

The Challenges of Researching Outbuildings and Urban Slavery in Charleston –Mary Fesak

Undertaking the research of outbuildings and the lives of the enslaved people who occupied them can be a challenging task. Considered to be ancillary work spaces, these small structures did not receive the same level of documentation as main houses in maps, photographs, and written records. Similarly, laws making it illegal for slaves to learn to read and write resulted in fewer historical documents produced by slaves. Sources written by whites such as census records, wills, and probate inventories typically discuss slaves only through their status as property.

Researching the architecture and social history of outbuildings requires a thorough understanding of the history of a property's ownership over time. Deeds can sometimes provide references to outbuildings, while plats often provide the earliest documentation of a lot's layout and outbuildings. Depending on the surveyor, a plat can contain information about building materials, dimensions, heights, and uses. Maps such as the 1852 Bridgens and Allen Map of Charleston may depict the footprints of outbuildings and other information. Sanborn Company fire insurance maps provide detailed information about lot layouts, outbuildings, building materials, and uses after the Civil War. While Sanborn maps sometimes describe outbuildings as tenements or occupied by servants, plats usually list an outbuilding's primary function such as kitchen or stable, omitting information about the mixed uses of outbuildings.

The Slave Schedules in the 1860 U.S. census can provide insight into slave housing, although the interpretation of the census is problematic. In Charleston, census enumerators only recorded the number of slave dwellings per owner in Wards 1, 5, and 8. Each enumerator had different understandings of what slave housing was. In Ward 1, the enumerator seems to have assumed that if a person owned slaves, they had to have slave housing. The enumerator listed one slave dwelling per owner for most of the Ward 1 slaveholders, so it is unclear whether the enumerator was listing slave dwellings or mixed-use outbuildings like kitchen-houses. Some slaveholders had no slave dwellings, indicating that their slaves lived in the main house. A few had two or three slave dwellings. The Ward 5 enumerator also assumed that all slaveholders had slave housing, but appears to have counted spaces inhabited by slaves as individual houses. The enumerator did not list any owners as having zero slave houses. He listed most slaveholders as having two, four, six, eight, or ten slave houses, paralleling the common division of the upstairs of kitchen-laundry-quarters and stable-carriage house-quarters into two or four rooms for enslaved occupants. The census records for the Aiken-Rhett House offers additional proof that the Ward 5 enumerator counted spaces occupied by slaves. He recorded that the nineteen slaves were housed in ten slave houses. There is no evidence that ten slave dwellings ever stood on the Aiken-Rhett property, but there are five rooms for slaves above the kitchen-laundry and two rooms above the stable-carriage house. There may have been an additional three rooms for slaves in the main house or other outbuildings that are no longer extant. The Ward 8 enumerator seems to have considered slave houses to be separate quarters. He did not list most of the slaveholders in Ward 8 as owning slave houses, so the slaves likely occupied spaces in the main house or outbuildings with other primary uses.¹

¹ Douglas Sanford, "Charleston, SC: 1860 Census Discussion," University of Mary Washington Department of Historic Preservation, 2011.

Wills, probate inventories, bills of sale, and newspaper advertisements for escaped slaves often provide the most information about the names and occupations of slaves. The use of wills and probate inventories in the research of enslaved people is typically limited to owners who died while in ownership of the property. Wills and probate inventories do not always list enslaved people by name or provide their occupation. However, the valuation of slaves in probate records can provide additional insights.

The transience of urban slaveholders poses one of the greatest research challenges. Many owners rented houses in Charleston, moving their entire households frequently. Because Charleston address books did not contain sections organized by street address until 1890, it is difficult to identify renters by street address. Furthermore, street addresses changed regularly in Charleston until the end of the nineteenth century. Early census records did not list residents by street address either. These problems can be circumvented by using the Charleston Ward Books to find the street address by year, then using address books to find the names of the tenants. Once the tenants are identified, their census records, wills, inventories, bills of sale, and newspaper advertisements can be searched for information about their slaves.

In addition to slaves owned by renters, enslaved people owned by planters can also be difficult to research. Some planters considered their plantations to be their primary residences, so the composition of their urban households was not recorded in census records. They also did not always distinguish between their urban slaves and plantation slaves in wills and probate inventories.

Despite the many challenges, there are ways to glean information about Charleston's enslaved and the places where they lived and labored. As new sources become available, their stories can be more fully told.

Bibliography

Sanford, Douglas. "Charleston, SC: 1860 Census Discussion." University of Mary Washington Department of Historic Preservation, 2011.