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Burning Down the House: Slavery and Arson in America

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Of those who escaped slavery and told the tale, few inspired such admiration as the Reverend Josiah Henson. No slave narrative was as “instructive” as his, the author Harriet Beecher Stowe believed. Indeed, Stowe used Henson’s pious account of suffering slavery’s torments as a basis for her wildly popular novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Henson’s life, she explained, ran “parallel with that of Uncle Tom,” her personification of enslaved virtue. The Uncle Tom connection made Henson into a celebrity, a living embodiment of “the archetypal ‘good slave,’” the scholar Jan Marsh has written.¹

If Henson was the celebrated “good slave,” then Harry Smith was something else. He certainly wasn’t celebrated; he barely registers in the historical record, and most of what we know about him is from an error-riddled and unreliable slave narrative quietly published in 1891 by an obscure Michigan press. Nor was he, by his own reckoning, good. He’d been “very saucy and mischeivous” [sic] as a youth, and his five decades in bondage did little to change that. Telling his story in his old age, Smith reveled in its seediness. He recounted drinking, gambling, having trysts with white women, punching a woman in a brothel, and waving a pilfered pistol in a white infant’s face. Such were the “flaming truths” of slavery, his editor wrote.²

Flaming, indeed; four of Smith’s tales ended with enslaved people torching white people’s property. Arson was, by the prevailing ethical codes of the nineteenth century, a distinctly heinous act—the “vilest of crimes,” as a respected nineteenth-century criminologist put it. Josiah Henson had established his moral bona fides by boasting that he’d convinced his fellow slaves *not* to burn white homes (it wasn’t “feasible or Christian,” he chided).

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¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, preface to Josiah Henson, *Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life: An Autobiography of Rev. Josiah Henson* (London, 1876), 7; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston, 1854), 42; Jan Marsh, “From Slave Cabin to Windsor Castle: Josiah Henson and ‘Uncle Tom’ in Britain,” *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 16 (2002), 47, 48.

² Harry Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1891), 26, 6.

But Smith? He not only described the deed with relish, he strongly hinted that he'd done it himself. A cruel enslaver named Austin Pease had beaten and framed a free Black man, Squire Taylor, in order to take Taylor's land, Smith explained. While Taylor was imprisoned, Pease's hemp and tobacco houses mysteriously burned down. "The reader can judge who might, possibly, have caused the loss," commented Smith with a wink.³

Smith's narrative is extraordinary in many ways, but its sly confession of arson makes it nearly unique. Although slaveholders persistently accused slaves of setting fires, those charges were hard to prove, and the enslaved rarely confessed save under duress. The abolitionist Benjamin Drew interviewed a formerly enslaved man, John Little, who admitted to having arson fantasies ("I sometimes felt such a spirit of vengeance, that I seriously meditated setting the house on fire"), but Little quickly reassured Drew that he "overcame the evil." Within the whole genre of U.S. slave narratives, Harry Smith's unconventional, untrustworthy, and written-long-after-the-fact memoirs represent one of the only instances of someone freely admitting to setting fires.⁴

Does Smith's idiosyncratic narrative offer a rare glimpse into a widespread yet covert practice? Or does its idiosyncrasy underscore how uncommon arson was—and thus how often the charges were trumped up by paranoid accusers? Both hypotheses are plausible, and both have been endorsed by historians. Arson vividly exemplifies what Saidiya Hartman has called "the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive": the difficulty of reconstructing Black lives via documents produced largely by white authors or for white readers. In the case of arson, slavery's archive is especially slippery. It's not only that sources discussing fires—slave narratives, court proceedings, planters' records—are heavily skewed by racism and stark power differentials. It's that arson itself was an anti-archival act, destroying its own evidence and burning holes in the paper-based documentary regime that historians use to access the past. This has left arson a blurry region in the scholarship on slavery, often in view but rarely in focus.⁵

³ Johann Ludwig Casper, *A Handbook of the Practice of Forensic Medicine Based Upon Personal Experience*, 3d ed., trans. George William Balfour (London, 1865), 311; Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life*, 193–94; Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States*, 79.

⁴ Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery* (Boston, 1856), 220. The only other slave narrative confessing arson I've found is Jourden Banks's. Banks describes burning his way out of a jail but stresses that he left the building intact and "no fire burning." *A Narrative of the Life of J. H. Banks* (Liverpool, 1861), 85. Although not a slave narrative, the 1858 autobiography of a Black arsonist and prisoner deserves mention: Austin Reed, *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, ed. Caleb Smith (New York, 2017).

⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), 17. Arson appears in nearly all major older studies of slavery: Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), chap. 22; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), chap. 6; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 127–28; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 613–15; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and*

Fortunately, there are other ways to approach the topic besides weighing accusations and searching for confessions. In this article, I use methods and evidence from environmental, urban, and intellectual history—including quantitative analysis—to compensate for what traditional sources don't disclose. I do so to make three related arguments.

First, we can better understand arson by reading the landscape. America, I argue, was peculiarly positioned with regard to fire. An extraordinary abundance of trees endowed it with an unusually wooden—and thus unusually flammable—built environment. This camouflaged arson, concealing purposeful fires among the numerous accidental ones. It also made American arson particularly severe and unruly, capable of destroying not just haystacks and barns but mansions and entire wood-built cities. Mysterious, uncontrollable, and dreadful, arson fell far outside the bounds of socially acceptable politics, and slaveholders regarded it with horror. Yet those same qualities suited it well to anyone radically opposed to the prevailing system. The combustible environment offered the enslaved a uniquely powerful weapon.

Did they use it? Individual fires are hard to adjudicate, and recent scholarship has only strengthened skepticism about whether documentary evidence produced by white authorities can reveal the intentions of enslaved people. Yet—this is my second argument—some of those evidentiary problems can be circumvented by considering fire in the aggregate. I examine Charleston in South Carolina and New Orleans in Louisiana, the cities with the largest proportion and number of enslaved inhabitants, respectively, in the nineteenth century. Both were startlingly fire-prone. They sustained conflagrations at a far greater rate than their peer cities with few or no enslaved residents, and their fires declined precipitously after abolition. It's thus highly likely that many of the antebellum South's large urban fires were purposeful. They should, I contend, rank among the most formidable slave uprisings in American history.

My third and final argument is that such fires mattered far beyond the physical damage they did. By the 1830s, as slavery concentrated in the South, many saw fire as a form of sectional warfare. Arson amplified North-South divisions by raising the prospect that Northern actions might kindle

Intellectual Life (Chicago, 1976), 247; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1979), 206, 216–17. Although discussion of arson is scattered throughout the scholarship on slavery, sustained treatment is most focused in accounts of individual plots and places, such as Don R. Gerlach, “Black Arson in Albany, New York, November 1793,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 7 (March 1977), 301–12; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005); Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South* (Baton Rouge, 2007); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York, 2016), chap. 6; and Jewel L. Spangler, “Slavery’s Archive, Slavery’s Memory: Telling the Story of Gilbert Hunt, Hero of the Richmond Theatre Fire of 1811,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 39 (Winter 2019), 677–708.

Southern fires, and this fear became central to the brewing crisis. Enslavers identified abolition with incendiarism, and abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and John Brown embraced that identification. It wasn't just a metaphor. Rashes of all-too-real fires eventually convinced dogged secessionists (or "Fire-Eaters") that the rise of the Republicans posed an immediate threat to their lives. They weren't wholly wrong; the Civil War culminated in widespread arson. Bondage was a precarious undertaking, it turned out, in a wooden landscape.

1. Fire in a Wooden Land

We are only beginning to write the environmental history of slavery. Historians have asked how slave-grown crops changed the landscape and how enslaved people made their way in it, navigating between spaces of control and of refuge. Yet there is another environmental feature of North America—immediately noticeable to visitors—that had bearing on slavery: its astonishing abundance of trees. To a traveler from deforested England like Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, the "overshadowing masses of forests" inspired awe. "I could not have 'realized' such enormous worlds of wood," she gasped, "without beholding them with my own eyes."⁶

America had—and still has—a special relationship to trees. It's where the world's heaviest, oldest, and tallest ones grow, covering the country's eastern half and western coast. Yet the inconceivable timber stores that Europeans like Stuart-Wortley saw weren't entirely natural. Although it is tempting to think that European settlers encountered primeval forests and destroyed them, in the early years the reverse is closer to the truth. "Settlement brought woods," explains the environmental historian Stephen Pyne. As Europeans expanded and spread diseases in the Americas, they destroyed and dislodged the Indigenous societies that had long burned back woodlands to create meadows and flush out game. Without Native peoples tending the land, vegetation grew thick. Unwittingly, early colonists thus wrought serious ecological changes, nurturing the forests that they mistook for nature's bounty.⁷

⁶ Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, *Travels in the United States, etc., during 1849 and 1850* (New York, 1851), 33, 28. Overviews of slavery's environment include Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and the Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 2006); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), chaps. 6–8; and David Silkenat, *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery* (New York, 2022). Other helpful works, connecting the environment to resistance as this article does, are Stephanie M. N. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004) and Tony C. Perry, "In Bondage When Cold Was King: The Frigid Terrain of Slavery in Antebellum Maryland," *Slavery and Abolition*, 38 (March 2017), 23–36.

⁷ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: A Brief History* (Seattle, 2001), 62. Alexander Koch et al, "Earth Systems Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492," *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 207 (March 2019), 13–36.

That bounty suffused their lives. “Well may ours be called a *wooden country*,” wrote the geologist James Hall in the 1830s. It wasn’t merely the log cabins and clapboard houses that he had in mind. It was also the wooden roads, fences, furniture, plates, utensils, and tools—Hall noted buildings where “wooden pins are substituted for nails” and doors swung on wooden hinges. Even the typical brick structure in the United States contained so much internal timber that it was essentially “a woodpile enclosed in noncombustible walls,” architectural historian Sara Wermiel has written.⁸

If the United States was a “wooden country,” it was especially so for enslaved people, whose onerous tasks included clearing land, erecting buildings, and procuring firewood. The University of North Carolina’s “North American Slave Narratives” project has digitized 294 narratives, totaling more than 11 million words. Within that corpus, authors refer to wood nearly twice as often as to cotton. They speak of wood more than they speak of sugar, tobacco, stone, iron, brick, glass, granite, steel, brass, wool, metal, copper, plaster, leather, tin, or straw. If you count, alongside the word *wood*, some synonyms and specifiers (tree, forest, lumber, timber, log, pine, oak, hickory), the corpus contains more references to wood than to all of those other substances, including cotton, combined.⁹

⁸ [James Hall], “Notes on Illinois,” *Illinois Monthly Magazine*, March 1831, 258; Sara E. Wermiel, *The Fireproof Building: Technology and Public Safety in the Nineteenth-Century American City* (Baltimore, 2000), 5. On wood, see Brooke Hindle, ed., *America’s Wooden Age: Aspects of Its Early Technology* (Tarrytown, N.Y., 1975); Brooke Hindle, ed. *Material Culture of the Wooden Age* (Tarrytown, N.Y., 1981); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Economy of New England* (New York, 1983); Joachim Radkau, *Wood: A History*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, U.K., 2012); and Eric Rutkow, *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2012).

⁹ William L. Andrews, ed., “North American Slave Narratives,” *Documenting the American South*, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh>. I compiled all 294 digitized narratives and searched all terms without case sensitivity and, unless specified, without regard for whether a word appeared inside another (so my *wood* search counted instances of *wooden*). In the following cases, verbal similarities to unrelated common words (a search for *tree* returning instances of *street* or *glass* returning *Frederick Douglass*) required limiting my count to whole words or words starting with the text string: *tree*, *straw*, *tin*, *log/s*, *glass*, *pine*, *lumber*, and *oak*. The corpus contains 4,326 instances of *wood*, 2,242 of *cotton*, 10,054 of all wood words combined, and 9,749 of all other material words, including cotton, combined. “North American Slave Narratives” includes mediated texts, multiple editions, disputed narratives, and second-hand accounts, so calculations are more suggestive than precise. On the slavery/wood connection, see Silkenat, *Scars on the Land*, chap. 3.



Wood is King: Edwin Forbes's 1864 sketch of a Virginia slave cabin captures the unrelenting woodenness of its architecture, material culture, and environment.

The reverse of this wooden coin was fire. Although “great fires” take center stage in urban histories, we rarely step back to consider how frequently things burned down in the United States and its colonial antecedents. It was a land, as Jill Lepore has written, where “daily life was a fire hazard.” The White House famously caught fire in 1814, and, by the end of 1865, so had the original President’s House in Philadelphia, Mount Vernon, Monticello, the Hermitage, the Confederacy’s White House, the Smithsonian, the Patent Office, the Treasury, the War Department, P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, and the New York Stock Exchange. By then, two-thirds of states had suffered fires in their capitols or former capitols and four states had watched their capitols burn down multiple times (counting territorial and colonial capitols). The U.S. Capitol in Washington caught fire twice, the second time requiring the president himself, Millard Fillmore, to work the engines to extinguish the flames. (Perhaps it helped that Fillmore had directed a fire insurance company back in Buffalo.)¹⁰

¹⁰ Lepore, *New York Burning*, 48. Important histories of pre-1865 fires, apart from studies of individual conflagrations, include John V. Morris, *Fires and Firefighters* (Boston, 1955); Margaret Hindle Hazen and Robert M. Hazen, *Keepers of the Flame: The Role of Fire in American Culture, 1775–1925* (Princeton, 1992); Amy S. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, 1998); Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of National Disaster in America* (New York, 2000); Wermiel, *Fireproof Building*; Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800–1950* (Baltimore, 2003); Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, 2007); Scott Gabriel Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2011); Cynthia R. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster: The Culture of Calamity from the Jamestown Colony to the Johnstown Flood* (Chapel Hill, 2019); and Jeremy Zallen, *American Lucifers: The Dark History of Artificial Light, 1750–1865* (Chapel Hill, 2019). Although its focus is wildfires, anyone studying fire history accrues an immediate debt to the vast corpus of Stephen J. Pyne.

Travelers were dumbfounded. Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on the frequent fires, as did Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, Charles Lyell, and other noted visitors. James Silk Buckingham was hounded by fires throughout his journeys, including two in the South that struck buildings where he was staying. He'd seen "nothing like it in all my travels," he exclaimed, and he estimated U.S. fires to be "more extensive and destructive" than those of any ten other countries combined.¹¹

Comparative statistics concerning fires aren't available until the late nineteenth century. Yet they suggest that Buckingham's estimate, made in the 1840s, wasn't far off. At the turn of the twentieth century, fires were eight times costlier per capita in the United States than Western Europe. Since fire frequency correlates with wood use, it's likely that, earlier in the nineteenth century when the United States was comparatively more reliant on wood, it was even more of a fiery outlier.¹²

Enslaved people knew fire on intimate terms. Those working among the Southern pines as lumbermen or turpentine workers encountered the wildfires that regularly attended forest extraction. Others, tasked with extending slavery's agricultural frontier, used fire to clear land. Farm workers, toiling from the proverbial "can't see" before dawn to the "can't see" of night, navigated by torchlight. Meanwhile, those in domestic service found themselves cooking, tending hearths, and laundering clothes, all of which also required fire.

Flames were especially conspicuous in slave quarters, which relied on open fires more than ovens and stoves, pine torches more than tallow candles, and chimneys made not of brick but mud-coated timber. In such rude wooden dwellings, things ignited easily. People proved "easy to catch on fire in that time," too, recalled Nancy Washington, who'd been enslaved in South Carolina. Surrounded by cheap and combustible materials and tasked with tending fires, enslaved people were especially vulnerable to accidental burnings.¹³

They were also vulnerable to purposeful burnings. The archetypal instrument of slave discipline was the whip, but slaveholders sometimes also

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (2 vols., London, 1835), appendix I, I, 286; Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (2 vols., New York, 1838), II, 98-101; Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842; London, 1850), 63; Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (2 vols., London, 1855), II, 108; J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (2 vols., London, 1842), II, 201-02, 48-49; J. S. Buckingham, *America: Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive* (3 vols., London, 1841), I, 271; J. S. Buckingham, *The Eastern and Western States of America* (3 vols., London, 1842), I, 179.

¹² Herbert M. Wilson and John L. Cochrane, *Fire Tax and Waste of Structural Materials in the United States* (Washington, DC, 1910), tables 1 and 9. U.S. and British lumber consumption compared in Nathan Rosenberg, "America's Rise to Woodworking Leadership," in Hindle, ed., *America's Wooden Age*, 56.

¹³ Nancy Washington interview (orthography standardized), *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*, South Carolina, vol. IV, 4:186.

resorted to the flame. Branding was notorious, used both as a punishment and an expression of dominance. Other flame-based torments included scalding slaves with fat and oil, pouring hot tar on their bodies and setting it ablaze, holding their hands in the fire, and forcing them to ingest boiling-hot chicken fat.¹⁴

At the most extreme, whites burned their victims alive. “Even the accused witches of Salem did not have to suffer the torture of death by burning,” historian Walter Rucker has noted. But Black people deemed dangerous did. The escaped slave Jacob Green described the immolation of a fellow slave, Dan, who had killed a white man to stop him from raping an enslaved woman Dan loved. Three thousand slaves were made to watch Dan burned alive. “Many of our women fainted,” Green wrote, “but not one of us was allowed to leave until the body of poor Dan was consumed.”¹⁵

Fiery tortures, mutilations, and killings were part of a disciplinary regime designed to compel obedience and prevent revolts. Nervous slaveholders restricted slaves’ ability to gather, travel, read, and possess weapons. Still, there was one instrument of insurrection that enslavers could do little about. No matter how harsh the laws, watchful the overseers, or busy the slave patrols, the enslaved had constant, unrestricted access to fire.

WHAT COULD fire do? Arson is a classic example of what the anthropologist James C. Scott has called “weapons of the weak.” In Scott’s telling, arson resembles foot-dragging, desertion, theft, feigning ignorance, and sabotage—all time-honored forms of everyday resistance used worldwide by those who cannot risk openly confronting their oppressors. Yet in flame-prone North America, it had a special status. Arson was the only weapon of the weak that could easily deal enormous damage.¹⁶

It could because, in a wooden environment, fire scales up mercilessly. Small, quick, and furtive acts can have outsize, enduring, and spectacular consequences. In 1734, an enslaved woman named Marie-Joseph Angélique threatened to make her enslaver “burn.” Soon after, a fire spread from her enslaver’s home, ultimately destroying nearly the whole business district of Montreal. Seven years later, an enslaved man named Quack Walter confessed to setting fire to Fort George in Manhattan. A flaming stick was all he’d needed

¹⁴ Katrina H. B. Keefer, “Marked by Fire: Brands, Slavery, and Identity,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 40 (2019), 659–81; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861), 71; Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1838), 48–49; Theodore Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839), 86; Gus Smith interview, *Born in Slavery*, vol. X, Missouri, 324.

¹⁵ Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge, 2006), 228n; J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green* (Huddersfield, U.K., 1864), 20–21.

¹⁶ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

to torch the seat of government in New York, including the governor's mansion, in an hours-long fire that rained a harrowing shower of flaming shingles onto the city below.¹⁷

It's tempting to imagine such fires killing hundreds. No one died in either, however. This illustrates a counterintuitive feature of large fires before 1865: they weren't intensely lethal. The reason is the shape of buildings. In the low-slung age before skyscrapers, serious fires grew by moving horizontally, from structure to structure. Those not at a conflagration's origin could usually see it coming and flee. Only toward the twentieth century did the risk of being trapped in a burning building grow high. A telling comparison is New York City's worst nineteenth-century fire, the Great Fire of 1835, to its worst twentieth-century fire, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911. The first, a horizontal fire, burned more than six hundred buildings yet killed only two people. The second, a vertical fire, was confined to a single ten-story structure yet took 146 lives.

Another way of saying that fires before 1865 were less lethal is to say that they threatened property more than lives—not only buildings but cash, deeds, furniture, and most of the other physical stores of value. That is why fire control was an elite concern above all. “It is of some Importance in Boston to belong to a Fire Clubb,” John Adams advised in 1774. Ben Franklin organized a fire department and fire insurance company in Philadelphia. When eighteenth-century grandees declared their independence from Britain, fire ward John Hancock was the first to sign the document, and “seven other past and future firemen” added their names below, historian Benjamin Carp has noted. To set fires intentionally was to attack the world of such well-off men. Arson was a strike against wealth, and, in slave societies, where enslavers owned nearly everything and the enslaved nearly nothing, it was a uniquely powerful strike.¹⁸

One reason arson was so powerful is that it was confounding. In any context, arson has a self-effacing quality; if successful, it covers its traces. Yet in an already fire-prone landscape, it hides especially well. With spontaneous fires occurring regularly, it was easy for slaves to quietly add intentional ones to the mix, or simply to respond to the accidental ones with strategic slowness. Arson could also conceal other transgressions, such as theft or murder. Historians rue the archival asymmetries that make it easy to know the passing moods of the

¹⁷ Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (Athens, Ga., 2007), 193; Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York Conspiracy* (New York, 1810), 97.

¹⁸ John Adams to William Tudor, 24 July 1774, quoted in Richard D. Brown, “The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760–1820,” *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974), 42 (the phrase is sometimes transcribed “Fine Clubb,” but see Brown’s discussion of fire clubs); Benjamin L. Carp, “Fire of Liberty: Firefighters, Urban Voluntary Culture, and the Revolutionary Moment,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 58 (Oct. 2001), 815; Morris, *Fires and Firefighters*, chap. 4.

powerful but hard to know basic facts about the oppressed. Yet it was precisely the evidence-incinerating power of fire—the historian’s bane—that made it an ideal weapon of the weak. Not only did arson conceal its perpetrators, it engulfed everything in a menacing fog of mystery.

Fear and uncertainty suffused one of the country’s most prominent sites of enslavement, Mount Vernon. In 1787, a fire there seemed to George Washington like arson, but he wasn’t sure. Accidents happened, especially, as he later wrote, with servants carelessly “running from one house to another in cold windy nights with sparks of fire flying, & dropping as they go along.” Five years later, two more unexplained fires raised Washington’s antennae. He grumbled that the enslaved carpenter Isaac probably deserved “a severe punishment,” but, still, proof was elusive.¹⁹

In his will, Washington provided for the liberation of his slaves on the death of his wife, Martha. This is frequently cited as evidence of the founder’s enlightened views, but *how* those slaves got free is less discussed. By making the liberty of 123 people conditional on Martha’s death, George had inadvertently placed a bounty on his wife’s head. Eyeing Mount Vernon’s slaves, Martha “did not feel as tho her Life was safe in their Hands,” Abigail Adams wrote. A close family friend explained that “an attempt to set fire to Mount Vernon House, in which some of the slaves were thought to be implicated,” prompted Martha to hastily release them “as a bar to similar and worse attempts.” George Washington’s famous emancipatory act, in other words, was sped along by an arson scare.²⁰

And even that emancipation didn’t dispel the fears. Martha’s manumission covered only people formerly owned by George—a minority of Mount Vernon’s enslaved workforce. And so the fires continued, including one in which an arsonist seemingly tried to burn the mansion down. Mount Vernon “has been sett on fire five different times & tis suspected some malicious persons are determined to reduce it to ashes,” wrote Dolley Madison in 1804. Things got so bad that Madison confessed she was “affraid” [sic] to visit the flame-harried plantation. Decades later, in 1848, Madison would see her own house burned by an unknown hand—just around the time she arranged to sell a fifteen-year-old girl, Ellen Stewart, to a notorious Baltimore slave trader.²¹

¹⁹ George Washington to William Pearce, Feb. 9, 1794, and George Washington to Anthony Whitting, Dec. 16, 1792, *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov.

²⁰ Mary V. Thompson, “The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret”: *George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon* (Charlottesville, Va., 2019), 311; Horace Binney, *Bushrod Washington* (Philadelphia, 1858), 25–26.

²¹ Thompson, “Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret,” 446n; “Dolley Madison and the Abolitionists, 1848,” *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Schulman, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/editorialnote.xqy?note=all#n29>.

We don't know if Ellen Stewart, or perhaps an ally, torched Dolley Madison's house. Yet the ubiquitous possibility of arson made every fire, whatever its origin, cause for terror. Discussing slave revolts, the Virginia politician John Randolph observed that "the night-bell never tolls for fire in Richmond, that the mother does not hug the infant more closely to her bosom." It was a fear that Randolph, who held hundreds in bondage, knew well. His biographer noted the "remarkable coincidence" that Randolph's birth place, childhood home, and first adult home "were all in succession destroyed by fire." Possibly that *was* a coincidence, but who could say?²²

IN A WOODEN LAND, arson filled its targets with fear and destabilizing uncertainty. What did it mean to its perpetrators? Historians have studied arson in other contexts, most notably England, where rural incendiarism was frequent in the first half of the nineteenth century. There, fire was carefully aimed. Out-of-work or underpaid laborers targeted mostly isolated haystacks and barns, only turning to farmhouses in the midst of the bitterest disputes. "No physical injury was intended," writes historian David Jones, "and, with a few exceptions, none was given." Rural laborers calibrated their arson (it rose and fell inversely with wheat prices), and landowners presumably recognized that. Fire essentially functioned, John E. Archer has observed, as an instrument of "wage negotiation."²³

Arson could be calibrated because of what England was made of. What historian Eric Jones has called the "brick frontier" had spread over timber-starved Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Builders had long since exchanged wood for brick, stone, tile, and plaster when it came to large structures and city blocks. This made nineteenth-century English arson milder; barns and stables burned in England, but elite homes or whole streets caught fire far less frequently. The not-very-combustible backdrop also made arson stand out clearly. There is no debate among English historians, as there is among U.S. historians, about whether the spates of nineteenth-century fires were intentional.²⁴

Things were different in pre-1865 America. There, homes and cities were still made of wood, flames spread easily, and to set a fire was to court open-ended consequences. At times, arsonists seemed the welcome these, as when

²² Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke* (New York, 1854), 295, 10.

²³ David Jones, "Thomas Campbell Foster and the Rural Labourer: Incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s," *Social History* 1 (Jan. 1976): 14; John E. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Incendiarism, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870* (Oxford, 1990), 133. And see Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969).

²⁴ Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (New York, 2003), 34; Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilization* (London, 1992), chap. 7. For complications, see David Garrioch, "Towards a Fire History of European Cities (Late Middle Ages to Late Nineteenth Century)," *Urban History* 46 (May 2019), 202-24.

John. C. Calhoun's enslaved servant, Issey, confessed to putting a large burning coal under the pillow of Calhoun's son. Calhoun's wife, Floride, concluded that Issey was "trying to burn us all up."²⁵

What was the point of such acts? The most forthcoming slave narrative dealing with arson, Harry Smith's, describes it not as a negotiating tool but an instrument of "vengeance." Smith ascribes a swaggering masculinity to arson; it was a sly way of turning the tables and terrifying those who had been the sources of terror. Decades later, Malcolm X would invoke the same spirit in his famous derision of the obsequious, feminized "house Negro" in favor of the defiant "field Negro": When the big house caught fire, the house Negro rushed to extinguish the blaze while the "field Negro prayed for a wind" to spread it.²⁶

Surely some fires were set in that spirit. But given the evidentiary problems, including arson's document-incinerating nature, a dose of analytical humility is called for. Slavery was an all-encompassing, traumatizing system that left its victims with few easy choices. Arsonists, a fair proportion of whom were probably women, might have had other motives than cunning vengeance, including fear, exhaustion, shock, despair, and perhaps even hope. Sarah Haley, theorizing about nineteenth-century Black women who committed arson and sabotage, interprets their attacks on the built environment as symbolic assaults on the larger constraints that structured their lives. Such attacks, she argues, were "not about success or triumph against systematic violence and dispossession" so much as they were about visibly disrupting systems of control and thereby gaining momentary release from them.²⁷

But whatever North American arson meant, it lay outside the dominant frame of antebellum politics. To set a fire was not to demand rights, plead for mercy, assert humanity, claim respectability, bargain over wages, or engage in moral suasion. Those were constitutive acts of classical liberalism, which was premised on political actors being responsible for their actions. Committing arson in a flame-prone environment, by contrast, meant surrendering control to the fire's own hard-to-predict agency. A blaze in the big house could imperil an infant as easily as a cruel tormentor, and a city fire could become a conflagration. Arson's imprecision made it a poor tool for anyone interested in

²⁵ Floride Calhoun to Patrick Calhoun, 3 April 1843, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Clyde N. Wilson (28 vols., Columbia, S.C., 1986), XVII, 136.

²⁶ Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States*, 17; Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York, 1990), 10–11. A similar understanding focusing on female arsonists is Angela Y. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3 (Dec. 1971), 2–15.

²⁷ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill, 2016), 200. On fires, explosions, and radicalism: Michael Marder, *Pyropolitics: When the World is Ablaze* (London, 2015), chap. 3; Angela Zimmerman, "Guinea Sam Nightingale and Magic Marx in Civil War Missouri: Provincializing Global History and Decolonizing Theory," *History of the Present* 8 (Oct. 2018), 140–76.

fine-grained ethical distinctions. But conversely, that imprecision suited it well to root-and-branch repudiations of the prevailing system. “Fire is a way to negate the world,” the media theorist John Durham Peters argues. “It is nature’s eraser.”²⁸

Fire is an eraser—“a way to make things vanish,” Peters writes—yet it’s also, he notes, a form of writing. Vincent Brown, in his history of an arson-heavy eighteenth-century Jamaican slave war, explains that fires weren’t only attacks on “the means of plantation production.” They were also signals, publicizing “the expansion of the insurrection.”²⁹

Brown’s point can be generalized. Whites often conspired to hide Black rebellion from view. When their slave Issey apparently tried to murder the Calhouns, the family resolved to keep Issey’s act “a profound secret,” as John Calhoun’s wife Floride explained to her son in a letter (“Burn this letter as soon as read,” she directed). But, when successful, arson produced a spectacle capable of bursting through white controls on information. A flaming plantation was a broadcast, and the medium was the message.³⁰

Fire as burn-it-all-down radicalism, fire as a shout by the silenced: it’s tempting to read such motives into one of history’s most richly symbolic cases of Black arson. In May 1844, Samuel Morse’s first telegraph cable, running on wooden poles from Washington to Baltimore, started operation. This was the birth of the telegraphic age, arguably of the information age. Yet less than four months into that new era, things screeched to a halt when the poles caught fire in a serious blaze erupting half a mile from the telegraph’s Baltimore terminus. The fire did some \$30,000 in damage, consuming—besides two hundred feet of the cable—a lumberyard, a stable, four brick houses, and some wooden tenements. A reporter described a “dark volume of smoke and vast sheets of flame” rising from the area, making “a grand and sublime spectacle.” Police arrested a free Black youth of about seventeen, Othello Johns.³¹

Othello Johns confessed to buying matches and setting the fire, adding that he had “no particular reason for doing it.” Or so the newspaper said. In court, Johns’s confession came via two white police officers, who told jurors that Johns had admitted culpability. Because he was Black, Johns was

²⁸ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, 2015), 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 119; Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020), 138. Similarly, see Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2020), 84–85.

³⁰ Floride Calhoun to Patrick Calhoun, 3 April 1843, *Papers of John C. Calhoun*, XVII, 136. Suppression of revolt news documented in Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, chap. 7, and Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2008).

³¹ “Destructive Fire,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Sept. 12, 1844; “Disastrous Conflagration in Baltimore,” *Philadelphia Sun*, Sept. 12, 1844; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Ward 8, City of Baltimore, Baltimore County, Maryland, sheet 458.

prohibited from contradicting them—by law, he couldn’t testify against white people. The jury delivered a guilty verdict on the spot, without retiring to deliberate, and the silenced defendant received a twenty-one-year prison sentence.³²

Samuel Morse’s wire carried, via tiny electric signals, a telegraphic chatter of news items and financial affairs. Perhaps Othello Johns’s vast inferno, if it was indeed his doing, was broadcasting a different message.

2. Measuring Arson

Whether Othello Johns truly set the fire remains an open question. It remains one, too, for Issey Calhoun—and every other accused arsonist I’ve discussed. Black people were so constrained in what they could do and say that it’s hard to get a clear view of their actions, much less their motives, when it comes to deeply transgressive areas like setting fires.

This is why arson was a point of contention in the older historiography of slavery, where it stood in for larger questions about power and agency. Historians who saw slavery as contested made much of arson, regarding it a sign of tenacious resistance. Herbert Aptheker deemed incendiarism “one of the great dangers to ante-bellum Southern society,” and Kenneth Stampp rated it, after theft, “the most common slave ‘crime,’ one which slaveholders dreaded almost constantly.” Yet historians who saw slavery as more cohesive or totalizing—a powerful system offering little wiggle room—had doubts. Discussing arson, Eugene Genovese called for “caution and some qualification.” Enslaved workers had reasons *not* to burn things: their fates were inescapably fused to those of their enslavers, so that a torched crop could spell ruin and trigger family-dismantling sales to slave traders. Perhaps some of what appeared to be insurrectionary arson, Genovese suggested, was just accidental combustion seen through the distorting lens of white paranoia.³³

Revolts—moments when the usual constraints were lifted—can open a window onto slaves’ intentions. They certainly do in the Caribbean, where the evidence for slave arson is unambiguous. Caribbean slave societies, which had been badly deforested during colonization, weren’t wonderlands of wood like their continental counterparts. Still, planters built their estates from cheaply imported North American timber, and they stockpiled the highly combustible leavings from pressed sugar cane, called bagasse, which they used as fuel in the

³² “The Arson Case,” *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 14, 1844; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 24, 1844; “Local Matters,” *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 24, 1844. On laws regarding testimony: Adam Malka, *The Men of Mobtown: Policing Baltimore in the Age of Slavery and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, 2018), 149.

³³ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 144; Stampp, *Peculiar Institution*, 127; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 613. Similarly to Genovese, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), chap. 15.

absence of firewood. The result was a built-to-burn landscape, where arson was rebellion's constant companion. The fires of Saint-Domingue (soon to become Haiti) in the 1791 slave rebellion were notorious. But enslaved insurgents also wreaked fiery havoc on Grenada in 1795, Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823, Martinique in 1831, and Jamaica in 1831–1832.³⁴

No continental uprising before the Civil War matched these Caribbean ones; North America's higher white-to-Black ratios made rebelling much harder. Nevertheless, there were important North American revolts, and, although scholars have not dwelled on this fact, nearly all involved fire. Of the "five greatest slave rebellions" in African American history identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr., four featured arson. The 1739 Stono Rebellion near Charleston, South Carolina, saw rebels burn a path to freedom ("the Country thereabout was full of Flames," a messenger reported). The New York Conspiracy of 1741 was to torch the city. Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia in 1800 involved plans to set the southern end of Richmond ablaze. And the 1811 German Coast Uprising, inspired by the flame-heavy Haitian Revolution, burned buildings as it approached New Orleans.³⁵

Genovese made his own list of the seven most important revolts. Like Gates, he included the Stono Rebellion, Gabriel's Rebellion, and the German Coast Uprising, but he added the 1712 New York City Revolt, the 1795 Pointe Coupée Conspiracy, and the 1822 Denmark Vesey Conspiracy. Six out of Genovese's seven featured arson. (The outlier on both lists is Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, whose lack of fire can be partly explained by Turner's commitment to stealth for the start of his spree.)³⁶

Smaller uprisings featured fire, too. The largest inventory remains Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, which documented "approximately two hundred and fifty revolts and conspiracies" involving at least ten rebels each. For roughly fifty of these, Aptheker presented evidence of arson.³⁷

Yet Aptheker's findings require caution, in ways that illustrate the interpretive problems surrounding arson. Aptheker's book was an attempt to dispel myths of Black docility. To build that case, Aptheker credited even loose talk of insurrection, and many incidents he listed were backed by just a single source or described in only the vaguest of terms—a "serious attempt at revolt"

³⁴ Bonham C. Richardson, *Igniting the Caribbean's Past: Fire in British West Indian History* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Christopher M. Church, "The Last Resort of the Slave: Fire and Labour in the Late Nineteenth-Century French Caribbean," *French History*, 32 (Dec. 2018), 511–31.

³⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "What Were the Earliest Rebellions by African Americans?" *The Root*, April 22, 2013, <http://www.theroot.com/what-were-the-earliest-rebellions-by-african-americans-1790896118>; William Stephens journal, Sept. 12, 1739, in *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, ed. Allen D. Candler (32 vols., Atlanta, 1904–1916), IV, 412.

³⁶ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 4.

³⁷ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 162.

somewhere in South Carolina in 1759 or maroon activities of “notable proportions” in three states in 1818. Aptheker assumed that whites must have minimized Black resistance in the documentary record, so he corrected for that bias by taking seriously their slightest mentions of rebellion. From evidentiary scraps, he inferred a land crawling with torch-bearing rebels.³⁸

Perhaps it was. But North American revolts were put down swiftly, many before even starting (Gates, Genovese, and Aptheker all include unrealized conspiracies on their lists). Consequently, they offer much less information than the Caribbean uprisings do. Almost all surviving evidence comes to us mediated through white authorities. And recently historians have suggested that those authorities inflated and even invented allegations of rebellion, producing an unreliable documentary record—but unreliable in the other direction than Aptheker supposed.

In 2001, Michael P. Johnson influentially argued that one of the largest supposed uprisings, Denmark Vesey’s plot, was largely fabricated. Ostensibly, Vesey planned to recruit thousands of enslaved Charlestonians to storm the city, set most of it aflame, and flee to Haiti. But none of those things happened. The Charleston court that prosecuted Vesey, Johnson noted, was motivated to find evidence of a vast conspiracy, and, unsurprisingly, it did. It relied on “coerced and tortured witnesses” who “had every reason to fear for their lives,” it refused to hear even hear testimony from many of the accused, and it “made thousands of changes” to the official record to smooth out ambiguities, Johnson wrote. On this flimsy basis, the state hanged Vesey and more than thirty of his alleged co-conspirators, and vigilantes burned down his church.³⁹

Recently, scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes have emphasized the inadequacies of slavery’s documentary record and the “archival violence” involved in making it. Building on that literature, Jason T. Sharples has examined slave conspiracies in early America and concluded that what Johnson saw in Vesey’s case was common. The best evidence for revolutionary intent, Sharples notes, comes from confessions that slaveholders extracted “through calculated terror.” Sharples particularly doubts the frequent accusations that slaves planned to torch towns. Such fears, he believes, stemmed from slaveholders’ own cultural backgrounds. Classically educated whites had read histories of arson-based slave uprisings in ancient Rome, and they were haunted by Catholic burnings of Protestant homes in the Irish Rebellion of 1641. They transposed those fears to their own context and then,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 197, 262.

³⁹ Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 58 (Oct. 2001), 919, 945, 942. And see forum: “The Making of a Slavery Conspiracy, Part 2,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (Jan. 2002), 135–202.

in the style of a witch hunt, forced slaves to confess, and used the confessions as a pretext to further torture and kill Black people.⁴⁰

Neither Johnson nor Sharples argues that slaves *never* set fires. But they've identified intractable problems with our evidence for both revolutionary and quotidian arson. Even when accused incendiaries reportedly confessed, as we have records of both Issey Calhoun and Othello Johns doing, it's plausible that their confessions were coerced or even fabricated. We're left struggling to distinguish Black fire from white fear.

CONSIDERED INDIVIDUALLY, arson cases present difficult evidentiary problems. But there's another option, which is to consider arson in the aggregate. Rather than asking whether specific fires were intentionally kindled, we can look at fires in general. Did they occur often enough to suggest arson? This sidesteps evidentiary problems, as we need to know only how frequently fires erupted, not who seemed to set them.

Some specificity is needed. I have thus far discussed the United States and its colonial precursors as a whole, given that wood and fire were ubiquitous through the Civil War. For quantitative analysis, however, it helps to focus on cities in the antebellum period, roughly 1830–1860. First, that's when and where the best records concerning fires come from. Second, by the antebellum period slavery was largely sectional rather than national, allowing for comparisons between slave and free states.

Rather than following the allegations, this approach follows the fires. In doing so, it directs attention to phenomena that aren't always the focus in discussions of arson: the South's urban conflagrations. Some of these were enormous. The best catalog, David Dana's *The Fireman* (1858), records ten slave-state city fires destroying one hundred buildings or more between 1830 and 1850. Of these, print sources directly blamed six on arson (the *Baltimore Sun's* editors reported wrestling with whether to break the silence on the delicate subject). In another two, newspapers noted ongoing spates of incendiarism in the stricken cities. If these print sources were right about where to lay the blame, the South's vast urban fires deserve to be central to discussions of slave arson—and slave resistance.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997); Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; and Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016); Jason T. Sharples, *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2020), 22.

⁴¹ David D. Dana, *The Fireman* (Boston, 1858). Dana's ten: Cumberland, Md., April 15, 1833; Charleston, S.C., June 16, 1835; New Orleans, April 8, 1837; Charleston, S.C., April 27, 1838; Mobile, Oct. 7, 1839; Wilmington, N.C., Jan. 17, 1840; Wilmington, N.C., April 30, 1843; New Orleans, May 18, 1844; Fayetteville, N.C., June 13, 1845; Charleston, S.C., May 7, 1849 (Dana wrongly lists the Fayetteville fire as occurring in Fayetteville, La., on June 1, 1845). Direct arson attributions include Charleston 1835: *Richmond Enquirer*, June 12, 1835; Charleston 1838:

The worst-hit spot on Dana's list is Denmark Vesey's city: Charleston. This is suggestive, as Charleston wasn't only the fire capital of the South, it was also, as Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts call it, "the capital of American slavery." Nearly half of all enslaved captives brought into the country came via Charleston and its environs. Consequently, it was the only major U.S. city where slaves regularly formed a majority. As a Southern port, Charleston was tightly connected to the Caribbean, including via Black seamen who brought news of insurrectionary conflagrations there (Vesey had lived in Saint-Domingue). Being a port also meant that Charleston was well-stocked with powder in case of war and that its wooden warehouses brimmed with flammable slave-produced goods: cotton, tobacco, and pine-derived naval stores. "We know of no town in the Union the materials and local circumstances of which afford more facilities to the incendiary," a St. Louis paper observed. Indeed, the city was almost built for arson.⁴²

Certainly, fires there were rampant—a "way of life," historian Daniel J. Crooks Jr. has written. Charleston was the site of North America's first fire insurance company (a large blaze soon wiped the firm out) and the subject of the world's first known fire insurance map. "If any city on the continent could claim to be expert in the extinguishment of fires from dearly bought experience, it is ours," wrote a Charlestonian in 1854. "There are few buildings in Charleston that do not rest on the ashes of former ones." The city endured conflagrations in 1740 (300 buildings), 1778 (250 buildings), 1796 (300 buildings), 1835 (182 buildings), 1838 (1,158 buildings), 1849 (150 buildings), and 1861 (1,300 buildings). The origins of those fires bunched tightly around the market—the center of white property—and citydwellers blamed arsonists for every one.⁴³

"Public Meeting in Behalf of Charleston," *New Orleans Courier*, May 10, 1838; Mobile 1839: "Mobile—Confirmation," *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 21, 1839; Wilmington 1843: Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States of North America*, I, 291; Fayetteville 1845: "Ruinous Fire in Fayetteville," *Augusta Chronicle*, June 20, 1845; Charleston 1849: "Fire in Charleston on Monday Morning," *Greenville Mountaineer*, May 11, 1849. General talk of incendiarism is New Orleans 1837: "Destructive Fire—Fifty Houses Burnt!" *New Orleans Picayune*, April 9, 1837 and "Barclay's Benefit," *New Orleans Picayune*, April 15, 1837; New Orleans 1844: "Another Fire," *New Orleans Picayune*, May 19, 1844 and "Great Fire at New Orleans," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, May 28, 1844.

⁴² Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York, 2018), 6; *St. Louis Daily Commercial Bulletin*, July 22, 1835. On Charleston's fires: Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 292–97; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, "The Blood-Thirsty Tiger: Charleston and the Psychology of Fire," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 79 (Oct. 1978), 281–95; Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, S.C., 1989); Daniel J. Crooks Jr., *Charleston is Burning!: Two Centuries of Fires and Flames* (Charleston, 2009); and Stacy Groening, "Pyrophobia: Euro-American Fear of Slaves and Fire in Charleston, South Carolina, 1820–1860" (M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 2009).

⁴³ Crooks, *Charleston is Burning*, 15; Charles Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston, 1854), 96. Arson accusations: 1740: Wood, *Black Majority*, 295; 1778: Crooks, *Charleston is Burning*, 25; 1796: Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 184–85; 1835: *St. Louis Daily Commercial Bulletin*, July 22, 1835; 1838: "Still Farther Attempts to Fire Our City," *New York Spectator*, June 18, 1838; 1849 and 1861: Crooks, *Charleston is Burning*, 75, 253–55.



Visualizing Danger: The world's first known fire insurance map, Edmund Petrie's *Ichnography of Charleston, South Carolina* (1788), revealed Charleston's perilous reliance on wooden construction.

Were Black Charlestonians culpable? The question arises in *The Life and Adventures of Zamba* (1847), a narrative ostensibly written by an African man who'd been enslaved in South Carolina. In it, Zamba (a pen name) notes how Charleston was “built chiefly of wood” and thus “suffered greatly from fire.” Yet wood wasn't its only risk factor. “More than once since I resided in it, at least one-half of the city has been completely destroyed within twenty-four hours; and I am quite aware that most of these fires have originated from the prevalence of slavery,” Zamba asserts. Enslaved people were regularly hanged for arson, and, in Zamba's view, they were probably guilty. Even when they didn't set the fires, they seemed to “enjoy” them, Zamba writes. They “delighted” in seeing slaveholders panic.⁴⁴

Zamba's memoirs have prompted scholarly skepticism—they might have been written by their Scottish editor. Yet there is reason to think that, whoever wrote them, they were right about the fires. Charleston suffered far more large fires than its closest peers. The four cities in the 1850 census with populations nearest to Charleston's were Buffalo, Louisville, Providence, and Washington, D.C. All four were colder than Charleston, thus more reliant on flame for heat, and in dryer areas—another fire hazard. Still, those cities, with small to no slave

⁴⁴ Zamba, *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, An African Negro King*, ed. Peter Neilson (London, 1847), 202, 203.

populations, came nowhere near Charleston's fire record. In the antebellum period, Charleston sustained *four times* the damage from large fires as they did.⁴⁵

Charleston, where the most slaves were imported, had the highest proportion of enslaved inhabitants, but New Orleans, where the most slaves were sold, had the highest absolute number. Did it also burn? Yes. Like Charleston, it was a wooden port city tightly tied to the combustible slave societies of the Caribbean. And, also like Charleston, despite its humidity it suffered a wildly disproportionate number of large fires: 3.25 times the average of its four closest comparators, all of which were colder and dryer. Surely it was fire rates such as these that prompted the American Fire Insurance Company, in 1820, to stop issuing policies in slave states.⁴⁶

Still, perhaps there's some other explanation for Charleston's and New Orleans's alarming combustibility. To check, I asked what happened after emancipation. If slavery had indeed caused many of Charleston's and New Orleans's fires, its end should have brought their fire rates down. I used ProQuest's Historical Newspapers database to count reports of fires in two ten-year periods on either side of the Civil War, 1850–1859 and 1867–1876.

Of course, other factors, unrelated to slavery, could affect these counts. New building technologies might lead to fewer fire reports, or improved journalism might lead to more. To address such complications, I compared Charleston and New Orleans to similarly sized free cities, Detroit and Cincinnati (Charleston's and Detroit's 1860 populations were 40,522 and 45,619, respectively; New Orleans's and Cincinnati's were 168,675 and 161,044). This is a social scientific method called difference in differences, by which I used free cities as a control to understand the slave cities. And to measure all cities uniformly so that, for instance, the appearance of a major Charleston paper in ProQuest's database halfway through the date range wouldn't skew things, I considered only reports published in New York and Boston, far from every city in question.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Graham White, "Inventing the Past?: The Remarkable Story of an African King in Charleston," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 12 (Dec. 1993), 1–14. The cost of Charleston's large fires, by 1850 population, was 4.3 times that of its four closest comparators (weighted average). Louisville and Washington had slaves, just far fewer than Charleston. All figures from Dana, *Fireman*, whose coverage of large fires starts in the 1830s and ends in the late 1850s, and thus excludes Charleston's major eighteenth-century fires and its devastating conflagration of 1861. Although *Fireman*'s figures are incomplete and imperfect, they're the best to use, as they were compiled without slave arson in mind. Drawn from newspapers (concentrated in the North) and compiled by a Bostonian, if anything, *Fireman* undercounted Southern fires.

⁴⁶ The same method as above, comparing New Orleans to Brooklyn, Boston, Cincinnati, and Baltimore (which had slaves, though far fewer than New Orleans). I excluded Philadelphia due to substantial incongruence between how the census defined the city and how Dana did. Fire insurance information in Matthew Mason, "The Fire-Brand of Discord: The North, the South, and the Savannah Fire of 1820," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 92 (Winter 2008), 457.

⁴⁷ I searched New York and Boston newspapers, 1850–1859 and 1867–1876, for articles containing *fire*, *burn*, *burned*, *incendiary*, *incendiaries*, *conflagration*, *destruction*, or *losses* in their titles

In all, I logged 354 fires from all four cities. There are places in this fire register where the possibility of slave arson suggests itself vividly, such as the month in 1852 when a cotton-trading ship in Charleston caught fire twice, followed by another cotton-trading ship burning the next day. But my question concerned change over time. Did Charleston and New Orleans report higher, lower, or unchanged rates of fires after abolition, relative to Detroit and Cincinnati? If Southern fire rates held steady or grew, the “slavery caused the fires” hypothesis fails this test. If they dropped, it passes.⁴⁸

In 1850–1859, Eastern papers registered ten percent more fires per inhabitant from the slave cities combined than from the free cities combined. This figure says little on its own, as Eastern journalistic coverage of distant fires was incomplete and might have varied by city in attentiveness. But it serves as a baseline for comparison to the postbellum period. That period, Reconstruction, was rife with racial violence and terror in the South. Even so, reported fires per inhabitant in the former slave cities plummeted to *less than half* those of their free counterparts (43 percent). Something happened between 1859 and 1867 that dramatically reduced fires reported from Charleston and New Orleans. The most obvious candidate? Abolition. Forget hydrants—ending slavery and giving Black Southerners even a temporary modicum of political power appears to have been one of the most effective fire safety measures ever devised.⁴⁹

If the volatile combination of wood and slavery indeed kindled the antebellum South’s urban fires, then some of those fires rank among the most formidable slave insurgencies in U.S. history. Denmark Vesey, known for plotting to set Charleston aflame, is now regarded as a significant figure in U.S. history. It’s unclear if Vesey truly sought to burn his city, but someone likely *did* torch Charleston—in fact, it appears that multiple people did. These statistical Veseyes are nameless; we can’t even know which of Charleston’s conflagrations they set. We can only observe that Charleston suffered a suspiciously large number of fires, and that these went out with abolition.

In identifying some of the antebellum South’s urban fires as insurrections—indeed, major ones—a note of caution is needed. Those fires

and *Charleston, New Orleans, Detroit, or Cincinnati* anywhere. I counted only distinct or enumerated fires. Two articles describing the same fire would count once, whereas one article describing two fires would count twice.

⁴⁸ “Fire in New-Orleans,” *New York Daily Tribune*, April 16, 1850; “The Ship ‘Prentice’ on Fire Again,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 27 May 1852; “Fire in the British Bark, Princess Alice,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1852.

⁴⁹ To calculate fires reported per 100,000 inhabitants, I used decennial federal census counts and interpolated for non-census years by assuming linear population growth. The slave cities together averaged 4.62 fires per 100,000 inhabitants in 1850–1859 (5.45 in Charleston, 4.34 in New Orleans) and the free cities averaged 4.21 (5.96 in Detroit, 3.84 in Cincinnati). In 1867–1876, the former slave cities together averaged 2.13 fires per 100,000 inhabitants (1.85 in Charleston and 2.21 in New Orleans) and the free cities averaged 5.01 (3.20 in Detroit, 5.67 in Cincinnati).

didn't require extensive coordination, as other revolts did. Nor were they the deadliest uprisings: a large fire might kill more than five people, but not the dozens killed by Nat Turner's rebellion. Arson's magnitude was rather in property damage, of which it did an extraordinary amount, wiping out fortunes amassed over lifetimes in hours, and driving thousands panicked from their homes. Perhaps as important were the fearsome spectacles fires created—the sight of dozens or hundreds of buildings burning was not easily forgotten. Each blaze demonstrated, not only in Charleston or New Orleans but throughout the country, that the peculiar institution was peculiarly combustible.

3. The Fiery Trial

White fears about fire were, at first, felt in all regions. In 1641, just four years before Captain William Pierce brought what we believe to be the first enslaved Africans to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, one set fire to the home of Pierce's wife—probably intentionally, according to the historian Wendy Warren. There is nothing surprising about this Northern setting for what might have been colonial America's first slave arson. Incendiarism scares followed the map of slavery, which was widespread before 1800, and they concentrated in cities, which were larger in the North. Until the nineteenth century, some of the most serious slave arson panics were Northern: New York in 1712 and 1741, Boston in 1732, Albany in 1793, and York, Pennsylvania, in 1803.⁵⁰

Yet in the nineteenth century the fire map changed. As slavery became particularly Southern, so did insurrectionary arson. Accusations simmered on Southern plantations and boiled over in Southern cities: New Orleans, Augusta, Richmond, Norfolk, Savannah, Natchez, Mobile, Macon, Baltimore, and, above all, Charleston. As it became regional, slave arson acquired a new political significance. Rather than just unnerving individual enslavers, it started also to feed sectional strife. Slaveholders worried that incitement in the free North could ignite infernos in the slave South.

As sectional tensions grew, that fear became central to how people understood the impending conflict. When slaveholders voiced their deepest anxieties about abolition, it wasn't that the South would drown, be smothered, be enchained, suffer the whip's lashes, or lose its population. They worried it would burn. And Northern abolitionists spoke in increasingly direct terms of incinerating Southern slavery with cleansing flames. This wasn't merely a metaphor, as references to floods or winds were. It was also—given the all-too-real fires that enslaved arsonists were repeatedly kindling—a threat. The material and metaphorical thus ran together, with actual fires feeding symbolic ones and vice versa.

⁵⁰ Warren, *New England Bound*, 198.

Thomas Jefferson understood how dangerous discussing slavery could be. Early sectional debates about it rang in his ears like a “fire bell in the night,” which “awakened and filled me with terror,” the former president wrote in 1820. Historians who quote those famous words often note their political prescience but not the personal experience that lay behind them. The previous year, Jefferson had been injured in a fire at his primary plantation, Monticello. The “conflagration,” he wrote, was part of a two-day rash of fires that struck plantations around Charlottesville in which “many houses burnt” and at least three people died.⁵¹

Jefferson wasn’t the only one hearing fire bells. By the 1830s, slavery’s defenders had latched onto a fire-based pejorative for abolitionists: *incendiaries*. “Who are the incendiaries?” asked the *Brooklyn Unionist*. “Not surely the combustible *materials* which have been inflamed; but those unprincipled men who have inflamed them.” This typical snippet of anti-abolition rhetoric illustrates the main features of the metaphor. First, it accuses “unprincipled” abolitionists of an odious crime. Second, it acknowledges the serious threat of rebellions while denying the rebels’ agency; enslaved people are not freedom fighters but “combustible materials.” Third, it removes enslavers from the equation, locating the problem entirely in the interaction between abolitionists and the enslaved. Fourth, it identifies the threat particularly as fire. If abolitionists are incendiaries, then revolts are conflagrations and the South is, as it was often said, a powder magazine or pent-up volcano.⁵²

This wasn’t an offhand metaphor, used occasionally. Slavery’s champions likened abolition to arson constantly. Abolitionists, warned Jefferson Davis, were going “torch in hand, among combustible materials.” He was especially infuriated by Congress, which, rather than reflecting the light of the people, was becoming “a torch to fire the pile.” “If the fire is to be kindled herewith which is to burn the temple of our Union; if this is to be made the centre from which civil war is to radiate, here let the conflict begin,” Davis told his fellow senators in 1848. “I am ready, for one, to meet any incendiary.”⁵³

The problem was, those incendiaries were elusive. In 1835, abolitionists bombarded slave states with antislavery literature by mail—“hurling their fire-brands from a remote distance,” one white Charlestonian complained. These “incendiary publications” and “inflammatory appeals,” President Andrew Jackson warned Congress, threatened to “produce all the horrors of servile

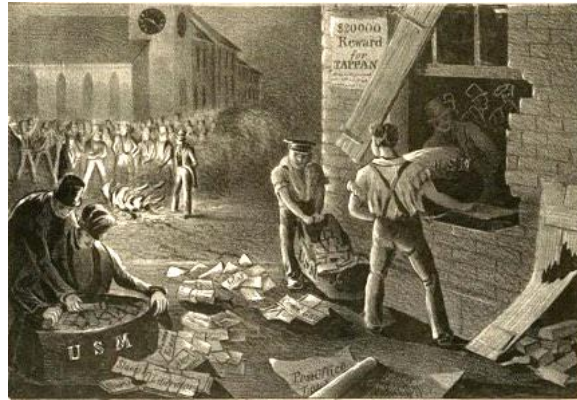
⁵¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820 and to John Barnes, May 5, 1819, *Founders Online*.

⁵² Reprinted in “The Riots in New-York,” *Liberator*, July 26, 1834.

⁵³ Jefferson Davis, Feb. 6, 1846 speech, in Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (2 vols., New York, 1881), I, 524; Jefferson Davis, April 20, 1848 speech, quoted in Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis: Ex-President of the Confederate States of America* (2 vols., New York, 1890), I, 376.

war.” Jackson’s metaphorical references to fire, like Thomas Jefferson’s, were informed by experience. A serious blaze had badly damaged Jackson’s plantation’s mansion the previous year, and his son blamed the slaves for letting it burn.⁵⁴

As if to show how incendiary the antislavery mailings were, a vigilance society in Charleston, the Lynch Men, stole them from the post office and made a bonfire. Two thousand whites—roughly a seventh of the city’s white population—watched the materials burn, along with effigies of three leading abolitionists. Perhaps they meant this as payback for the conflagration they’d suffered a month before, attributed widely to Black arson.⁵⁵



Burning “incendiary” abolitionist mail in Charleston, S.C., 1835, a month after one of Charleston’s many great fires.

Incendiarism was a serious charge in the all-too-flammable antebellum United States, yet leading abolitionists didn’t duck it. The first item to appear in William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, a poetic “salutation” from the paper to its public, proposed the vengeful burning of avaricious enslavers. “I have need to be *all on fire*,” Garrison told a friend, “for I have mountains of ice around me to melt.” Frederick Douglass saw himself similarly, describing his relationship to slavery as that of “fire in a magazine.” John Brown, meanwhile, sought to teach enslavers a lesson: “those who live in wooden houses should not throw fire.” This was a European proverb—“those who live in glass houses should not throw stones”—adapted for an environment of wood and a politics of flame.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Richard Yeadon Jr., *The Amenability of Northern Incendiaries as Well to Southern and Northern Laws* (Charleston, 1835), 4; Andrew Jackson, Seventh Annual Message, Dec. 8, 1835, in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson* (3 vols., New York, 1977–1984), III, 185.

⁵⁵ Susan Wyly-Jones, “The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy over the Abolition Postal Campaign,” *Civil War History*, 47 (Dec., 2001), 289.

⁵⁶ “The Salutation,” *Liberator*, Jan. 1, 1831; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 120; Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick*

Such pyrophilia marked a pronounced departure from earlier Western political discourse. David Simon and Michael Marder, writing respectively of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have both identified “light without heat” as a reigning metaphor. The Enlightenment proposed to illuminate the world with reason, but the age’s obsession with light came with a simultaneous spurning of fire. To be enlightened was to be calmly informed, not aflame with passion.⁵⁷

Yet writers who had endured slavery often favored the firebrand’s blaze over soft lamplight. In their renditions, the Age of Reason’s central metaphor of illumination led easily to talk of burning. Although Henry “Box” Brown wrote of “freedom’s fires” filling the “darkened prison” of slavery with the “full light of freedom’s glorious liberty,” he also imagined those fires melting chains. Austin Steward believed the “light” of the gospel, broadly “diffused,” would bring humanity to “a state of earthly perfection,” yet he added that slaveholders stood “over a volcano” that could, “with one mighty burst of its long suppressed fire,” sweep them “to destruction.” Sojourner Truth, a Pentecostal, found comfort in the advent’s flames. “Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm,” she preached. “Do you tell me that God’s children can’t stand fire?”⁵⁸

In the Black abolitionist Martin Delany’s view, God’s children positively delighted in fire. His extraordinary novel *Blake*, appearing in serial starting in 1859, imagines an enslaved rebel who’d lived in the Caribbean promulgating a scheme to “scatter red ruin” throughout the slave states. The plot, one character explains in dialect, involves setting “fire to each house in all de towns at da same time.”⁵⁹

Frederick Douglass, who co-edited a newspaper with Delany, entertained a similar fantasy. Douglass was an attentive student of fire; his long, lurid description of an “awful conflagration” in his 1852 novella, *The Heroic Slave*, suggests he’d seen one up close. Flames burst from his nonfiction, too. “Slavery is one of those monsters of darkness to whom the light of truth is death,” he wrote in 1855—a typical Enlightenment sentiment. Or, it would have been typical had he not gone on to fantasize about exposing slavery to “the heat of the sun, that it may burn and wither out of existence.” “I want the slaveholder

Douglass (Boston, 1892), 539; Louis A. DeCaro Jr., “Fire from the Midst of You”: A Religious Life of John Brown (New York, 2002), 192.

⁵⁷ David Carroll Simon, *Light without Heat: The Observational Mood from Bacon to Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2018); Marder, *Pyropolitics*, chap. 2; Stephen J. Pyne, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next* (Oakland, 2021), 28–33.

⁵⁸ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, ed. Charles Sterns (Boston, 1849), 32; Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, 1857), 157, 154, 153, 32; Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Boston, 1850), 112.

⁵⁹ Martin R. Delany, *Blake, or, The Huts of America*, ed. Jerome McGann (1859–1862; Cambridge, Mass., 2017), 129, 272.

surrounded, as by a wall of anti-slavery fire,” Douglass continued, summoning Old Testament fury. “I would have condemnation blaze down upon him in every direction.”⁶⁰

In one of the most famous passages from his most famous oration, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852), Douglass rejected the Enlightenment’s twin pursuit of illumination and reason altogether. The time for “convincing argument” was over, he insisted. What was required instead was “scorching irony” or “a fiery steam of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire.”⁶¹

ABOLITIONISTS BROUGHT fire in 1859 when John Brown and eighteen followers attacked a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. They carried specially made pikes, which Brown regarded as the proper instrument for overthrowing tyrants, but they also carried torches—pine and hickory sticks wrapped in cotton and soaked in accelerant. At the arsenal, Brown and his men encountered not an armed guard but a fire watchman, employed to ensure the day’s embers went out. “I want to free all the Negroes in this State,” Brown told the watchman. “I have possession now of the United States armory, and if the citizens interfere with me, I must only burn the town and have blood.”⁶²

Although Brown believed in “fighting the devil with fire” and, indeed, had spoken with his men about torching bridges, he was ultimately too nervous about how arson would be regarded. He had, he later explained, come to liberate, not “burn and kill.” And so, instead of torching the town, Brown holed up in the arsenal’s fire engine house, where he was swiftly captured.⁶³

John Brown had hoped to spark an insurrection, but he’d failed to communicate his intent to the enslaved people nearby. Criticizing the raid two weeks after, the Black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet insisted that all that was really needed was “a box of matches in the pocket of every slave, and then slavery would be set right.” W. E. B. Du Bois, writing fifty years later, similarly argued that Black Virginians had been ready to rebel. As evidence, he pointed to the spate of fires around Harpers Ferry in the tense month after Brown’s arrest. “Night after night the heavens are illuminated by the lurid glare of burning property,” wrote the *Richmond Enquirer*. It became hard to see such

⁶⁰ Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Boston, 1853), 193; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), 418.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 444.

⁶² U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Select Committee on the Harper’s Ferry Invasion*, 36 Cong., 1 sess., June 15, 1860, pp. 22, 50; Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (New York, 2011), 149.

⁶³ DeCaro, “Fire from the Midst of You,” 139–40; Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 155–56; *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown* (New York, 1859), 45.

fires as accidental after they struck the estates of three jurors and the judge in Brown's trial.⁶⁴

The fires continued. A suspicious rash of them in Georgia in the spring and early summer of 1860—plus a large blaze in Natchez, Mississippi—threw the slaveocracy into a frenzy. The frenzy grew wilder when, in a 24-hour period in July 1860, fires struck more than a dozen towns in northern Texas, nearly obliterating downtown Dallas. Historian Donald Reynolds has argued that heat, drought, wooden buildings, and improperly stored matches were probably to blame. Even so, white Texans went on a lynching spree, hanging at least thirty people. Rumors spread of Republican conspiracies to burn white homes and poison their owners; Reynolds notes that these formed “the key provocation that pushed the cause of secession over the top” in much of the South. In the eyes of secessionists—and surely it's meaningful that such people were called “Fire-Eaters”—the Texas fires demonstrated that Abraham Lincoln's inauguration wouldn't mean merely undesirable policies but a literal and immediate threat to their lives.⁶⁵

In 1859, Texans had overwhelmingly elected unionists. In 1861, after the fires, the same voters chose secession by three to one. Days after the Texas vote, the seceding states adopted a provisional constitution for their new country, the Confederate States of America, and two months later Confederate units fired on Fort Sumter outside Charleston. The wood-stuffed fort (named for a general whose house had been torched in the Revolutionary War) promptly burst into flames. The man credited with firing the first shot, Edward Ruffin, had recently suffered two serious fires on his plantation, widely blamed on his enslaved workers.⁶⁶

The counterattack came quickly. The night of the Fort Sumter assault, the homes of planters Leonidas Polk and Stephen Elliott, the two most senior bishops in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Confederacy, burned down. “Negro incendiaries” were blamed.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Garnet quoted in Benjamin Quarles, ed., *Blacks on John Brown* (Urbana, 1972), xiv; W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia, 1909), 354; reprinted in “The Charleston Reports,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1859; Jonathan Noyalas, *Slavery and Freedom in the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War Era* (Gainesville, 2021), 36–39.

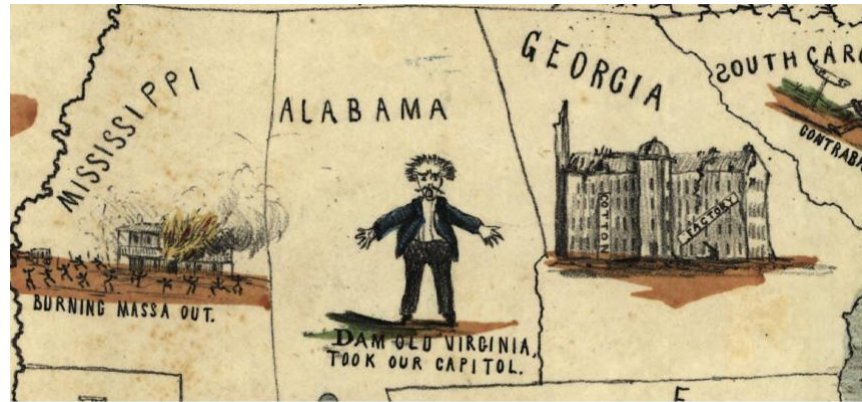
⁶⁵ Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 192. On the fires: Ollinger Crenshaw, *The Slave States in the Presidential Election of 1860* (Baltimore, 1945), 92–108; Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York, 1970), 43–45; Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1986), chap. 2; William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of Confederacy* (New York, 2020), 131–34.

⁶⁶ William Kauffmann Scarborough, ed., *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin* (3 vols., Baton Rouge, 1972–1989), I, 249–50, and II, 554.

⁶⁷ “Negro Incendiaries in Louisiana,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1861. A large arson scare shortly after the war broke out is described in Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge, 1993).

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, borrowing an image from the Book of Zechariah, had fantasized about surrounding slaveholders with “a wall of anti-slavery fire.” Interestingly, the Confederacy’s president, Jefferson Davis, used precisely that imagery to describe what happened: Union forces “girt Virginia as with a wall of fire.” Such was the Civil War, or, as Lincoln called it, the “fiery trial.”⁶⁸

Lincoln and Davis were right to highlight fire. The Confederacy faced it from all directions, including from the internal enemy. “Incendiary fires in the South have become very frequent,” observed Thomas Jefferson’s great-grandson in 1862, adding, “they are undoubtedly set by negroes.” Historian Thavolia Glymph has noted that enslaved women burned and encouraged others to burn planter’s houses—the sites of their torments—to prevent their enslavers from returning.⁶⁹



“Burning Massa Out.” Detail from Ohioan J. B. Elliott’s 1861 map of the catastrophes a Union blockade might visit on the South, showing a Mississippi mansion aflame.

In March 1864, Confederate editors published papers ostensibly captured from U.S. Colonel Ulric Dahlgren—but perhaps forged—detailing a Union scheme to “burn the hateful city” of Richmond and kill Jefferson Davis “on the spot.” Robert E. Lee spoke of his blood boiling on reading of the “barbarous and inhuman plot.” In historian Bruce Catton’s judgment, the Confederate belief that the Union had accepted arson and assassination as legitimate tactics is what finally tipped the conflict “into the pattern of total war.”⁷⁰

The failed and possibly fake Dahlgren plot has been the subject of multiple books. Far less attention has flowed to a nearly successful attempt to assassinate

⁶⁸ Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederacy*, I, 440; Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Message, Dec. 1, 1862, *American Presidency Project*.

⁶⁹ T. Jefferson Coolidge, *The Autobiography of T. Jefferson Coolidge* (Boston, 1923), 37; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008), 105–07.

⁷⁰ Duane Schultz, *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War* (New York, 1998), 156, 245, 175; Bruce Catton, *The Army of the Potomac* (3 vols., New York, 1951–1953), III, 18.

the Confederate president, and to do so by fire. In January 1864, Jefferson Davis's enslaved servants set fire to the Confederate White House—while the Davises were inside. The blaze was extinguished, but shavings and sticks found placed against a wood pile made the intent clear; it's one of the few prominent slave arson cases with compelling material evidence. “Fancy having to be always ready to have your servants set your house on fire,” exclaimed Mary Chesnut, the noted diarist who visited the Davises shortly after.⁷¹

In a little more than a year, Chesnut herself was burned out, not by a house fire but by the torching of Columbia, South Carolina—one of the many towns and cities burned in the war. Prevailing military norms prohibited arson in fights between “civilized” adversaries, but the Civil War strained those norms badly, especially after the Dahlgren affair. The Confederacy sought to burn Northern cities within reach, torching Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and igniting liquid incendiaries in more than a dozen hotels in New York (had the plot “been executed with one-half the ability with which it was drawn up,” the *New York Times* commented, “no human power could have saved this city from utter destruction”). Far more effective were the Union Army's fiery forays, most notably laying waste to the Shenandoah Valley and setting fires on the march from Atlanta to Savannah.⁷²

The Union's readiness with the torch is notorious. Less appreciated is how much of the South's burning was self-immolation. “Let every man set fire to his own house,” renowned newspaper editor John O'Sullivan advised. One slaveholder threatened to “burn all his slaves rather than let the Yankees have them.” Such nihilism motivated the Confederacy's formal and comprehensive scorched-earth campaign, which burned military installations, bridges, warehouses, and crops in advance of Union troops. Decades later, a woman who'd been enslaved in Arkansas remembered her grandmother weeping at the sight of a Confederate agent systematically incinerating all the cotton that field hands had laboriously picked, lest Yankees or Black people profit from it.⁷³

⁷¹ “The Attempt to Burn Jeff. Davis' Mansion,” *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1864; John Beauchamp Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Confederate States Capital* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1866), II, 174; C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, 1981), 547.

⁷² “The Plot,” *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1864. On Civil War arson: Nat Brandt, *The Man Who Tried to Burn New York* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986); Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 2012).

⁷³ Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1998), 337; Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 57; Josephine Ann Bennett, *Born in Slavery*, vol. II, Arkansas, 1:110.



The Confederacy's capital, Richmond, torched by Confederates before the Union Army arrived (Andrew J. Russell, photog.).

The Confederacy burned Southern cities, too. The first was Hampton, Virginia, where Confederate General John Magruder torched five hundred buildings to prevent Union soldiers and fugitive slaves from using them. For all their anguish about arson, Southern whites proved perfectly willing to set fires to undermine their enemies. The capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, was already aflame on April 3, 1865, when Union troops arrived. An intentional ignition of tobacco factories had accidentally grown into a “great conflagration,” wrote the diarist John Beauchamp Jones, converting the “lower part of the city” to “ashes.”⁷⁴

There is a reason, in other words, that the period of Southern history after Richmond's fall is called “Reconstruction.” It wasn't just that Southern politics needed to be rethought. It was that Southern places, destroyed by flame, needed to be physically rebuilt.

“The fires of civil war have melted every fetter in the land, and proved the funeral pyre of slavery,” proclaimed Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax at the opening of Congress in December 1865. When he spoke those words, applause erupted.⁷⁵

It's fitting that U.S. slavery ended in ashes. By then, enslaved people had been setting fires for two centuries. Such fires spread easily because not only were America's buildings combustible, its institutions were, too. Perhaps that was for the best. Some things can't be fixed; they must be burned.

⁷⁴ Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, 14–29; Jones, *Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, II, 468–69.

⁷⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 39 Cong., 1 sess., Dec. 4, 1865, p. 5.