CHAPTER 11

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"Without Recourse to Owners": The Architecture of Urban Slavery in the Antebellum South

In 1857 a New Yorker traveling by steamboat down the Mississippi River was heard to inquire of a native southerner: "Where's your towns?"[1] His cynically posed question points out the key problem for urban studies in the South during the antebellum era—the presumed absence of sizable towns and cities and therefore the lack of urbanism itself. There were, of course, plenty of towns during the antebellum period but they were not built to the scale that a northerner might recognize. Rather than the expected burgeoning industrial and mercantile centers, one would have found numerous crossroads villages of modest size.[2] But importantly, the major urban centers of the South could not be found by traveling through the countryside; southern cities were all established around the edges of the region.

Collectively, these places served the region as gateways that allowed people and goods in and staple crops out. Southern cities during the antebellum period were, in the view of historian David R. Goldfield, "urban plantations." He explains:

> Staple agriculture formed the economic base for the urban South. The proliferation of small urban places meant, among other things, that marketing staple products was the main if not the only economic activity of much of the urban South. . . . In New Orleans, visitors observed with some annoyance that conversations with residents invariably took one track: cotton planting, cotton climate, cotton soil, and cotton labor. Scarcely a shopkeeper or professional in the city was untouched by the economic vagaries of the staple.[3]

The fates of planters and urban merchants were so closely linked that Southern cities even seemed to move to an agricultural rhythm; there was, for example, not much life in them until the first arrival of new crops in the fall. Even if cities were not actually plantations, a plantation mentality was

nonetheless pervasive among their residents, and chattel slavery was regarded as an indispensable urban institution. Further, the presence of slavery gave rise to an architecture of slavery.

Even though the relative number of blacks living in cities was decreasing by the mid-nineteenth century, in 1860 the largest southern cities were still 20 percent black. One-third of the people living in Richmond, Charleston, and Savannah were slaves.[4] It is not hard, then, to understand why visitors were so struck by the dark-complexioned appearance of the urban South; black people were as omnipresent in the cities as they were in plantation settings, even though they did not constitute the majority of city dwellers. It was not too great an exaggeration for Swedish traveler Frederika Bremer to claim in 1850 when she reached Charleston that "Negroes swarm the street. Two-thirds of all the people I see in town are negroes."[5] Even though her estimate was nearly double the actual number of blacks then living in Charleston, slaves were, in fact, assigned many public tasks and thus they did dominate the city's street life. A New Orleans resident similarly observed that "almost the whole of the purchasing and selling of edible articles for domestic consumption [is] transacted by colored persons."[6] The high visibility of black people was one of the distinctive marks of southern urbanism.

Simply by doing their work, slaves effectively converted southern cities into black landscapes. Visitors' repeated observations that southern cities seemed to be "swarming with negroes" make it very clear that daily life in the urban South was characterized by slave actions.[7] Because southern cities were for the most part small, crowded enclaves, the spatial domains of blacks and whites necessarily overlapped with each other. The majority of urban slaves usually lived in the homes or in the shops of their owners; a condition that was feasible since most urban slaveholders owned no more than two slaves.[8] Space was found for them somewhere in the house: in the attic, in the cellar, or perhaps in a room attached to the rear of the house. An example of this pattern can be seen in drawings of the Fearn-Garth house in Huntsville, Alabama, which indicate that the slaves were kept on the second floor of the rear-ell addition above the kitchen (fig. 11.1). At "The Maples," a residence in Washington, D.C., less than seven blocks from the capitol, William Duncanson housed his slaves at one end of his stable.[9] While his slave quarter was a two-story apartment with a large general purpose room on the ground floor and two rooms above, the usual amount of space provided for urban slaves was more confined. The slave spaces at the Fawcett house in Alexandria, Virginia, consisting of two rooms in the loft area above the kitchen, was more typical. Since the urban homes of free blacks were rarely more than tiny one- and two-room cottages, those slaves who were not allowed to live away from their masters' residences could not expect to find much more than the most meager accommodation.[10]

Urban slave owners generally wanted their domestic servants readily available, and, by keeping their slaves in rooms within their houses, masters were spared the expense of constructing and maintaining a separate building. If, however, slaveholders owned more slaves than they could reasonably accommodate within the rooms of their dwellings, the common response was to build a detached service structure, usually at the back edges of their lots. The master's house, its yard, and its servants' quarters were then the prime components of an urban compound, a gathering of buildings that was readily distinguished from the homes of city residents who owned few or no slaves.

In cities like Charleston or New Orleans, where space was severely restricted by geography or settlement density, slave compounds were carefully organized. According to historian Richard C. Wade, the slave owners in these places took particular care to insure that their buildings would clearly convey their authority over their human property. Referring to New Orleans, Wade writes: "[T]he physical design of the whole complex compelled

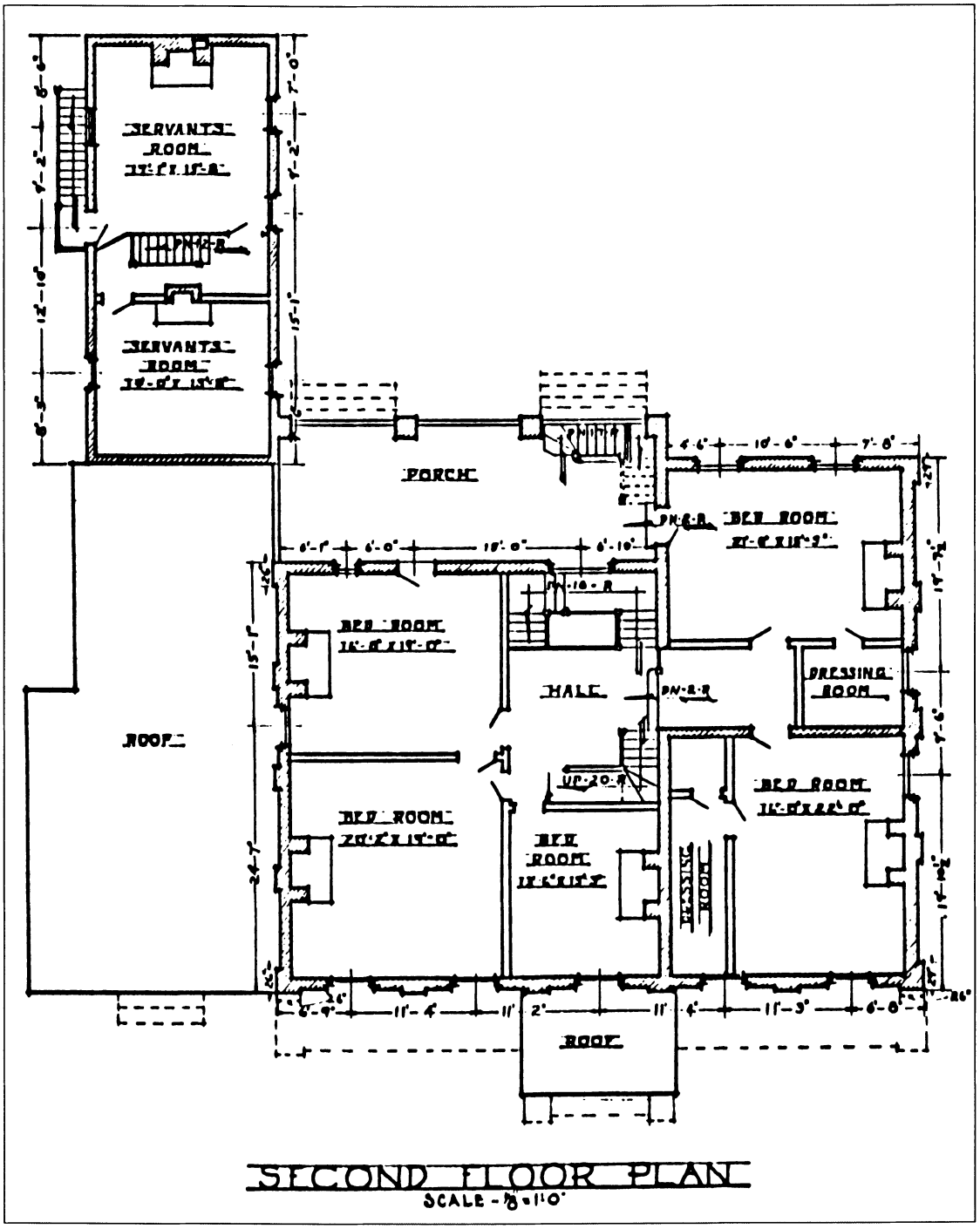

Fig. 11.1. Plan of the Fearn-Garth House, Huntsville, Alabama. The slave quarter at this house consisted of the two rooms designated as "servants rooms" in the upper left portion of the drawing. Drawn by B. F. Cole, 1935, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

slaves to center their activity upon the owner and the owner's place. Symbolically, the pitch of the roof of the Negro quarters was highest at the outside edge and then slanted sharply toward the yard—a kind of architectural expression of the human relationship involved. The whole design was concentric, drawing the life of the bondsman inward toward his master."[11] Much of his description would apply as well to slave quarters built in Mobile, Savannah, Charleston, Richmond, and Washington, D.C.

Wade's summary and interpretation are confirmed by examples of standing buildings. The slave quarters built in the 1830s as part of the Gally house in New Orleans provide a complex but relevant example (fig. 11.2). Since the house was divided into three separate residences, the quarter, at the rear of the property, was likewise divided into three separate units. Standing three stories tall like the main building, each of quarter's upper floors was, nevertheless, significantly lower than its corresponding unit in the main building. Thus, from the balconies of the quarter the slaves were compelled to look not only across a narrow space to the residences of their owners but slightly upwards as well (fig. 11.3). The slave occupants of the Gally house were put in a position that was both at the back and down, and thus their low social status was doubly underscored by their architectural context. With the three household privies on the ground floor, the kitchens on the second, and the bedrooms for the slaves at the top, the Gally house slave quarter was larger than the usual quarters-kitchen back building. More often, these structures were only two stories tall and were separated from the main house by a wider service yard, a pattern illustrated by the Staylor house slave quarter in Mobile (fig. 11.4).[12]

Even within the crowded city confines, some of the wealthier slaveholders were still able to recreate estates that were set out according to the plantation ideal; that is, a "big house" accompanied by a set of service dependencies. One of the largest,

Fig. 11.2. Gally House Slave Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo by Richard Koch, 1936, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

and certainly one of the most elaborate, of these estates in Charleston was the residence of William Aiken Jr.[13] Laid out along Elizabeth Street, the property extended through an entire city block between Judith and Mary Streets (fig. 11.5). The house was built in 1818 for John Robinson, a fairly prosperous cotton factor. Aiken, who acquired the property in 1833, initiated an extensive program of changes to the house and its grounds. In short order he thoroughly rearranged the site. The Judith Street entrance was closed off, and the sandstone steps that formerly led up to the piazza and the front door were moved around to the back of the house where they connected the grand stair hall to a paved courtyard.[14] Along the edges of the rear yard, Aiken added several new structures and modified two extant back buildings. When his new building program was completed, the yard contained six outbuildings: a

Fig. 11.3. Sectional View of the Gally House, New Orleans, Louisiana. The slave quarter is on the left with privies located on the first floor, kitchens on the second floor, and slave bedrooms on the third floor. Drawn by E. N. Maddux, 1936. Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

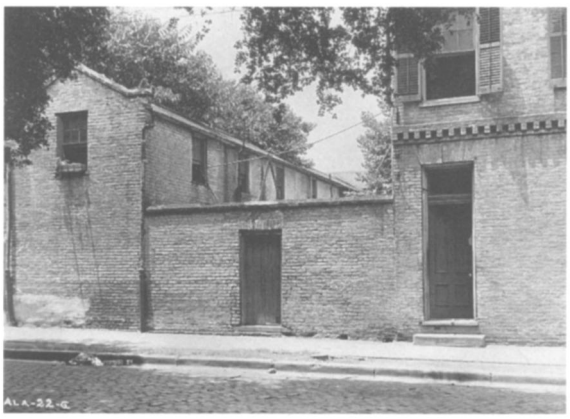

Fig. 11.4. Slave Quarter at the Staylor House, Mobile, Alabama. Photo by E. W. Russell, 1936, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

kitchen, a stable, two cow houses or milking sheds (although one of these sheds may have served as a chicken house), and two privies.[15] Visitors could easily imagine they were approaching a country plantation as they entered the property from Mary Street and passed between two rows of magnolia trees on the way to the house.

If Aiken used the same occupancy ratios as his fellow slaveholders then he could have easily kept about thirty slaves on the property. All of Aiken's back buildings were not only substantially constructed with brick masonry but they were all, even the privies, decorated in the Gothic manner with pointed lancet windows. While such decorative touches might seem unique, if not eccentric, several other prominent Charleston estates also used the Gothic style to decorate their dependencies. It should be noted, however, that while the quarters may have been pleasant to look at, the rooms in Aiken's slave quarters were quite oppressive. Slaves living over the stable were only allowed a view of the interior yard while the exterior wall was decorated with a series of shallow niches instead of windows. Several of the rooms above the kitchen wing lacked any outside windows so that whatever light and air they received came in through the corridor that ran the length of the building (fig. 11.6). Since these spaces had only half-height windows set in a staggered alignment with the exterior windows, these rooms must

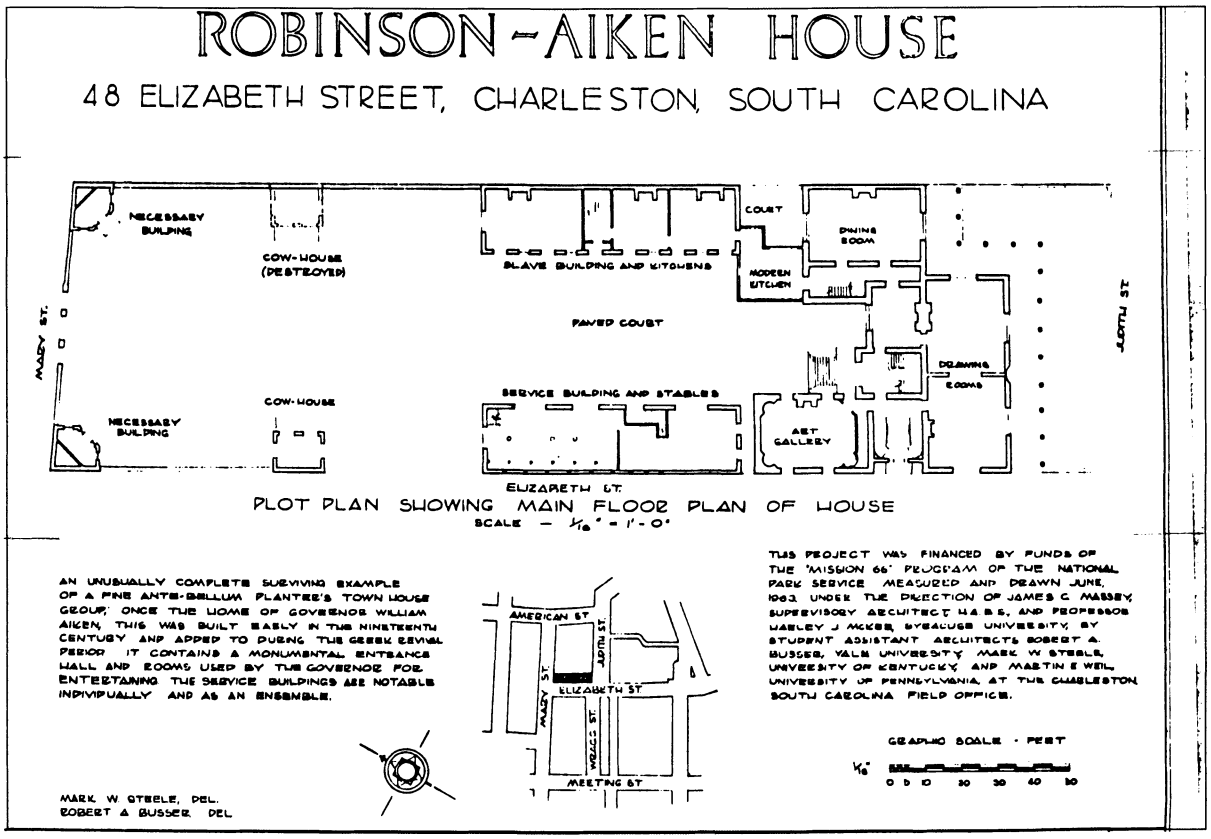

Fig. 11.5. Plan of the Aiken-Rhett House and Its Outbuildings, Charleston, South Carolina. Drawn by Mark W. Steele and Robert A. Bussser, 1963, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

have been particularly stifling during the summer months. The decorative exteriors with which William Aiken cloaked his slave quarters provided a sentimental and picturesque veneer, intended, it seems, to impart positive propaganda on behalf of chattel slavery. The overt spiritual references in the Gothic details denied the evils of the slave system. Regardless of how the gesture may have been "read," it certainly expressed Aiken's authority over his human property.

The Dargan-Waring residence in Mobile presents another case of an urban estate shaped by plantation ideals. The main house, built for Edmund Dargan in 1846, rested on a generously proportioned lot that extended back almost 250 feet from Government Street, a main thoroughfare in the city. Purchased by Moses Waring in 1851, the site reflects mainly his ideas regarding slave treatment. The property was divided into three main zones; the largest was reserved for the main residence and its garden. Behind this area was a fenced yard containing the slave quarters and a privy. Presumably much of this yard was intended to be work space where his nine slaves carried out many of their required household tasks. Beyond the slave yard was a stable yard containing a well and a building that served both as a stable and carriage house. (In 1868 the Nugent house, which

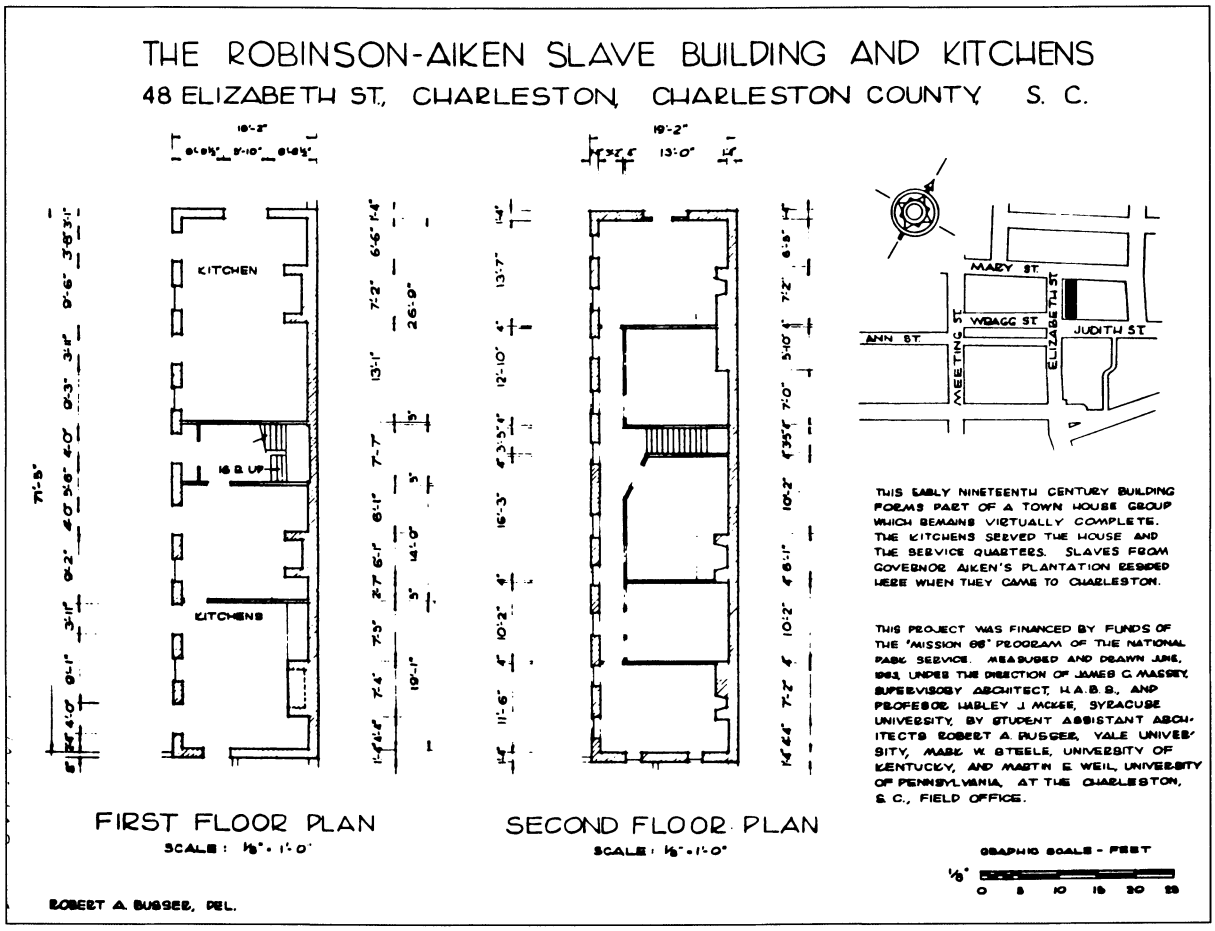

Fig. 11.6. Plan of the Slave Quarter Located on the Second Floor of the Kitchen Wing of the Aiken-Rhett House, Charleston, South Carolina. Drawn by Robert A. Busser, 1963, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

stood at the eastern end of the stable yard, was purchased by Waring. Used as a residence for Waring's bachelor sons, it was variously referred to as "The Lodge" or the "Texas."[16])

The slave quarters and the stable were joined into a single T-shaped structure (fig. 11.7). However, the two elements while contiguous were not directly interconnected; the party wall that they shared was actually part of the boundary line between two zones of the property. The portion of the building within the slave zone was two stories tall with three rooms on each floor. Six of Waring's nine slaves were females, who no doubt ran the laundry operation located on the ground floor of the quarters building. The sleeping rooms for the slaves were located on the second level. The other building in the slave zone, the privy, was shared by slaves and whites alike (fig. 11.8). Divided into three closets, two of them are alleged to have been reserved for the Warings and their visitors, while the third, the one with a door that opened away from the main house into a narrow space between the privy and a tall brick wall, is believed to have been used solely by the slaves. We can see in this ensemble of structures the attention given to insure that the slaves would be

segregated from whites. Waring seems to have marked off with considerable care a discrete zone with fences and buildings that was understood as slave space. Even when he had to enter that space to use the privy, he continued to manipulate paths of access so that a crucial degree of separation might be maintained despite the limitations of close spatial proximity.

In urban settings blacks and whites encountered one another repeatedly and often. It could not be otherwise in a city like Mobile, where one out of every three people was black. A Charleston resident remarked of that city's slave population: "They are divided out among us and mingled up with

Fig. 11.7. Slave Quarter and Stable at the Waring House, Mobile, Alabama. Photo by E. W. Russell, 1935, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

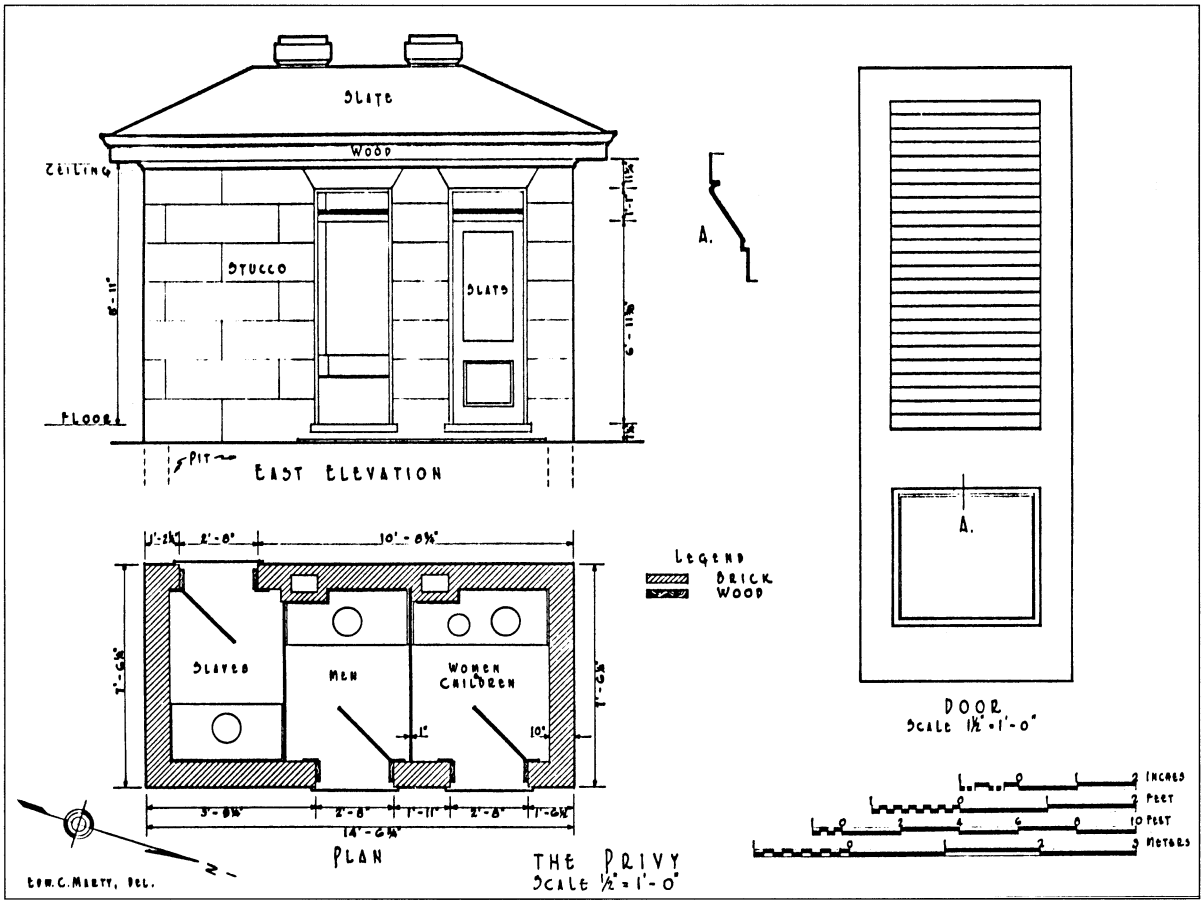

Fig. 11.8 East Elevation and Plan for the Waring House Privy, Mobile, Alabama. Drawn by Edward C. Marty, 1935–36, Historic American Buildings Survey, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

us, and we with them, in a thousand ways."[17] The same could have been said of most southern cities. Given the fact that the social routines of blacks and whites living in southern cities were so likely to overlap, Waring's efforts to keep his slaves' daily routines separate from his own reflect a circumstance that must have troubled many urban residents who were concerned with the maintaining what they considered the proper racial decorum.

While the more prosperous urban slaveholders had large homes comparable to rural plantation mansions with detached slave quarters, it was much more common for urban slaves to sleep in basement rooms, hallways, and attics. Since these were uncomfortable quarters, to say the least, the crowded conditions, which affected both the white and black members of an urban household, provided ample incentive for these slave owners to allow their bondspeople to live elsewhere. Slowly at first but then with increasing regularity, urban slaveholders permitted their slaves to "live out"; that is, to reside someplace beyond the confines of their owners' premises.

Urban slaves sought rooms wherever they might find them; all that seems to have mattered, in their view, was that they would be out from under their masters' roofs. These slaves frequently went to the shanty towns set up just beyond the city limits or to rickety tenements in which they rented rooms. Chief among the locations where urban slaves began to congregate were the expanding mercantile and industrial districts; places filled with warehouses, stables, utility sheds, and all sorts of outbuildings. "Serving commercial purposes by day," writes Richard C. Wade, "by night they attracted transients—white and Negro, slave and free."[18] Increasingly these areas were chosen by slaves as the sites for their permanent residences. Most of the structures inhabited by slaves while they were "living out" are no longer visible in the urban landscape, but they are described in the documentary record. In 1848, for example, so many slaves in Savannah were living away from their masters that one census taker complained that he was forced to enumerate them "in the place of abode, without recourse to owners."[19] In spite of the fact that slaves often endured harsher conditions while "living out" than when they remained in their masters' homes, they continued to leave. Any place, no matter how trying its lack of amenities, was considered better than living with one's owner.

Determining how many urban slaves were "living out" is difficult, but given the fact that they were able to establish well-known and easily recognizable areas—like the "Neck" north of Charleston, the Oglethorpe Ward of Savannah, or "Herring Hill" in Washington, D.C.—suggests that their numbers were significant. These places usually had, for white people, a disturbing, sinister quality. Given the hysteria over potential slave rebellions that periodically swept through the South, a large concentration of unsupervised blacks living so close at hand certainly presented them with a reason for concern if not dismay. A journalist writing in the *New Orleans Crescent* in the 1850s pondered, "Where the darkies all come from, what they do there, or where they go to, constitute a problem somewhat beyond my algebra."[20] As the numbers of slaves "living out" increased, so too did the anxiety level of whites.

Returning each night to a sizable black settlement, slaves found themselves not only in the company of their families but also interacting with free blacks, who owned and operated numerous canteens, grocery shops, gambling houses, and boarding houses. Here, while hidden within a warren of flimsy buildings, tumble-down structures, and sundry reclaimed spaces, slaves anticipated the possibility of future freedom as they saw that white man's law was often scoffed at or ignored. The twisting, mazelike streets and alleys of the black urban domain enveloped its inhabitants under a veil of protective seclusion that black

people soon discovered they could well use for their own purposes. A mysterious underworld evolved, one crisscrossed with hidden passages and entered by secret passwords. While investigating the report of an unlicensed black confectionery shop in 1853, a Richmond policeman "detected a secret door in the partition, and opening it, found it led to a narrow passage. Passing through it for some distance, he came upon a large bar room, handsomely fitted up, in which one man was indulging to his heart's content."[21] The surprising lengths to which the black proprietor went to disguise his illegal business suggests the degree of independence that might be obtained by Richmond slaves while "living out."

The landscape of the urban slave owners consisted principally of their homes, their places of business, and the prominent public places and buildings, an ensemble of spaces and structures that was connected and bounded by streets and sidewalks. While slaves, too, moved through this landscape, occasionally dominating a particular place like the market, the waterfront, or the city square, their prime domains were hidden either behind their masters' houses or in a marginal section of the city that had been reluctantly ceded for their use. These black districts, filled with small, wooden structures, were noted particularly for their seedy, ramshackle appearance, an appearance that offered a marked contrast to the official decorum of the city grid and its architect-designed buildings.[22] While their settlements were criticized as squalid, miserable "dens" and feared as sources of epidemics or fires, what white city fathers feared most was the growing feeling of autonomy these settlements fostered among the slave population. This spirit was sensed in Mobile by the city's mayor, who, in 1856, wrote of the practice of allowing slaves to establish their own residences: "It is to its influence, more perhaps than to all other causes, that we are indebted for the spirit of insubordination so manifest and so much complained of in the community."[23] The existence of an independent, urban slave landscape was a portent of the freedom that would eventually mark the end of slavery.

Notes

1. Quoted in David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607–1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), 32.

2. John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 72.

3. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers,* 44, 33–34.

4. John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619–1869* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky 1984), 126.

5. Quoted in Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 16.

6. Ibid., 29.

7. Robert Russell, *North America, Its Agriculture and Climate; Containing Observations on the Agriculture and Climate of Canada, the United States, and the Island of Cuba* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1857), 151.

8. David R. Goldfield, "Black Life in Old south Cities" in Edward D. C. Campbell Jr. and Kym S. Rice, eds., *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South* (Richmond: Museum of the Confederacy, 1991), 138.

9. See the Historic American Buildings Survey at the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, record number HABS DC-5.

10. For examples of the houses of free blacks from Richmond, see Marie Tyler-McGraw and Greg T. Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Valentine Museum, 1988), 48.

11. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities,* 59.

12. For other examples of slave quarters in New Orleans, see Mary Cable, *Lost New Orleans* (New York: American Legacy Press, 1980), 60–61.

13. For other slave quarters in Charleston, see Albert Simons and Samuel Lapham, *The Early Architecture of Charleston* (New York: American Institute of Architects, 1927), 50, 85, 123, 133, 194.

14. William Nathaniel Banks, "The Aiken-Rhett House, Charleston, South Carolina," *Antiques* 98 (Jan. 1991): 236, 239.

15. Evidence of the earliest configuration for the Aiken outbuildings was discovered by Bernard Herman and Gary Stanton during personal fieldwork conducted in Jan. 1988 when they made measured drawings of these structures. They also measured the extant outbuildings at the second Robinson house located next door to the Aiken-Rhett house at 10 Judith Street. Finding that the two sets of buildings were constructed to the same dimensions and with very similar configurations, they concluded that the outbuildings for both properties must have built in the same period after the same design. It is reasonable to infer then that one can glimpse the original Aiken-Rhett outbuildings in the standing structures at 10 Judith Street.

16. Elizabeth Barrett Gould, *From Fort to Port: An Architectural History of Mobile, Alabama, 1711–1918* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1988), 126–27. The term "Texas" was used allegedly to confirm that the potentially troublesome youths, when they were in their quarters, were considered to be "in exile" in a distant place like Texas, where they would hopefully be less of a bother to their parents.

17. Quoted in Wade, *Slavery in the Cities,* 61.

18. Ibid., 73.

19. Ibid., 114.

20. Ibid., 145.

21. Quoted in Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 242.

22. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities,* 70.

23. Quoted in Harriet E. Amos, *Cotton City: Urban Development in Antebellum Mobile* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1985), 146.