "faithful" slave trope. It also denied the agency of men like Caesar who did not embody an idealized notion of resistance. I argue that many enslaved people who acted to protect their enslavers' property did so based on calculations about their present needs and anticipation of future needs; calculations that were complicated by the state of uncertainty that permeated every aspect of enslaved life in the Civil War South. At the moment that the Hendrick house was torched, it, like Caesar, and indeed, like the entire nation, was suspended in a bizarre transitory state. The Hendrick house was neither whole nor wholly destroyed. The nation was split but it was unclear if the split was temporary or permanent. And Caesar had been legally freed by the 1863 Emancipation

[47] Lois McMichael, *History of Butts County, Georgia, 1825-1976* (Atlanta, GA: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1978), 438.
[48] Ibid.

Proclamation yet he may have felt some measures of constraint when it came to claiming that freedom or, like many unfree Black people, he may have been loath to leave the place he considered his home.[49]

Over the course of the Civil War, an estimated five hundred thousand enslaved people fled their plantations. The majority of the roughly four million enslaved people in the South remained on or near the properties where they labored. Historians, including Lawrence Litwack and Thavolia Glymph, have documented the numerous obstacles to flight that enslaved people faced. As Litwack notes, "there were mounted citizens' patrols, river patrols…Confederate sentinels that had to be eluded…[and] pursuing bloodhounds."[50] Of those who came in direct contact with the Union army, many were rebuffed from seeking safety with them. As was the case with Louisa in Georgia, these would-be escapees were actively discouraged from following in the wake of the army. As Thavolia Glymph writes, "sometimes, extended family ties made leaving more difficult; sometimes, the distance to safety within Union lines was too great; sometimes, they were simply too old or ill to travel."[51] Many unfree people did not necessarily see the Federal troops as liberators but as an untrustworthy force who left unwarranted disaster in their wake. Thus, when the Union army arrived bent on destruction, the enslaved often acted to prevent it.

The recollections of formerly enslaved people further reveal their nuanced relationships with the built environment of the plantation during wartime. Adeline Grey had strong memories of the day the Union army passed through the plantation where she was enslaved in Hampton County, South Carolina during the Civil War. After burning multiple other buildings on the

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[49] Ibid. After the Civil War, Caesar Hendrick founded a church with other free Black preachers and lived the rest of his life in Butts County, GA.
[50] Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1979).
[51] Glymph, *Out of The House of Bondage,* 111

property, the soldiers had turned their attention to the cornhouse when Grey's mother spoke out, pleading with them to leave the building intact and instead "give it to me and my children." So they put the fire out, Grey remembered.[52] For Grey's mother, the imminent threat of starvation compelled her to intervene. In that moment, saving her enslaver's property equated with saving the lives of her children and herself.

The slave quarters were a site of particular contention between enslaved people and Union soldiers who were known to destroy or appropriate slave cabins for their own use. Heddie Davis, a formerly enslaved woman, described the Union soldiers as the "worst people dere ever was" because of how they burst into slave cabins, wreaking havoc and making off with property that enslaved people saw as their own.[53] Heddie's antipathy toward the Union army was rooted in their failure to honor Heddie's ownership of the slave quarters. Historian Dylan Penningroth demonstrates how enslaved people built and negotiated systems of property ownership that were often recognized by their enslavers but may have been illegible to northerners.[54] Perhaps the Union soldiers looked at slave cabins and saw just another set of buildings belonging to the rebellious planter class. Or perhaps they saw them as particularly easy targets for appropriation. Whatever the soldiers' motivations for invading or destroying slave quarters, they were at odds with the quarters' inhabitants who saw those places as their own.

Other enslaved people impeded the army's hand of destruction in favor of extending their sense of ownership beyond the slave quarters. In Henry Wright's recollection, he and his fellow bondsmen and women were able to dissuade Sherman's forces from damaging any property on the plantation where they were held in bondage outside of Atlanta, Georgia. When asked if their

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[52] Adeline Grey *South Carolina Narratives*, part 2, p. 203 Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Administrative Files. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn001/.
[53] Nelson, *Ruin Nation,* 94-95
[54] Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

master was mean to them, the enslaved people said "no," so the soldiers moved on to the adjoining plantation where all the property was burned because the enslaved people there reported that their master was cruel.[55] Toward the end of this narrative, Wright notes that his master had not been in residence at the plantation when the Union army passed through. House had fled with his family to Augusta, Georgia ahead of Sherman's arrival.[56] Whatever Wright's feelings toward House, he and the other bondspeople on the estate may have seen the absence of their enslaver as an opportunity they could work in their favor. In dissuading the Union soldiers from destroying the plantation, Wright and his fellow laborers maintained a measure of control over this space, if only temporarily, which may have helped them weather the uncertain days ahead.

The motivations of enslaved people regarding the fate of the plantation's buildings differed from both their enslavers and their would-be liberators. In 2001, author Alice Randall published *The Wind Done Gone,* an alternative imagining of *Gone With the Wind* narrated from the perspective of enslaved people. Randall depicts the sentiment of a formerly enslaved character, Garlic, as he described his relationship to "Tata" (representative of Tara). "There was no architect here", Garlic declared. "I built this place with my hands…Mammy and me, we saved it from the Yankees not for them but for us…[we] kept this place together because it was ours."[57] Like the fictional Garlic, actual enslaved people had their own motivations for saving plantation structures that agitate against notions of blind loyalty or faithfulness to enslavers. In preserving these structures, which were at once symbols of oppression yet also places of

[55]Although this practice was not universal, several other accounts from the WPA narratives share similar recollections of Union soldiers deciding, at least in part, whether or not to set fire to a plantation based on the report of the enslaved people about their treatment there. For further discussion of Union soldiers' desire to dismantle slavery, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2008).
[56] Henry Wright *Georgia Narratives*, part 4, p. 303
[57] Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 52.

provision, many enslaved people acted in ways that defy a straightforward interpretation of resistance. By thwarting the Union army's destructive tendencies, enslaved people preserved places that held practical and symbolic meaning for them. They also amplified and extended their unique sense of ownership and property rights.

Appropriation: "The old homestead is mine"

Among the many changes wrought by the Civil War, the movement of Black and white southerners was among the most dramatic. In anticipation of military conflict, thousands of white southerners fled rural areas for cities like Savannah, Georgia or Columbia, South Carolina. And others moved in the opposite direction, leaving towns and cities that were in danger of becoming the next casualties of war. In the wake of their flight, white property owners left behind their houses, furnishings, food stores and enslaved people who often refused to flee. The ownership of this abandoned property became an ongoing controversial question. The erstwhile white owners considered their homes temporarily abandoned as evidenced by the fact that many returned later to reclaim whatever remained of their property holdings. The Union army had been permitted, by law, to appropriate property for military uses since the early days of the war.[58] Yet a third set of stakeholders--Black residents of Union occupied territory,whose own status as property was still in flux – were making their own claims on these spaces. Many tentatively free Black people occupied the abandoned homes of their former owners even as they expressed wariness from the beginning that they may be unable to maintain these tenuous claims of ownership. In this section, I investigate some of the ways that free and unfree Black southerners laid claim to the property

[58] The Confiscation Acts, signed into law in 1861, permitted the federal government to seize property being used to support the rebellion; General Orders No. 100 (known as the Lieber Code), issued by Lincoln in April 1863 Lincoln issued General Orders No. 100 included numerous articles providing guidance on the appropriation of property including houses, boats, etc. for military use. While the property of Confederate sympathizers was not considered for compensation after the war, the Southern Claims Commission was set up in 1871 to consider claims of compensation from Southern Unionist citizens. Many African Americans also submitted claims.

of their former owners and transformed it to meet their own practical and psychological needs. I pay special attention to how Black residents remade places that were designed to be sites of separation into sites of connection and community.

Hampton, Virginia

Situated at the meeting point of the James River and the Chesapeake Bay, antebellum Hampton, Virginia was a flourishing port town where white merchants traded enslaved people as well as agricultural products along the waterways. After secession, the port location also made Hampton a key staging area for the Union forces which were established at Fort Monroe in 1861 and expanded rapidly. With the Union army on their doorstep and the Confederate army unable to guarantee their protection, white Hamptonians prepared to evacuate the town en masse. Black Hamptonians had other ideas. Of the nearly six thousand residents of Hampton at the time, around 40% were enslaved people who saw the presence of the Union army as an opportunity to seize their freedom. When three Black men escaped to Fort Monroe in May of 1861, the Union leader of the garrison, Major Benjamin Butler, granted them sanctuary much to the chagrin of the Confederates who had demanded the return of the escapees. For Confederate General Magruder, the writing was on the wall. Hampton had been mostly emptied of its white residents and the abandoned houses, shops, and other buildings were either vacant, requisitioned by the Union army or, most disturbingly, solely occupied by Black residents.[59] For Magruder, the idea of Black people occupying the town as free men and women was utterly unacceptable. He feared that the Union forces would "colonize [former slaves] at Hampton, [in] the home of most of their owners" which may very well have been the plan.[60] As the number of self-emancipated people absconding to Fort Monroe ballooned to over a thousand by July 1861, Major Butler needed a

[59] "Burning of Hampton" *The Tennessean*. (Nashville, TN), 17 August 1861 Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. https://www.newspapers.com/image/119294703/>
[60] As quoted in Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation,* 16

place to house them all and Hampton was right there, nearly empty. It would have been folly for the Confederates to occupy the town and "expose the men to…the guns and the mortars of Fortress Monroe."[61] Yet, a full retreat would mean leaving the town's resources to be utilized by the Union army and the "contraband."

Caught between two opposing forces, Hampton's remaining Black and white residents alike were finally forced out of their dwellings in the dead of night on August 7th, 1861. Under the cover of darkness, General Magruder led 500 Confederates back into Hampton and set the town on fire, burning down nearly every building. Magruder justified this destruction as necessary to keep the town out of the hands of the enemy and his reasoning was supported in reporting of the incident by southern newspapers. The *Richmond Dispatch*, while lamenting the "destruction of [Hampton's] habitations and…consecrated temples" nonetheless upheld that it was "better that one should apply the torch to his own dwelling than leave it to be polluted by the presence of a barbarous foe."[62] The "barbarous foe," while certainly referring to the Union army, also included Hampton's Black residents. A letter to the editor of the *Tennessean* was more explicit in its grim acceptance of Hampton's demise. The author declared that it was better to burn the homes of Hampton's "loyal and good citizens" than to allow them to remain the "abode of the Yankees and runaway negroes." Hampton's old stately houses lay in ruins, but Magruder's plan proved to be only a partial success.

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[61] "Burning of Hampton" *The Richmond Dispatch*. (Richmond, VA), 14 August 1861 Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress.<https://www.newspapers.com/image/80619484/>
[62] Ibid.

The Burning of Hampton by the Rebel Forces Under Colonel Magruder. Hampton, Virginia 1861. New York: Harper's Weekly, August 31, 1861. Sketch. https://archive.org/details/sim_harpers-weekly_1861-08-31_5_244/

Federal Troops at Hampton, Virginia. Hampton, Virginia 1861. New York: Harper's Weekly, April 19, 1862. Sketch. https://archive.org/details/sim_harpers-weekly_1862-04-19_6_277/page/244/

During the months and years following the burning of Hampton, the remaining Black inhabitants, in addition to those that flocked to the area, built an expansive community of formerly enslaved people. Many of the newly constructed dwellings were built against the still-standing brick fireplaces of the former owners' homes using wood and any other materials left after having been burned. The irony did not escape an outside observer who noted "the ruins of the houses of the First Families of Virginia are now covered with the cabins of their former Slaves." By the time John Trowbridge, a Boston-based travel writer, visited Hampton in 1866, he found a "thrifty village" of Black people exercising their respective crafts, farming the land, and providing mutual aid to one another. "It was very common to hear of families that were helping not only their own relatives, but others who had no such claim of kindred on them."[63]

[63] John T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities*, 1866 (New York: Arno, 1969), 219-221.

Hampton, Va. View of the Town, December 1864. Civil War Photographs Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018666857/

In building new houses –from the literal wreckage of their old homes of bondage – newly freed people were able to renegotiate their experiences in those places. The new selves they were able to express manifested in numerous ways including through more control of their own labor, evolving associational life, and, perhaps most significantly, through kinship ties.[64]

[64] For further reading on how Black labor in and around Hampton was still largely controlled by the Union army, see Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

Beaufort, South Carolina

Like Hampton, Virginia, the demographics of Beaufort, South Carolina underwent significant shifts during the Civil War as white residents fled ahead of or were forced out by Union occupation. Robert Smalls, one of Beaufort's most famous people, took advantage of a shifting legal landscape which created opportunities for newly freedpeople in the Sea Islands to purchase houses and land. In 1864, at just 24 years old, Smalls already had a storied military career. His dramatic episode in 1862 commandeering a Confederate naval ship, the *Planter*, was the ticket to securing his freedom, as well as that of his family and several other Black families. These acts of self-emancipation and military appropriation were a curious foreshadowing of another way Smalls would disrupt Confederate property ownership in Beaufort. Two years later, while the Civil War still raged, the Sea Islands were under Union occupation and Robert Smalls returned to purchase a house, in fact, the house and land where he and his mother had been enslaved.[65]

Following the status of his mother, Lydia Polite, Robert Smalls became the legal property of Henry McKee from the moment of his birth in 1839. While Smalls spent his early years as a "houseboy" at the McKee's Beaufort house, at twelve years old he was sent to work in Charleston.[66] In this larger and more affluent city, Smalls would have seen an even starker contrast between the opulent lifestyles of Charleston's elite and the violence of slavery that underwrote their comforts. But life in Charleston also afforded Smalls critical opportunities that he would leverage to his advantage. Though still enslaved, Smalls was hired out and allowed to keep a portion of his earnings. By finding paid employment on Charleston's waterfront, Smalls

[65] Edward A. Miller, *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls From Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).
[66] Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: The Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape From Slavery to Union Hero* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).

became familiar with the shipping industry and with sailing, becoming an accomplished sailor himself by the time he was nineteen years old in 1858. When the outbreak of war followed South Carolina's secession, Smalls was working on a ship called the *Planter*. In May 1862, with the aid of other enslaved crew members of the ship and with their families on board, Smalls successfully commandeered the *Planter* and steered it to the Union blockade. Smalls would spend the next two years participating in numerous naval campaigns including as the newly appointed captain of the *Planter,* now in service of the Union army. Early in 1864, he returned to his birthplace of Beaufort to participate in yet another subversive act that undermined members of the white ruling class of South Carolina's Sea Islands.[67]

In January of 1864, an auction took place in Beaufort to sell many of the homes of the town's white residents which had been seized by the federal government for a failure to pay taxes.[68] A correspondent for the *New York Times* noted that, of those who gathered to witness and participate in the auction, the "contrabands" were the "class in the preponderance" and were foremost among the purchasers of the available properties. "How in the world these fellows manage to exhibit so much money is a mystery" noted the correspondent.[69] At least for Smalls, the source of cash was probably less mysterious. In addition to his earnings as a captain, Smalls had received a $1500 cash prize from congress for requisitioning the *Planter*.[70] The bidding for the seized properties started on January 19th, 1864 but Smalls held off until the 28th when the home of William DeTreville (formerly the home of Smalls' enslaver, Henry McKee) was auctioned off. His winning bid of $665 made Smalls the new owner of the house and land where he had been born, a slave.[71]

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[67] Ibid.
[68] "From the South," *New York Times*, January 25, 1864."
[69] Ibid.
[70] E.A. Miller, "Smalls, Robert," *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, August 23, 2022, https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/smalls-robert/.
[71] "Sale of Lots and Blocks In Beaufort, South Carolina" *Free South*, January 30, 1864

The Smalls family quickly moved in and "tastefully decorated" their new home with articles like a mahogany sofa with rich red upholstery and marble-topped wooden tables.[72] In addition to filling the house with beautiful furnishings, they filled it with people, using their new home as a site for fostering community. One of the first events hosted by Smalls and his wife, Hannah, was a wedding for Miss Lavinia Wilson (who had also escaped on *The Planter*) and Frank Nickson of the 33rd USCI.[73] A commentator on the wedding in the *Free South* noted the beauty of the Smalls's home and made sure to highlight that Smalls "now owns the house of his former master…where he himself was born."[74] Beyond an occasion for socializing, this wedding also served as a powerful symbol of the reconstitution of Black families in the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War.

The new relationship of Black bodies in what had formerly been white controlled spaces was not lost on Richard DeTreville, a local real estate lawyer, and the son of William DeTreville, whose former house Smalls now owned. While purchasing these "abandoned" houses had been a relatively straightforward process for Smalls and other Black men in Beaufort, holding on to them would prove to be more challenging as the town's white residents returned. Unable to reclaim their human property, Beaufort's white landed class was intent on reclaiming, at the very least, their real estate. Richard DeTreville was at the vanguard of this ensuing legal battle which, over the course of the next several years, wound its way all the way to the Supreme Court. While many historians have focused on the Sea Islands as an early Reconstruction experiment in terms of land redistribution, legal historian Cynthia Nicoletti shines light on this unique court struggle

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[72] "Mahogany sofa from the home of Robert Smalls", "Marble-top washstand from the home of Robert Smalls" Segregation Gallery, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC. Thank you to Dr. Whitney Nell Stewart for alerting me that the NMAAHC has furniture from the Smalls house in their collection, some of which is available for public viewing as of the date of this essay.
[73] *The Free South*, Beaufort, South Carolina, Saturday, April 9, 1864, Page 4. The 33rd USCI were reorganized from the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, a Black regiment under Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
[74] Ibid.

between Beaufort's white residents returning from displacement and the Black men who had claimed ownership of their houses.[75] According to Nicoletti, DeTreville's challenge to the wartime auctioning off of Beaufort homes lay in the "irregular" titles held by Smalls and other homebuyers. DeTreville and his legal team argued that the Direct Tax Act of 1864 which had enabled the sales was unconstitutional and that administration of the tax had been irregular at best. Ultimately, Nicoletti argues that DeTreville's suit was unsuccessful because the Supreme Court "valued the stability of title more than anything else."[76]

DeTreville's failed bid to evict Smalls from his home is noteworthy not just because of its intriguing legal arguments but because of what it reveals about Black and white contention over space and the built environment. In 1870, in the midst of the legal battle, DeTreville published a pamphlet in which he aired his grievances about how the federal government had dealt with Beaufort, and St. Helena Parish more broadly, during the war. He characterizes pre-Union occupation Beaufort as a place with "tastily located…handsome…expensive and luxurious…residences" belonging to "planters living on the productions of their lands." According to DeTreville when these planters were forced to abandon their homes due to Union occupation, "they left their…elegantly furnished dwellings…in the care of their slaves, (until then faithful and attached)." At this juncture in DeTreville's narrative, Black bodies as the sole occupants of white homes represented an acceptable occupation because he imagined the enslaved as dutiful caretakers of white property. His tone shifts notably one page later in the pamphlet as he describes the aftermath of the tax sale. "The negroes took possession of and

[75] Thank you to Katie Wu for her thought partnership on the dynamics of Sea Islands occupation. Thank you to Dr. Cynthia Nicolletti for sharing her legal expertise on this case and allowing me access to her forthcoming essay.
[76] Cynthia Nicoletti, "Robert Smalls's Tax Title Case and the Endurance of Land Redistribution in Port Royal, South Carolina," forthcoming essay in *The War That Made America: Essays Inspired by the Scholarship of Gary W. Gallagher*, edited by Caroline E. Janney, Peter S. Carmichael, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

occupied the finest houses in the town…the most costly furniture was destroyed…windows, doors, wainscoting, and even floors…were torn off. Low and feeble…was the moral and religious sense of the poor negroes at that time." When Black people's relationship to the houses shifted from custodian to owner, DeTreville painted them not just as illegal but unworthy occupants, incapable of appreciating the homes they possessed.

The way that Smalls inhabited his new home was antithetical to the antebellum ethos which dictated how Black people were allowed to move in white spaces. As an enslaved domestic servant, Smalls's presence in the McKee house would not have been questioned although it would have been controlled. He would have known when and where he could be visible and how he was allowed to interact with every aspect of the house from the entrances and exits to the staircases and sofas. After Smalls purchased the McKee house, he filled it with beautiful furniture that was used and enjoyed by Black bodies and stewarded for the next generation of the Smalls family. Smalls' possession of his house interrupted the cycle of inheritance that would have seen the property passed down to the very man who tried and failed to regain control of it. "The old homestead is mine," Smalls reflected later in life, "and I shall leave it for my children to enjoy."[77]

The built environment of slavery consisted of literal walls of separation. While in bondage, enslaved people went to great lengths to create and inhabit spaces that reflected and reinforced their kinship and community ties. These efforts were often jeopardized by one of the seminal aspects of slavery in the United States, family separation. In the early, tentative days of freedom newly freed Black southerners seized opportunities to subvert white control of the built

[77] "Stole a Whole Vessel: Daring Feat of Gen. Robert Smalls" *Boston Daily Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, October 8, 1903. The Robert Smalls house, as it is now called, remained in the Smalls family until the early 1950s. U.S. Department of the Interior. (n.d.). The Robert Smalls House (U.S. National Park Service). National Parks Service. https://www.nps.gov/places/the-robert-smalls-house.htm

environment and turn sites of separation into sites of connection. These efforts did not go unchallenged by the previous occupants of abandoned houses and lands. In Hampton, VA and Beaufort, SC the presence of Black people in white spaces only became untenable to the white population when the formerly enslaved inhabited those spaces under conditions of freedom rather than those of bondage. In both locales, extreme efforts were made to prevent Black people from existing in those places as freedmen and freedwomen. In Hampton, the Confederates burned down their own homes rather than let the Union army and the "contraband" occupy the town. In Beaufort, former owners used legal instruments to try and evict Robert Smalls and other new Black homeowners from houses they had purchased according to valid, if tenuous, legal practice. The actions of Black southerners in spite of the backlash they faced exemplifies the resourcefulness and ingenuity of freedpeople as they laid claim to embattled spaces in their ongoing fight for a meaningful freedom.

Conclusion: *The Deserted Homestead*

In the Autumn of 1901, Joseph B. Jones's mansion in Burke County, Georgia was utterly consumed by an accidental fire. Nearly forty years after the enslaved woman, Louisa, expressed her incendiary desires regarding the Jones's house, it lay in ashes. After the incident, an unnamed author covered the event in the local newspaper. The news piece is so laden with grief that it reads almost like a eulogy. The writer laments not only the loss of this grand dwelling but all that the house represented, writing "it was a palatial mansion of the true Southern type…speaking the dignity and refinement of the Southern family that inhabited it."[78] Pining for the bygone days of the antebellum South when elite families like the Jones's resided in lavish homes, the author explicitly fuses the house with the human, writing of Jones: "His home life connected with the

[78] *True Citizen*, Waynesboro, GA, November 23, 1901

elegant old mansion, his honorable bearing that spoke so plainly the southern gentleman, his educated and refined family illustrated the superior people that made up the South…" The author goes on to lambast Sherman and his army for their role in "[laying] waste to a helpless land", analogizing them to Attila and the Huns. Having survived the Civil War almost entirely intact, the Jones house had become a famous gathering place for Waynesboro's elite and humble citizens alike. It seems to have been a point of particular pain for the writer that the Jones's home should have escaped the "fire and sword" of the Union army only to succumb to an accidental fire a few decades later. Notably, the author makes no mention of the enslaved people whose labor was responsible for raising this "palatial mansion."[79] There is no inclusion of the less sanguine feelings about the house's destruction that someone like Louisa likely would have expressed if given the chance. Perhaps Louisa would have resonated more with a different piece of writing published that year which expressed sentiments about the ruins of antebellum southern houses rather contrary to that of the *Waynesboro News*.[80]

In May 1901, African American writer Aaron Belford Thompson released his second book of poetry entitled "Echoes of Spring."[81] Despite being born in the midwest nearly a decade after emancipation, his poetry demonstrates a keen connection with his not so distant southern past.[82] Toward the end of "Echoes" – a collection of lyrical pieces with alternately religious, familial, and romantic themes – Thompson penned the poem, "A Deserted Homestead." Through

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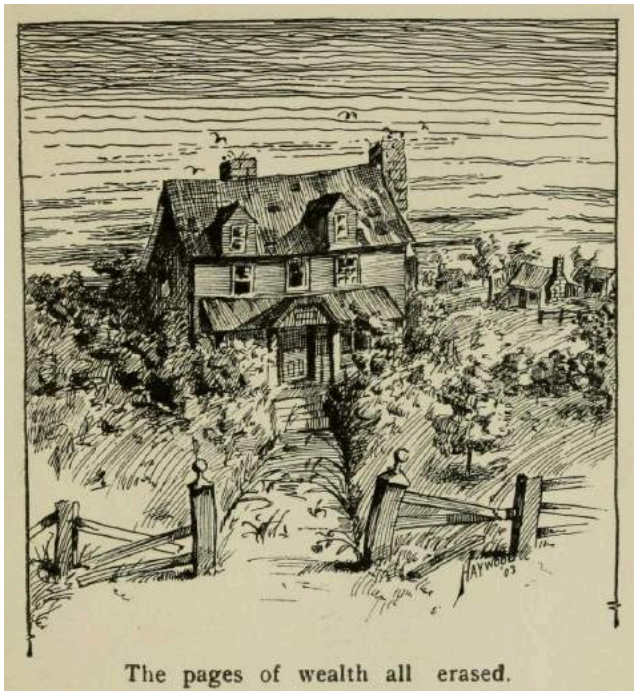
[79] Ibid.
[80] Given that Louisa was a wet nurse for one of the Jones's youngest children in the 1850s, and thus of child-bearing age herself, it is quite possible that she would have been alive, albeit likely in her 60s or 70s, by 1901.
[81] Aaron Belford Thompson, *Echoes of Spring* (Rossmoyne, Ohio: Aaron Belford Thompson, 1901), accessed on Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/echoesofspring00thom/page/46/mode/2up., 44-45. See Appendix A for the poem in its entirety.
[82] "Aaron Belford Thompson". indyencyclopedia.org. (2023, June 13). https://indyencyclopedia.org/aaron-belford-thompson/ Thompson's parents had been born enslaved in Virginia, were later enslaved in Kentucky, and then escaped slavery with their firstborn child, relocating to Ohio. It is entirely possible that rather than just a figurative plantation, Thompson's poem is a reflection on an actual trip he made to a plantation where his parents had been enslaved.

the poem, Thompson takes his reader "far down in the land of old dixie" to explore the remains of an antebellum plantation. Thompson guides the reader through the deserted slave cabins, past the "vine-clad ruined walls" of the big house, and into the "dreary old attic" where he imagines he can still hear "a bondmaid's helpless groan." As he explores the ruins of this once great estate, Thompson states his inability to drum up any "compassion" at the site of the remains asserting instead that the "broken down house all deserted," was a just recompense for the "vile, vile deeds" of the planter's family. The poem evokes something of a reverse haunting where it is the plantation house that has become the spectral being inhabiting Thompson's thoughts, though by the conclusion of the poem, he is able to break free, "leaving the scenes far behind me."[83]



Harvest of Thoughts, 1907, Sketch, Garfield Thomas Haywood[84]

[83] Aaron Belford Thompson, *Echoes of Spring*

[84] In 1907, Thompson republished "A Deserted Homestead" in his third volume of poetry entitled Harvest of Thoughts. "Harvest" also featured images to accompany several of the poems.These illustrations were created by Garfield Thomas Haywood, an African American minister in Indiana where Thompson moved in 1902. Haywood's sketch to illustrate "A Deserted Homestead" encapsulates the vision set forth in Thompson's poem well. Notably, there are several birds which circle around the top of the house. The poem talks about swallows and wrens who have built their nests in the house so these birds could be coming back to roost. But they also evoke buzzards or vultures coming to dispose of the remains of a dead and decaying thing.

Thompson's poem is, indeed, an echo of the attitudes and actions of his forebears who took advantage of the Civil War to reshape the built environment. For some, destroying the houses of oppression was a practical, tactical, and symbolic necessity. When USCT soldiers burned rice plantations in South Carolina, they also liberated several hundred enslaved people, permanently decoupling them from property and from being property. For others, the built environment of the plantation was a place of known resources that they sought to claim and protect amidst the many uncertainties of wartime. In preventing the destruction of these buildings, the enslaved saw themselves as preserving their own labor and sustenance for their families. And others, still, saw themselves as the rightful occupants of spaces formerly under white control. When unfree people moved into abandoned houses or even constructed new homes from the ruins of their former owners, they made tacit claims of ownership based on their collective needs and in spite of a tenuous legal landscape. From the outset of the Civil War, Confederate and Union forces sought to gain the upper hand through destruction, occupation, and control of the built environment. But these actions were not undertaken by white military actors alone. For Black southerners, reshaping the built environment in the midst of conflict was part and parcel of claiming the liberation for which they so assiduously fought.

Appendix A:
The Deserted Homestead by Aaron Belford Thompson

Far down in the land of old Dixie,
Where cane-brake and cotton-fields grow,
I saw there, a large plantation;
Which flourished long years ago:
The cabins, they were deserted,
The fences, all tumbled down,
All things about me were silent,
The slaves had deserted, and gone.

As I looked at those rude built cabins,
On that sad deserted spot,
I thought of my old forefathers,
And there humble, bitter, lot:
I gazed at the large old homestead,
On her vine clad ruined walls;
It roused within a strange feeling,
Like the sight of some dead man's pall.

While I passed through the broken down portals,
And entered the large, spacious, halls,
The old doors squeaked on their hinges,
And saffron stained were the walls:

Far up in the dreary old attic,
As the winds of autumn did moan,
I thought I could hear a pleading voice,
Like a bondmaid's helpless groan.
As I entered the large old parlor,
Once flourished with southorn grace,
Where oft sat the rich old planter,
In wealth by that large fireplace,
I saw no trace of existence,
Where mortals lately had been;
The drifting of time had banished her prime,
And now, shone the wages of sin.

For the power of that wicked old planter
Who once bound my fathers in chain,
Had been quelled by the hand of Jehovah;
Been severed and broken in twain:
In that fierce battle fought at old Shiloh,
By death-shots from Northern guns,
There fell four bodies all mangled;

It was the old planter and sons;
They have yielded to dust in the churchyard,
The mother and daughter lies there;
And the broken down house all deserted,
Is now standing silent and bare.

The swallow had built in the chimneys,
The wren had built in the wall,
Through tangled vines and tall grasses,
The venomous serpent crawls:
The fields in which grew the white cotton,
Where the poor black slaves used to hoe,
Long since they have turned to a fallow;
There the birch and the cotton-wood grow:
'Twas the Lord who tore down that dwelling.
And checked that old planter's reign;
Each slave, He unyoked from their bondage;
And bad them to shake off their chain.

How could I look on with compassion,
And mourn o'er the planter's lost,
'Twas a just return for his vile, vile, deeds;
And his life-blood and wealth paid the cost:
And leaving the scenes far behind me,
I returned from that dreary old place,
Whose grandure and splendor had faded,
The pages of wealth all erased.