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Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820

ABSTRACT

Studies of Charleston, South Carolina, architecture and archaeology tend to focus on the artifacts and landscapes of the city's white populace. This essay builds on the growing wealth of archaeologically recovered African-American material culture and initiates a discussion on Charleston's slave quarters and their settings.

Billy Robinson claimed innocence. Standing before the justices trying the plotters in Denmark Vesey's thwarted slave insurrection, Robinson listened attentively first to his accuser and then to the witnesses in his defense. Perault Strohecker, slave to a Cumberland Street blacksmith, implicated Billy Robinson in the insurrection, averring that the defendant was intimate with other plotters already convicted and that after their arrests he tried to organize a scheme to rescue Vesey and those condemned with him from hanging. Perault Strohecker testified that at least two of the conversations he shared with the accused took place at Billy Robinson's own house. Billy Robinson's attorney summoned Andrew Miller, the white boardinghouse keeper who kept the premises where the defendant lived, to answer Perault Strohecker's claims. Miller stated (Pearson 1998): "I live in a house in Elliot Street—there are two rooms on a floor the front occupied by Mr. Howe [who worked as a grocer on nearby Tradd Street]—the back by me—Billy occupies a room above the Kitchen and no one can go into his room without passing through my Kitchen—I never saw Perault go into Billy's room or into my Yard—Billy has lived in that room for 3 years."

Howe, along with two other witnesses apparently living in Miller's boardinghouse, supported their landlord's contention that Billy Robinson was innocent because Perault could never have rendezvoused with Billy Robinson in Robinson's quarters without their seeing him enter and leave. They did not witness such a meeting, thus it could not have happened. Moreover, they reported that Billy Robinson was of good character and tractable disposition. "Great mildness he possesses," offered one witness. On cross examination, though, Perault Strohecker "described Billy's residence exactly as Mr. Miller had done"— and effectively demolished Billy Robinson's architectural defense. The following day the court sentenced Billy Robinson to death, and then showed clemency, commuting hanging to deportation "out of the state by sea on the first opportunity" with the proviso, "death for a return" (Pearson, 1998).

Billy Robinson's defense, largely forgotten in the greater gripping narrative of Denmark Vesey's Revolt, focused on the most basic of everyday actions and spaces, a private meeting between two slaves in a servants' quarter, a place their masters claimed to surveil. The significance of Billy Robinson's protestations of innocence lies in how the accused drew on white perceptions of urban space and the implicit assumptions they held about their ability to regulate not only that space, but the people in it. Billy Robinson recognized a cultural blindness in his masters and attempted to exploit it first to the ends of insurrection and then as a means for acquittal. The plot for the insurrection would never have advanced so far if black Charlestonians, slave and free, had not acquired an invisibility engendered by white custom, habit, and arrogance. From this perspective Billy Robinson's defense reveals more than a desperate ploy to win acquittal; it is about urban settings where the authority and identity of the processional landscape of the plantation countryside and city merchants' mansions exist in a larger context of segmented social and cultural relationships (Upton 1988). Billy Robinson and his fellow conspirators seen from a slaveholder's vantage point occupied the marginal spaces of the city, the street, work yards, and back lot domestic compounds. For slaves

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Figure 1. 1739 Roberts and Toms map of Charleston. Elliott Street extends just below Broad Street from the East Bay waterfront toward Church Street, and is marked by two arrow points. (Courtesy of The Charleston Museum.)

and many free African Americans, those same spaces defined a locus of political and economic agency; but what were those spaces? What was the urban architecture of slavery in Charleston and other Southern cities? Additionally, how did the slave spaces associated with Charleston town houses relate to the architecture of servants and service in Northern and English cities? In the

context of town house design, the answer resides in the organization of domestic work and lodging spaces in, and behind, the dwelling.

Andrew Miller's testimony in Billy Robinson's defense offers a way into the architectural topography of urban slavery. Andrew Miller described a house one room wide and two rooms deep where he lived with several other white lodgers occupying different rooms. Behind the house stood Miller's kitchen, and for three years Billy Robinson lived in its second-story apartment. Miller asserted that anyone going in or out of Billy Robinson's quarters necessarily came through his kitchen and to his notice.

A row of four town houses reflecting this arrangement remains standing on Elliott Street just above its intersection with the city's Cooper River waterfront (Figure 1). Each of the dwellings occupies the full span of its street frontage and contains a ground-floor commercial area and upper-story living spaces. In 22 Elliott Street, the ground-floor arrangement included street access into a heated shop paneled with planed and beaded cypress boards. While an outside entry provided direct access into this business room from the street, a second arched passage extended alongside the shop and provided separate access to the ground-floor back room, stair, and work yard behind the house. The stair leading to the upper stories rose from a position abutting the passage, turned over the passage, and ascended to a spacious landing that opened into a 16 x 25 ft. (5 x 8 m) front parlor and smaller back dining room. The two second-floor rooms were the best finished in the house. The front parlor possessed paneled wainscot with applied astragal moldings and a relatively plain neoclassical mantelpiece distinguished by its reeded pilasters and intricate bed molding. The ground-floor passage also opened onto the yard that continued roughly 50 ft. (15 m) to the kitchen with its second-story servants' rooms. The kitchen faced the rear of the house, which presented multiple possibilities for access. The covered passage led back out to the street, a door in the rear elevation opened into the heated back room of the main house, and a second narrower door apparently opened under the stair. The yard itself was a work area presenting either a brick paved surface or crush of shell, dirt, bone, and debris.

Billy Robinson's lodgings occupied the single room most removed from the street. When Andrew Miller testified that Perault Strohecker had to pass through "my kitchen" to get to Billy Robinson's room, he recognized only one element in a more complicated journey. Passing in and out of Billy Robinson's lodgings required a passage that led through and under the house. In the architectural settings of the surviving Elliott Street houses, householders like Andrew Miller literally placed themselves above commerce and domestic work. The views afforded of the work yard and the street were intrinsically proprietorial. The householder looked down into the open expanse of yard that separated the kitchen and its upper lodgings from the house; the householder occupied the second-story rooms as a dwelling which stood above the world of work and commerce. Despite the advantages of elevation and passage, the householder's dwelling remained porous and vulnerable in key ways. Andrew Miller, for example, asserted his control over Billy Robinson's movements through continuity—he held visual authority over adjoining spaces. The ability to actually penetrate Billy Robinson's lodgings never enters into Miller's testimony. Andrew Miller's claims center on his ability to monitor passage through his spaces, but they do not reach past the door into Billy Robinson's room.

Andrew Miller's narrative identifies several categories of domestic space: his house, his kitchen, Billy Robinson's lodgings, and the urban lot that contained all the buildings. The significance of the setting in the context of Billy Robinson's trial centered on explicit distinctions drawn between those categories, in particular the architectural and social relationships represented by the location and placement of service and servants' quarters in relationship to the principal dwelling. Andrew Miller's evidence identifies implicit relationships between rooms and build-

ings and the possibilities for movement, observed and unobserved, in and out of those spaces. The assertion of innocence on the presumption of surveillance raises questions surrounding the "transparency" of servants and their ability to claim and transgress the household spaces of their masters. Understanding the meaning of Billy Robinson's defense depends on the ability to reconstruct those spaces, their settings, and their significance to the people who built and occupied them. To do this one needs to start reading Charleston's architectural history from the world of Billy Robinson's quarter.

In Charleston the dwelling represented only one element in an ensemble of buildings that included kitchen, washhouse, quarters, privies, stables, work yards, gardens, and a variety of other structures ranging from rickety garden sheds to two-story brick warehouses. Through the usage of everyday life and work, the urban lot with all its attendant buildings (and not just the principal dwelling) defined the Charleston town house. The organization and architectural content of individual lots varied according to shape and size of the property, the form of the main dwelling, the household economy, and the location of the property within the city. Regardless of size, as one late-18th-century observer wrote, the Charleston town house at a minimum was the product of two elements: "at present there are not quite twelve hundred dwelling houses, with nearly as many kitchens which are built separate" (Chalmers 1790:333).

Billy Robinson's Elliott Street ran from the Cooper River waterfront to Church Street. One of the city's older and narrower streets, Elliott was interrupted by Bedon's and Gadsden's Alleys that intersected with Tradd to the south and Broad to the north. In 1822 Elliott Street was an environment defined largely by grocers' shops and boardinghouses. Of the 22 residents between East Bay Street and Gadsden's Alley alone, 8 identified themselves as grocers and 4 as either boardinghouse operators or residents. The remaining population included a cooper, barber, hair dresser, mariner, and cigar maker. Lined with commercial premises and inhabited by individuals operating at the lower end of the economic spectrum, the streetfront architecture and occupational profile of Elliott Street possessed more in common with Philadelphia and Boston than with nearby streets in Charleston. The Elliott Street of Billy Robinson's day also represented a street in social decline. Merchant houses, along with the shops of tailors, a printer, and watchmaker had dominated the street a generation earlier. Unmentioned in street directories, however, were the slaves like Billy Robinson who occupied quarters located behind the shops and boardinghouses.

Twice ravaged by fires in 1740 and 1778, Elliott Street presented a streetscape that was the result of successive rebuilding efforts (Stoney 1987:133). Among the houses and shops that fronted the street were the double tenements commissioned by tailor William Mills, George Gibbs's three-story dwelling and bakery, and cooper David Saylor's compact but fashionable brick town house with its paneled interiors. These buildings and their neighbors followed a standard urban practice with the ground-floor front room dedicated to commercial pursuits and the best parlor and chambers located in the upper stories. A mid-19th-century plat for one Elliott Street property depicts the outline of half of a double tenement. The brick two-story main house measured roughly 26 x 50 ft. (8 x 15 m) with a covered passage leading from the street to the back lot. The passage opened into a brick-walled L-shaped yard with a two-story brick kitchen pushed back into the far corner with its gable at right angles to the back of the house. The cooking room occupied the front half of the kitchen building with a quarter comparable to Billy Robinson's placed in the second floor. In this arrangement, Andrew Miller presumed the power of surveillance. After all, the only way in and out of Billy Robinson's quarter was through the kitchen, across the yard, and down the passage to the street—three spaces that Robinson's masters assumed they controlled.

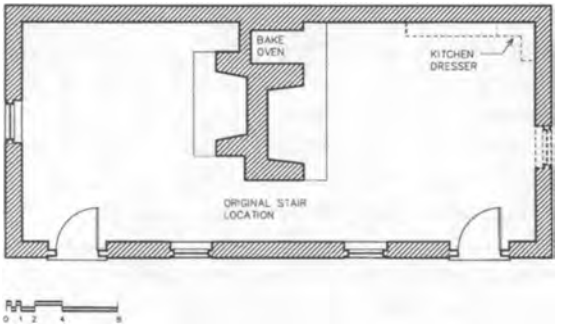

Figure 2. Heyward-Washington house kitchen-quarter, Church Street—ground floor plan.

Kitchens with slave quarters that stood in the backyards behind the town houses that lined Charleston's older streets generally assumed one of two forms (Figures 2-3). In the 18th century, the most popular configuration incorporated a large central chimney furnished with back-to-back fireplaces. Sited in alignment with the principal dwelling, the quarters contained a kitchen facing a back entry into the ground-floor back dining room across a small intervening yard. Behind the kitchen, a second ground-floor door served as a washhouse. The stair to the quarters in the upper stories of the kitchen-washhouse either opened into the kitchen or occupied a small lobby entry between the two rooms and was entered by a separate door. The upper stories were subdivided into numerous small rooms, each provided with its own door and window. Where the plans of upper-story quarters can be reconstructed, the typical arrangement centers on one heated room which apparently served as a shared quarter when warmth was necessary, but not as a regularly used cooking space.

Kitchens of this type include those behind the Heyward-Washington and Cooper-Bee houses in the older parts of Charleston (Figure 4). The Heyward-Washington and Cooper-Bee kitchens presented four-bay elevations with the interior asymmetrically divided into a larger front kitchen closest to the back entry into the house and the smaller washhouse or laundry placed behind it. Both kitchens possessed bake ovens in addition and the largest hearth. The 16 x 33 ft. (5 x 10 m) Cooper-Bee kitchen stood just over 15 ft. (4.5 m) behind the back dining room on the ground floor of the main house, a placement that was typical until the mid-19th-century when Charlestonians began to fill in the yard between house and kitchen with intervening rooms. Less is known about the upper floors. The second story and garret of the 18 x 39 ft. (5.5 x 12 m) Heyward-Washington kitchen were divided into multiple quarters. A winder stair built in the space between the ground-floor rooms, and the front wall led up to a narrow, unlit landing. A door on each side of the landing opened into a front room measuring approximately 8 x 14 ft. (2.5 x 4 m) and illuminated by two windows. A second partition running parallel to the ridge created a back room of nearly equal dimensions, but lit and ventilated by only a single window. Movement in and out of the back rooms appears to have occurred only through the front quarters producing an environment of constant intrusion and little privacy beyond that afforded by everyday comportment. The stair continued up to a pair of garret rooms, each provided with a dormer window and measuring just under 13 ft. (4 m) square.

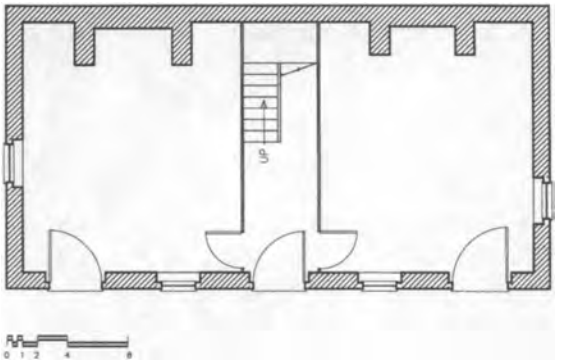

Figure 3. Robinson House kitchen-quarter, Judith Street—ground floor plan.

Figure 4. Heyward-Washington house kitchen-quarter, Church Street. (Courtesy of The Charleston Museum.)

this building. At least two factors appear to have contributed to the ascendancy of the new kitchen plan. First, the removal of the fireplaces to the rear wall underscored the orientation of the building to the yard and to the master's gaze. Second, the placement of the stair, provided with its own external entry between the work rooms, clearly articulated the division of functional spaces, each with its own avenue of access neatly arranged by a symmetrical five-bay elevation pierced with three entries announcing alternate paths of access to different working and lodging areas. One result of this reorganization was the architectural segregation of the quarter from the kitchen. In the old center-chimney kitchens, the stair to the upper-story chambers was reached through the kitchen proper. The new arrangement ostensibly restricted access in and out of a space previously open to servant society. One intended objective was the architectural segmentation and regulation of domestic spaces where servants often worked out of the sight and hearing of their masters.

The back-wall chimney arrangement achieved the same standardized quality as its center-chimney predecessor. The earliest examples of this form appear to date from the 1780s and include unfinished upstairs lodgings, such as the servant rooms over the Bocquet kitchen on Broad Street,

Toward the end of the 18th century, a second type of slave quarter gained popularity (Figure 5). The new form jettisoned the massive center chimney arrangement, placing the fireplaces for kitchen and laundry in two separate stacks rising against the rear wall of the building abutting the neighboring property. The arrangement created a space in the middle to insert a straight-run stair leading up to the second-floor quarters. On the second floor, the quarters on each side of the stair were often subdivided into multiple rooms, some as small as 7 ft. (2 m) square. By the 1820s the kitchen and washhouse with second-story quarters emerged as the favored form for

Figure 5. Aiken-Rhett kitchen-quarter (on the left), Elizabeth Street. (Courtesy of The Charleston Museum.)

where two roughly 15-ft. (4.5-m) square lodging rooms housed an unknown number of resident servants. In their original appearance, the two rooms possessed whitewashed walls of raw brick; exposed, but poorly finished ceiling joists; roughly planed board partitions; and unglazed windows. These rooms stood in marked contrast to the neat flemish bond, symmetrical, five-bay exterior of the kitchen. The juxtaposition of a public exterior and an interior seldom entered by masters and mistresses speaks to larger issues of architectural contiguity and social differences in a world where buildings were intended to signify and codify the quality and texture of human relationships. As the back-wall-chimney form gained popularity in the early 19th century, it also tended to incorporate multiple entries, more precisely defined work spaces, and slightly better finishes in the upper story servant rooms.

The Robinson kitchen on Judith Street, erected in the 1820s, presented a symmetrical five-bay front to the yard. Of the three doors, one opened into the kitchen, one provided access to the stair that led to the upper-story quarters, and the third led into the washhouse. Unlike the center-chimney kitchens, where the front kitchen was typically larger than the back room, the two main ground-floor spaces contained roughly the same area. A suite of two small rooms on either side of the landing composed the second-floor plan. Each pair of rooms consisted of a heated 10 x 14 ft. (3 x 4 m) room that adjoined a smaller 7 x 14 ft. (2 x 4 m) unheated chamber overlooking the dooryard below. All 4 rooms possessed individual entries that opened onto the common passage that continued up to a finished loft containing a landing and two additional 12 x 14 ft. (3.5 x 4 m) rooms. Similar quarters erected on the Aiken-Rhett house next door were remodeled in the mid-19th-century when the kitchen was doubled in length. The new arrangement introduced a full-length passage running along the front of the room and terminating at either end in a large heated room provided with multiple windows. Between these two rooms and off the passage, the builders

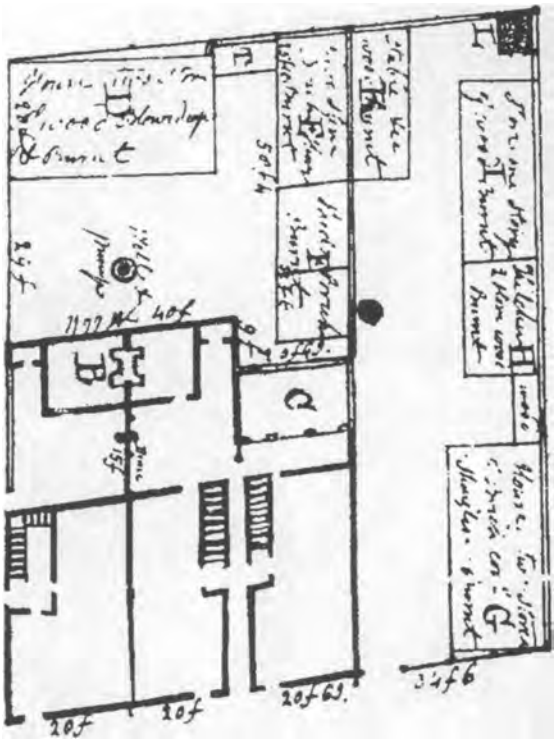

Figure 6. Edmund Petrie house and outbuildings, ca. 1797, Queen Street. (Detail redrawn from McCrady Plat No. 464, Charleston City Archives.)

strung a range of smaller chambers along the wall backing onto the adjacent property. Without windows of their own, these quarters employed interior glazing to "borrow" light and air from the passage. Most Charleston kitchens with their attendant washhouse and quarter functions, however, adhered to the Robinson kitchen and the earlier form of the Aiken-Rhett kitchen. Variation in size and level of finish distinguished individual buildings, such as the 12 x 20 ft. (3.5 x 6 m) kitchen washhouse erected as an L shape behind 31 Hassell Street. Each of the two ground-floor rooms contained less than half the area of the Robinson kitchen, and the total area of the second-floor quarter just equaled that of the smallest Robinson kitchen chambers. Matters of scale aside, the Hassell Street kitchen and oth-

ers like it displayed remarkable continuity in terms of plan and the disposition of functions.

Although back kitchens conforming to the types illustrated by the Heyward-Washington and Robinson backbuildings document the most common choices, there were additional options, especially in the older, more congested parts of the city. A survey of Edward Petrie's Queen Street property in 1797 recorded a plan of a lot where

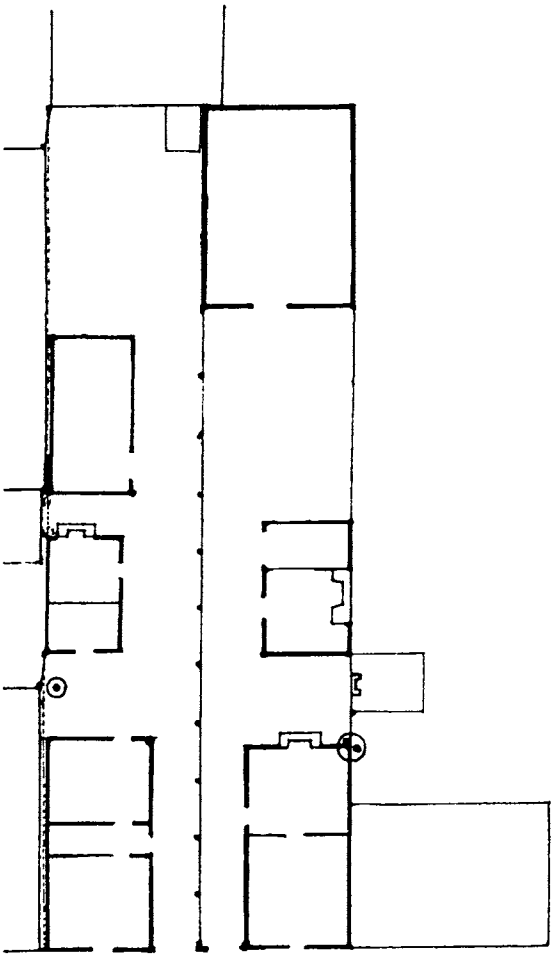

Figure 7. Robert Geddes and Michael Cromley houses and outbuildings, ca. 1799, King Street near Blackbird Alley. (Detail redrawn from McCrady Plat No. 536, Charleston City Archives.)

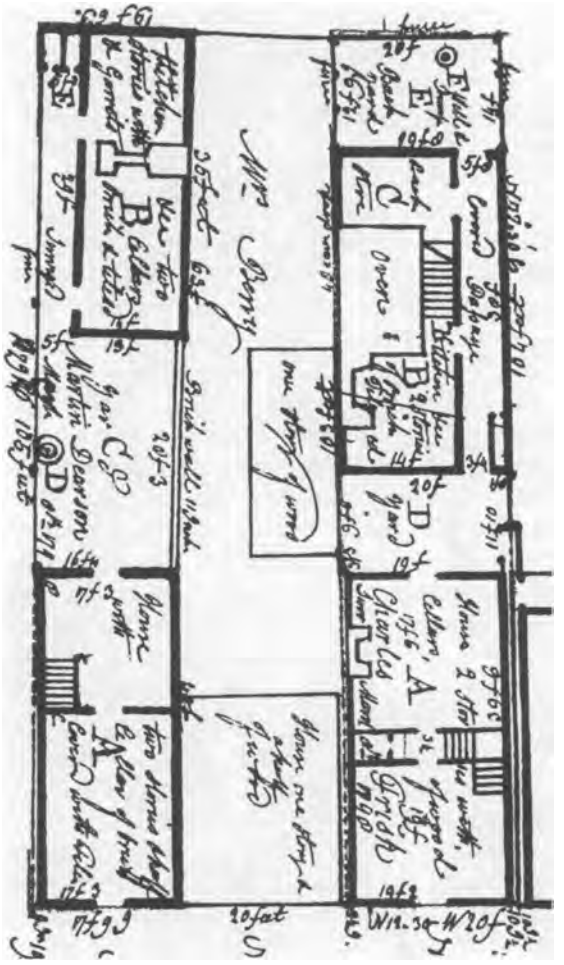

Figure 8. Charles Frish house and bakery, ca. 1801, Union Street. (Detail redrawn from McCrady Plat No. 562, Charleston City Archives.)

a single structure with a central chimney stack contained two discrete kitchens with upstairs quarters for a pair of adjoining tenements (Charleston County Register Mesne Conveyance Office [RMCO] 1797)(Figure 6). A plat drawn for two neighboring houses on Blackbird Alley in 1799 shows one with a one-room, two-story brick kitchen connected to a small carriage house and the other with a two-room gable-front

kitchen quarter outfitted with only a single fireplace for the back room (RMCO 1799) (Figure 7). Townhouses erected in the rapidly developing reaches of upper King Street at the close of the 18th century employed other plans (RMCO 1790s-a; 1798). A house and store sharing a lot on the corner of King and Liberty streets, for example, were supported by one-and-one-half story wood kitchen similar to its gable-fronted counterpart on Blackbird Alley, but enlarged with a small pantry built against its exterior end chimney. Nearby, at the intersection of King and Hassell streets, a cluster of town houses presented kitchen designs ranging from freestanding outbuildings to L shapes, all exhibiting alternative forms based on chimney placement. In other settings, kitchens conforming to one of the two principal types were extended as part of a range of backbuilding functions or acquired other uses specific to the property. The outbuildings behind a pair of Queen Street town houses begin with center chimney kitchen-washhouse combinations and then continue with storage rooms, stables, and privies (RMCO 1790s-b). The operators of a bakery on Union Street modified their center-chimney kitchen to include a commercial bake oven (RMCO 1800s-a)(Figure 8). What unites these varied solutions in Charleston's urban landscape is their concern with the explicit segregation of service from the main body of the house, the provision for slave and servant quarters within these structures, and the conceptualization of the total lot as a house of which the main dwelling was only one element.

The routes in and out of Charleston's townhouse compounds reinforced both the assertion of domestic authority and its very vulnerability. The 1774 Pringle House on Tradd Street illustrates the larger pattern of access in and out of the city's urban plantation landscape. The main house abutted but did not front the street. Access from the street into the single house, therefore, followed one of two routes: from the sidewalk onto the piazza or from the sidewalk or street down the carriage way. The piazza route led to the main and most formal entry into the stair passage, to a secondary entry into the breakfast room, or to a set of steps at the far end of the piazza which led down to the dooryards of the back buildings. While these two options directed traffic of varying levels of formality and familiarity directly into the house, a third, the carriage way, provided an access into the single-house compound at street level. Servants entering by the carriage way literally passed beneath the gaze of the occupants of the main house as they went about their business at the rear of the house or among the backbuildings. Carriages or horses carrying social equals entered nearly at eye level with the piazza. Passengers and riders stopped at the rear steps, stepped down into the yard, then up onto the piazza, and back toward the main entry. This mode of entry was only slightly less formal than entry from the sidewalk. In all instances the organization of the single-house unit ran from street to backyard wall in a pattern of decreasing formality, declining architectural detail and finish, and increasing dirtiness. In an environment where architecture symbolized stature, the slave's eye view of the big house from the quarter and the work yard spoke to different relationships and forms of movement than those defined by the master's and mistress's guests and business associates. Billy Robinson and Perault Strohecker, for example, relied on custom and familiarity, moving through the interstices of houses with an autonomy that ultimately surprised and frightened their disbelieving masters.

The Charleston kitchen and its upstairs quarter was an architectural emblem of a domestic environment and social structure based on a culture of dependent relations. The kitchen and its occupants served the house, and the house and its occupants depended on the kitchen. Household servants asserted their voice in the operations of a hierarchical urban landscape that constantly cast them as dependent on white authority, but where white masters inescapably depended on black domestic labor. The status of servant and slave from their masters' perspective objectified the inmates of the kitchen, washhouse, and quarter.

Like household furnishings that functioned as backdrops and props in the world of sociability, servants found a degree of autonomy in the transparency that Billy Robinson sought to exploit first for insurrection and then for legal defense. Timothy Ford captured the quality of dependent relationships and the critique of authority they contained in the 1780s:

It would readily be supposed that the people require a great deal of attendance; or that there must be a vast superfluity of Servants. Both are true though not in equal degree. From the highest to the lowest class they must have more or less attendance—I have seen tradesmen go through the city followed by a negro carrying their tools—Barbers who are supported in idleness & ease by their negroes who do the business; & in fact many of the mechanics bear nothing more of their trade than the name (Barnwell 1912:142-143).

The presence of servants as fixtures was of particular importance in the genteel households of the "higher classes" where "one or more servants (in many places) plant themselves in the corners of the room where they stand & upon the slightest occasion they are called" (Barnwell 1912:142-143). Servants were not without the ability to protest the whims of their masters and found opportunity to do so in the execution of their duties: "At dinner it wd. Seem as if the appetite were to be whetted & the victuals receive it's relish in proportion to the number in attendance. They surround the table like a cohort of black guards & here it appears there is a superfluity; for no sooner is a call made than there is a considerable delay either from all rushing at once; or all waiting for one another to do the business" (Barnwell 1912:142-143). In situations like the one Ford describes, the social failings of servants rebound to the discredit of their masters as surely as ineptitude in conversation, taking tea, or playing cards. (Barnwell 1912:142-143).

Still, the sociology, plans, and functional divisions ascribed to servant spaces inadequately describe the textures and daily experience of service spaces like the kitchen and quarter occupied by Billy Robinson. Kitchens, for example, were often floored with heavy slate pavers, a practice that enhanced maintenance, but further blackened an already dark interior and exhausted the legs of those who stood and crouched on those hard surfaces. Windows in the upper-story quarters were shuttered, but often left unglazed, leaving the occupants in summer prey to mosquitoes, flies, and other insects or sweating in close, poorly unventilated rooms. In winter, loose-fitting shutters offered little protection from the cold and damp. The smells of cooking and laundry filtered year around into the servant's quarter along with the earthy stench of cesspits and stables. In the kitchen dooryard, bits of shattered pottery intermixed with chicken bones and fish scales crunched underfoot. Wooden fences and brick walls constrained sight lines in a city where back-lot gates and service alleys were a rarity. The view from the quarter outward focused on the work yard, the back of the house, and the narrow passage or carriage way that led past the house and beneath the implied gaze of white masters. Voices in conversation, some whispered, some shouted, penetrated the crevices between board walls melding together in an unremarkable white noise monotony where the plotters engaged in the thwarted Denmark Vesey Revolt calculated their moves seen, but unseen; heard, but unheard.

Quarters over kitchens were not the only slave lodgings in Charleston. Additional quarters were placed above storehouses, shops, and carriage houses. In the case of the Aiken-Rhett house, a pair of heated second-story lodging rooms were placed in incendiary juxtaposition to the hayloft over the stables. The desire to have house slaves available around the clock produced accommodations where servants slept on pallets in their masters' rooms or occupied attic chambers. Charleston slaves engaged in occupations that took them away from the house and even rented their own lodgings, sometimes pooling limited funds and leasing an entire house. Travelers often remarked on the presence of slaves sleeping in city doorways (Wade 1964). The archi-

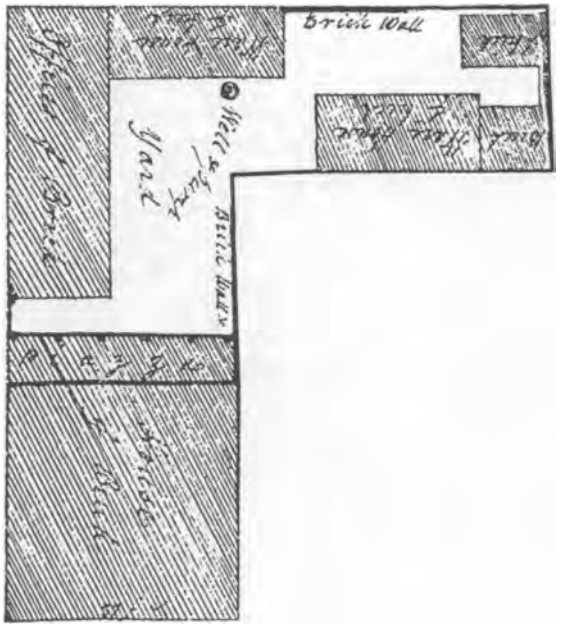

Figure 9. Benjamin Smith house, commercial premises, and outbuildings, late 18th century, Broad and Church Streets. (Detail redrawn from McCrady Plat No. 557, Charleston City Archives.)

tectural expression of the servant's quarter, however, found its closest association with the kitchen in the domestic yard behind the house.

The organization of the Charleston town-house lot and the placement of kitchens and servant lodgings followed a limited number of alternatives. In some situations the construction of the house and its outbuildings occurred at different times or were the result of radical remodeling efforts, such as the mid-18th-century Smith house on Union Street, where the owners substantially remodeled or replaced many of the backbuildings in the early 1800s (RMCO 1800s-a; 1880s-b:122; 1837) (Figures 9-10). In other instances, the house and its outbuildings were conceptualized and built as a piece, as in the case of an 1849 commission to the Horlbeck brothers for the construction of a brick house with piazza and pantry and outbuildings, including a rear-wall-chimney kitchen and washhouse, double privy, cistern, well, and wall for the yard and garden with three gates (Horlbeck Brothers Day Book 1849:67). City lots, even those in the older parts of town, were typically narrow and deep with many properties retreating from the street well in excess of a 100 ft. (30 m). The standard arrangement of a town-house lot placed the principal dwelling on the street, usually with several possible paths of access. For a town house with commercial functions, an entry from the street opened into a front shop while office and a gated passage led from the sidewalk past a second private entrance into the main house and into an open yard. The yard, typically enclosed with a tall board fence or brick wall contained a well or cistern, kitchen with quarters, privies, and other structures, like carriage house, store, or stable. The overall plan was linear.

Room-by-room inventories for furnishings of the spaces where servants lived and labored are scare and invariably emphasize the working environment. Inventories thus list predictable arrays of objects related to cooking, washing, stabling, and craft work. The appraisers found in Martha Godin's kitchen, for example, a pair of fire dogs, large and small iron pots, skillets, stew and dripping pans, a spit, and pewter basins (Charleston County Probate Court [CCPC] 1786:2-3). Beds and bedding, chairs, and tables for the four adult slaves and their four children went unrecorded. Francis Simmonds's Legare Street kitchen held a comparable array of pans, kettles, pots, spits, and fireplace equipment as well as a fire screen and two wooden tables valued at $1.00—contrasted with the $30.00 mahogany dining table with ends and the pair of $45.00 card tables in the main house (CCPC 1815:259ff.) The functional division between kitchen and washhouse is reflected in bricklayer and builder Matthew William Cross's inventory that lists 50 dozen hearth tiles in addition to a full assemblage of cooking utensils described as a "Lot of Pots, Kettles, dutch-Ovens, frying pans, grid Irons, pot-Covers, pails,

piggins, &c." (CCPC 1811:43ff.). The washhouse half of the building held large iron pots for heating water, wash tubs for laundering, smoothing irons and ironing table, and clothes horses. The location and furnishings for the quarters of the 13 slaves employed in Cross's building enterprise went unrecorded, as did those for the 14 servants (and their children) employed in the house. The domains of "Washer & Ironer" Amey and Dinah, the cook, are obvious, but the accommodations for house servants like Phillis, Mary, and Juliet remain uncertain. Specific mention of servant quarters over kitchens and other work buildings as well as the enumeration of slave possessions are nonexistent in late-18th and early-19th-century Charleston inventories.

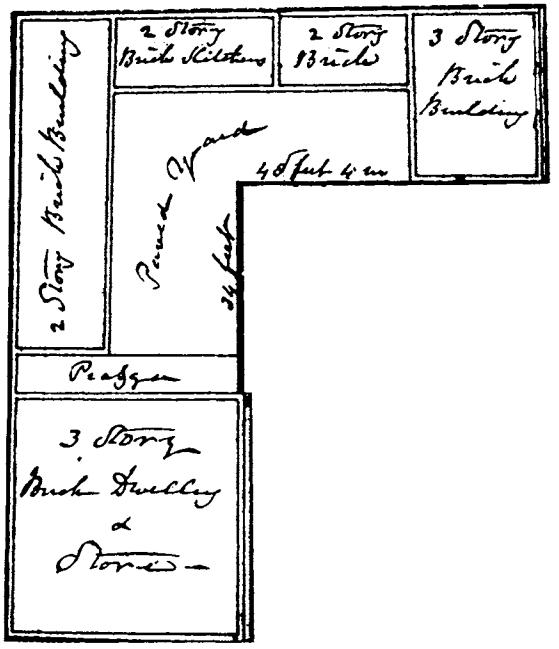

Figure 10. Benjamin Smith house, commercial premises, and outbuildings, ca. 1837, Broad and Church Streets. Note the reorganization of the area behind the house into a continuous range of service and storage buildings fronting a paved yard. (Detail from McCrady Plat No. 485, Charleston City Archives.)

Although few clues exist for the lodgings of Charleston house servants outside of the quarters above kitchens and washhouses, tantalizing references in the furnishings in the house, particularly garret rooms, suggest an additional location for quarters. John Ingliss's 1775 inventory itemizes the contents of both the front and back garret rooms. The front room with its mahogany clothes chest, writing desk, bed outfitted with pavilion and curtains, and framed prints hanging on the walls belonged to a member of Ingliss's family, but the back garret room with its poorer quality bedding, mahogany chest of drawers, and "Hair Trunk containing Remnants of Negro cloth, calico, &C." may well have quartered one or more house servants, (CCPC 1775:452ff.). Other inventories, such as planter Alexander Ingliss's 1791 estate listing, typically mention only the front garret chamber, leaving the contents of the rear garret, like those of the kitchen quarter, unrecorded (CCPC 1791:369ff.). Typically ventilated and lit only by single dormer windows in the front and back elevations and unheated, garret rooms were scorching hot in summer and numbing cold in winter, factors that elicit caution in assigning these spaces functions greater than sleeping and storage. Servants slept and dressed in these rooms, but they did not live there.

The architectural ambiguity of servant lodgings in Charleston town-house garrets and kitchen quarters speaks to the greater problem of servant identity and material life. The cumulative absence of direct evidence documenting the presence of servant quarters through the contents of specific household spaces suggests three interpretive possibilities. First, enslaved household servants could and did possess personal property independent of their master's authority. Second, from a white perspective, the personal possessions slaves owned were by default the property of those who owned the servants. Third, despite the brutal constraints of slavery, Charleston's chattel servants were able to claim some measure of privacy and independence in spaces located at the very heart of the urban plantation.

Given the town-house environments of service and servant quarters and the paucity of evidence describing how those spaces were used, what does one make of Billy Robinson's defense? The most striking element in the court case is the belief articulated by white witnesses that, by virtue of location and custom, Billy Robinson (and by implication other servants, slave and free) was perpetually visible. Perault Strohecker's testimony, however, exposed the fallacy of this assumption. The autonomy of slave spaces within the quarter and the interstices of the house, house lot, and city, was revealed again and again in other trials associated with the Vesey revolt. Cross-examined in the trial of John Vincent, Charles Drayton stated, "I think 'twas in his own room in an Alley on Church Street next Elliot Street that he told me about his master" (Pearson 1998). Other witnesses and defendants narrated encounters behind the house: "He brought the first news of the [planned] rising into our yard" and "Perault, when hauling cotton from my store, told Bacchus in the yard secretly" (Pearson 1998). Similar exchanges were reported in Monday Gell's workshop and on the city's wharves. Laid bare in these terse accounts is the persistent sense of the vulnerability of elite power at its most intimate point—the house. Servants throughout the North Atlantic rim at the turn of the 19th century laid claims to spaces within their masters' houses—and made them their own.

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