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## THE "GREAT FIRE" OF 1740 AND THE POLITICS OF DISASTER RELIEF IN COLONIAL CHARLESTON

MATTHEW MULCAHY\*

**FIRES WERE A CONSTANT THREAT TO CITIES IN COLONIAL** British America. With mostly wooden buildings crowded along narrow streets and back alleys, urban places like Boston, New York, and Charleston were literally firetraps. Once a fire got started, it could — and often did — spread quickly beyond the best efforts to control it. Colonial cities routinely passed laws regulating the materials used in the construction of buildings and mandating frequent chimney cleanings (defective chimneys were a common cause of urban conflagrations), but the problem of fires actually worsened over the course of the eighteenth century as more and more people crowded into the port cities.<sup>1</sup>

Historians have long recognized the extent to which fires plagued colonial urban areas. Large-scale fires were important and dramatic events in the histories of individual cities, and few urban histories fail to describe major conflagrations and the panic they created among residents. Likewise, scholars have documented the tremendous damage caused by fires and the various (and often ineffective) measures taken to control their outbreak.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, however, few historians have examined what happened after the flames were extinguished and, in particular, what relief was provided to those who had lost property and personal belongings. Residents of colonial cities routinely received food and money in the wake of fires and other disasters, but we know relatively little about how much aid was distributed, who received it, or how helpful it was in restoring order to

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1938), pp. 205-209, 364.

<sup>2</sup>The best and most thorough account of fires (and other catastrophes) that struck colonial cities remains Carl Bridenbaugh's two-volume study: *Cities in the Wilderness* and *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York: Knopf, 1955). Boston and Charleston were particularly hard hit by fires, and several books discuss specific conflagrations. For Boston, see G.B. Warden, *Boston, 1625-1776* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970). For Charleston, see George Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969) and Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

people's lives.<sup>3</sup>

This paper begins to answer some of these questions by examining relief efforts following the "great fire" of 1740 in Charleston, South Carolina. The fire of 1740 was one of the worst in any city during the colonial period and it offers a good opportunity to explore how an individual city responded to a major disaster. It also raises questions concerning the nature of "relief" broadly defined. Most studies of relief focus on efforts directed at the poor in various colonies and cities, and there is considerable debate among historians about the nature of this aid in Charleston and other cities. Some scholars have argued that relief reflected a genuine concern for the poor, while others have seen it as a form of social control. Relief efforts following the 1740 fire do not fit neatly into either category. Aid in Charleston came initially from local, and mostly private, sources. Individuals contributed what they could to assist their neighbors in a spirit of benevolence. Within a few months, this assistance was supplemented by money from the local government, and later from neighboring colonies. In each case, the funds were distributed to the most needy in the city, although the most needy were not necessarily the city's poorest residents. Relief was directed toward those who were impoverished by the fire rather than those who were simply poor.<sup>4</sup>

The king of England and Parliament eventually supplanted these local efforts with a relief grant of £20,000 sterling. The grant made Charleston unique among colonial cities: it appears to be the first and only time the English government provided significant disaster relief to any of its American

<sup>3</sup>Gary Nash looks briefly at relief following the 1760 fire in Boston, but does not offer much detail on how relief was organized or the process by which it was distributed. See Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 245-246. Likewise, Warden notes the sources of relief, but offers no analysis of who received aid, or how much. See Warden, *Boston*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>4</sup>There has been one previous study of relief in Charleston following the 1740 fire, but it is essentially a short description of the fire and a list of those who received money from the Parliamentary grant. See Kenneth Scott, "Sufferers in the Charleston Fire of 1740," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 64 (October 1963), pp. 201-211. There is a large literature on poor relief in colonial America. Two studies that look at Charleston in particular are Barbara Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); and Walter Fraser, Jr., "The City Elite, 'Disorder,' and the Poor Children of Revolutionary Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 84 (July 1983), pp. 167-179. Bellows argues that elites were generally compassionate and attempted to ease the suffering of their less fortunate neighbors. Fraser sees a darker side and argues that elites used poor relief as a means of social control.

colonies prior to the Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Carolina officials requested the money for the "relief of the poor sufferers by fire," but not all sufferers benefitted from the grant. Instead, the majority of the money was distributed among the wealthiest and most prominent individuals in the city, which helps explain why Charleston was the recipient of Parliament's largesse. The fire was the last in a series of crises that struck the colony in the late 1730s, and, with the threat of war with Spain looming, the security of the colony and of the elites' position atop the social hierarchy appeared in jeopardy. Parliament's unprecedented disaster relief was granted as much to stabilize — militarily, politically, and economically — a floundering city and colony as it was to aid victims of a fire. Thus the money was intended to help "control" society, but it did so by supporting elites rather than regulating the poor.

**DURING THE EARLY PART OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY,** Charleston emerged as "one of the most flourishing towns in America." As the hub of the lowcountry trade in naval stores, deerskins, slaves, and, later, rice, and buoyed by the rising Carolina economy in the first decades of the eighteenth century, Charleston grew rapidly. Its population expanded from 1,200 persons in 1700 to more than 6,300 by 1740, and the city itself was transformed from a struggling outpost into a major American port. Several public buildings were constructed, most notably St. Philip's Church. Eight wharves served ships calling from Bristol, Bridgetown, and Boston, and warehouses sprung up along the Ashley River to store the trade goods that brought prosperity to Charleston and the surrounding Lowcountry. Along the city's main thoroughfares, wealthy merchants and planters built increasingly large private homes, more and more of which were constructed of brick rather than wood, testaments to the power and privilege of their owners.<sup>6</sup>

The rise of Charleston, however, was not a tale of linear development.

<sup>5</sup>Boston received a good deal of aid from England following the 1760 fire, but it came from private sources, mostly London merchants who had trading connections to the city. See Warden, *Boston*, pp. 149-150. The next important English relief effort after the fire that I have been able to locate was the money granted to Barbados and Jamaica following the devastating hurricanes in 1780. See Richard B. Sheridan, "The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution" *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 Third Series (October 1976), pp. 615-641.

<sup>6</sup>Quotation in "Letter from Charleston," *Gentleman's Magazine* (January 1741), p. 55. Much of the above is drawn from Peter Coclanis, particularly the introductory essay "The Sociology of Architecture in Colonial Charleston" in *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1670-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 3-11. See also Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*; John McCusker and Russell Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), especially Chapter 8, "The Lower South."

It would be more accurate to speak of the repeated rises of Charleston, since the city was destroyed by various disasters and rebuilt on several occasions, beginning with the hurricane of 1690. Hurricanes struck again in 1700, 1713, and 1728, each "overthrowing many houses and overflowing the town." Hurricanes were a seasonal fear, but fires were a constant threat. In 1698 a small fire consumed part of the city, and two days later a terrible earthquake shook Charleston. Roughly fifty buildings in the town were damaged or destroyed between the two misfortunes. Fire struck again in 1699, destroying more than £30,000 of goods and property, and just as residents recovered from this blaze, another one hit in 1700. This series of disasters gave English colonists and their London backers good reason to wonder about the stability and future prospects of the settlement.<sup>7</sup> After an interlude of relative calm, major fires broke out in the 1730s, once again bringing damage and distress to the city and its inhabitants.

As destructive as these calamities were, none compared to what residents came to call the "Great Fire" of 1740. Charleston's most devastating disaster of the colonial period began in the afternoon of November 18. An accident in a hatter's shop ignited the blaze, and from that small beginning, flames spread rapidly across the city. It had been hot and dry along the southern coast for several weeks, and the fire found ready fuel among Charleston's wooden buildings, leaping from one to another with an "astonishing violence and fierceness." Strong winds fanned the flames throughout the day, and as the blaze intensified, panic in the city increased. The streets were filled with terror-stricken individuals and families, some rushing to escape burning homes, a few vainly attempting to stop the blaze from spreading, and still others running in and out of fiery buildings desperately trying to save what personal belongings they could before their homes were engulfed.<sup>8</sup>

The *South-Carolina Gazette* reported that "inhabitants of all ranks" worked together "with Care and Diligence" to fight the fire, but other accounts paint a more chaotic picture. While some other cities, most notably Philadelphia, had formed fire brigades, Charleston had no organized

<sup>7</sup>John Bartram, quoted in David Ludlum, *Early American Hurricanes* (Boston: American Meteorological Society, 1963), pp. 41-42. See also Jeanne A. Calhoun, *The Scouring Wrath of God: Early Hurricanes in Charleston, 1700-1804* (Charleston, S.C.: The Charleston Museum, 1983; Leaflet No. 29); Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, p. 212.

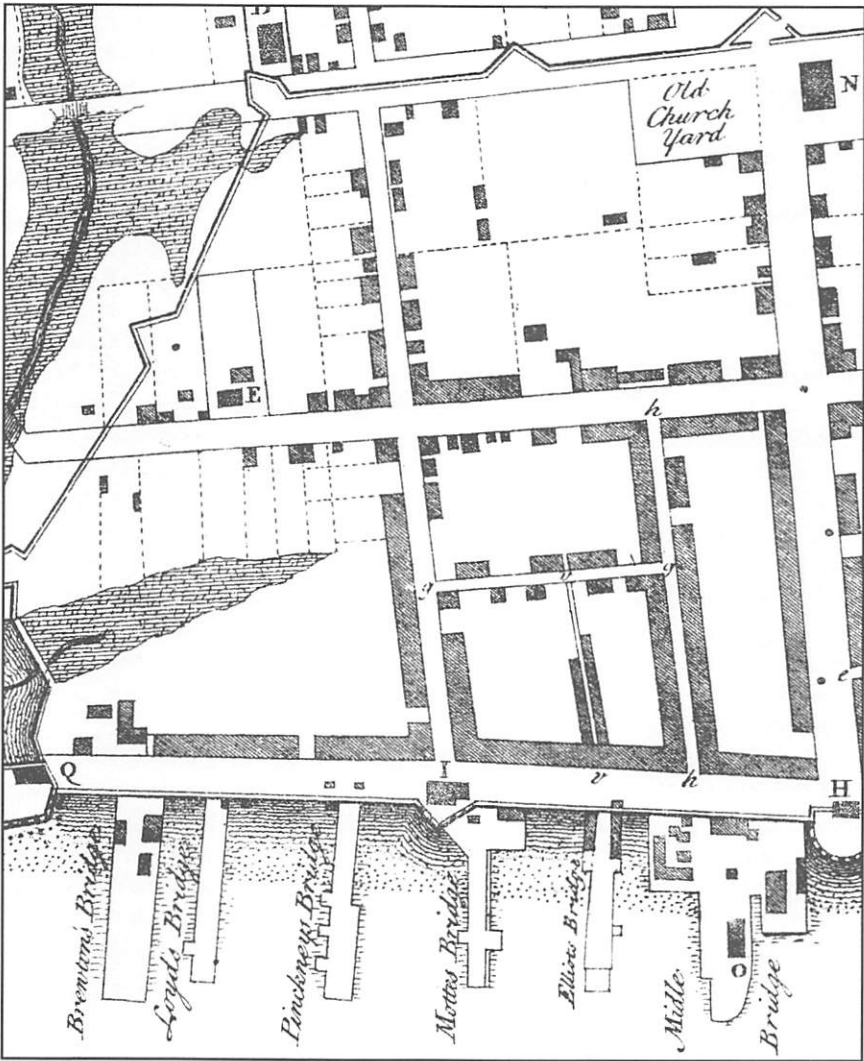
<sup>8</sup>The claim that the fires started in a hatter's shop appears in an account printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 29, 1741; *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1740 (quotation). Other accounts of the fire appear in "Letter from Charles-Town," p. 55; Robert Pringle to Andrew Pringle, Nov. 22, 1740, in Walter Edgar, ed., *The Letterbook of Robert Pringle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), Vol. 1, pp. 271-273 (hereafter *Letterbook*); and in Alexander Hewatt, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia* (London: Alexander Donaldson, 1779), Vol. 2, pp. 83-84.

means of dealing with fires. There were fire wardens in the city, and individuals were expected to have leather buckets and hooks at the ready if a blaze broke out, but such efforts were rarely coordinated, and even less often effective. The fire-fighting efforts in 1740 provided clear evidence of the penalties for such disorganization. In the early hours of the blaze, individual residents tried to rescue personal belongings rather than control the flames, and there was no coordinated effort by officials to form a fire-fighting force. It was only with the arrival of disciplined British troops from ships stationed in the harbor that enough houses were torn down to halt the spread of flames. If residents could have been prevailed upon to work collectively, perhaps there would have been less damage. Instead, the fire burned a wide swath across Charleston, destroying more than 300 homes and businesses in the central part of the city, which was, according to the merchant Robert Pringle, "the most valuable part of the town on account of the Buildings and Trade." Warehouses along the docks filled with that year's rice crop went up in flames, and one anonymous writer, in a letter to London, estimated that "7 or 8,000 deerskins, above 200 tons of Braziletto wood," and numerous other goods were also lost. The streets of Charleston in the wake of the fire presented a "dismal schene which much surpassed anything I ever saw," wrote Pringle. He and others estimated the total damages in the city at £250,000 sterling. "From one of the most flourishing towns in America," commented one observer, "Charleston is at once reduced to ashes."<sup>9</sup>

The fire left hundreds in the city homeless. Reports indicate that two and sometimes three families crowded into the surviving houses. Even wealthy merchants like Pringle were forced into cramped accommodations. Two months after the fire, Pringle informed one correspondent that he was "still in part of the House near the Custom House at a small Charge, but not Conviennent for Business. However as there is no Help for it must be Content till I can provide myself Better."<sup>10</sup> Others without the means to pay rent relied on the generosity of neighbors until they could find money or did

<sup>9</sup>*South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1740 (first quotation). Hooks were used to help pull down houses in hopes of stopping the spread of fires. The fire wardens of the city made an inspection of inhabitants just six months prior to the blaze to insure that all homes were equipped with buckets and hooks, but it made little difference in November. *South-Carolina Gazette*, May 10, 1740. For a discussion of early fire-fighting techniques, see Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, pp. 212, 364-372. Robert Pringle to Andrew Pringle, Nov. 22, 1740, in *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, p. 272 (second quotation). The writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* estimated that the loss in buildings alone was £100,000 sterling. "Letter from Charles-Town," p. 55 (third quotation). For accounts of disorder in the streets, see *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1740; Robert Pringle to Andrew Pringle, Nov. 22, 1740, in *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, pp. 271-273.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Pringle to Andrew Pringle, Dec. 29, 1740, in *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, p. 283.



The 1740 fire, according to the November 13, 1740 *South-Carolina Gazette*, "consumed the Houses from Broad-Street and Church-Street down to Granville's Bastion.... The Fire likewise consumed all the Houses on the West side of Church-Street, from Broad-Street to Tradd-Street, opposite to Coll. Brewton's." Above, Broad Street is on the right (H marks the Exchange Building), Church Street the horizontal street through the middle of this map. Granville's Bastion is marked Q. "The Ichnography of Charles-Town at High Water" (1739) from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.



without shelter.

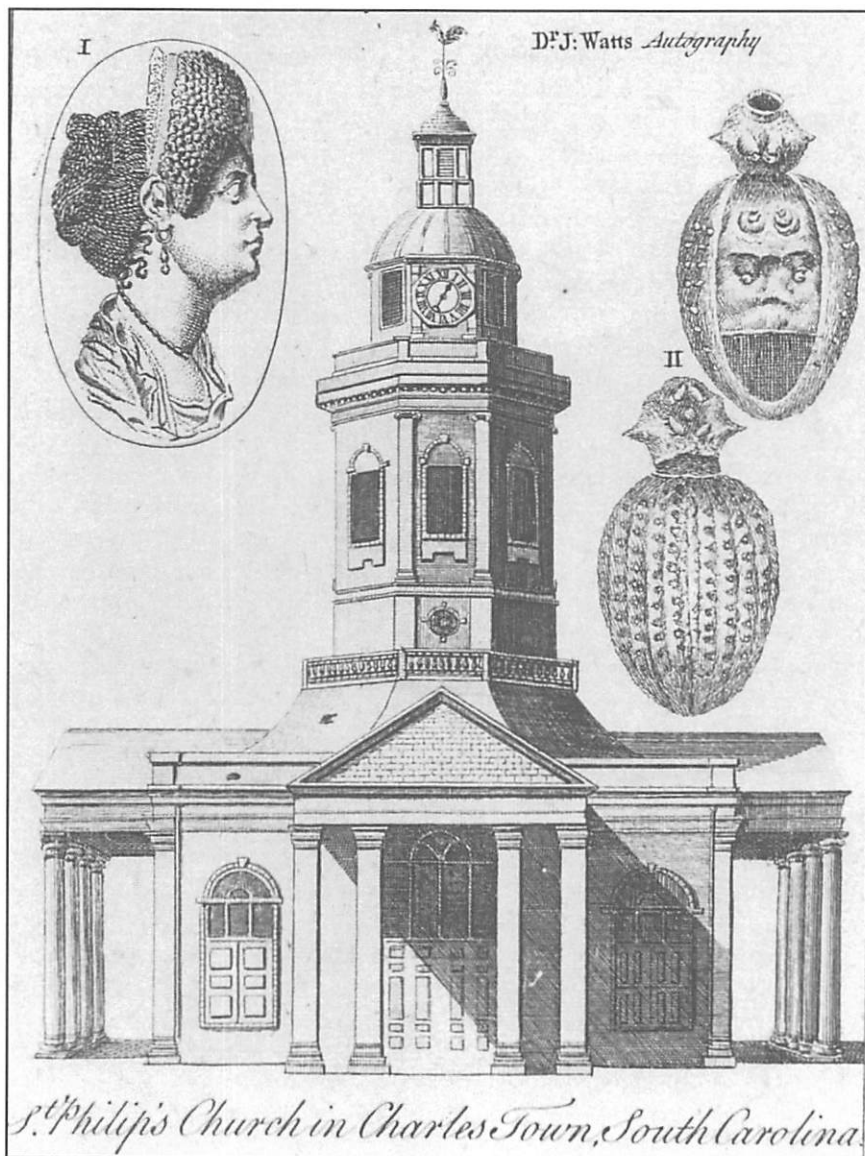
People burnt out by the fire began to seek aid as soon as the flames were extinguished. Those most destitute turned to St. Philip's Church for relief. Unlike other colonial cities, Charleston had no formal city government until 1783. Instead, city services such as poor relief were administered through church parishes, which in Charleston meant St. Philip's. The vestry of the parish met regularly to distribute aid or review cases of persons seeking admission to the almshouse. But the extent of damage caused by the fire called for special measures. Dozens of residents were lined up outside the door in need of immediate aid. The vestry met two days after the fire, on November 20, and decided to "meet daily at 10 of the clock in the morning to distribute [money] amongst the most neessitious [sic]."<sup>11</sup>

The most pressing issue for the vestry was raising money to distribute to the "sufferers." Regular poor relief was collected through a yearly tax; on occasions when tax revenues fell short of demand, the vestry petitioned the General Assembly for additional funds. The 1740 fire overwhelmed the available moneys, however, and vestry leaders hoped that government funds would be allocated quickly. The Assembly was aware of the suffering, and it passed an immediate bill allocating £188 (£1,500 currency) to St. Philip's for relief efforts.<sup>12</sup> Although the bill worked its way through government channels with relative speed, the money did not appear in the vestry account books or, more importantly, in the hands of victims, until the following February.

Immediate relief money came instead from private citizens. William Bull, the lieutenant governor of the colony, was the first to help, donating £13 (£100 currency) "for the present Relief of such poor People who have been ruined by the late dreadful fire" and others soon followed. The vestry appointed two or three members to review individual requests for aid, and they decided to distribute what money they had "until a further supply can be Collected." The initial grants were small. On the first day, a total of only £7 (£55 currency) was distributed, and no single grant was more than £3 (£20 currency). Over the next several days, money continued to trickle in, and

<sup>11</sup>For a general history of poor relief, see Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders*, pp. 1-20. Minutes of the Vestry of St. Philip's Parish, Nov. 20, 1740 (quotation), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

<sup>12</sup>J.H. Easterby, ed., *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1739-1741* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 407, 412, 415. The money was approved by both the Council and Assembly by November 21, but the vestry records indicate that the money was not distributed until February 2, 1741. All money is listed as pounds sterling unless otherwise noted. The 1740 exchange rate to sterling was roughly 8 to 1, while the 1742 rate (when Parliament's grant was distributed) was roughly 7 to 1. See John McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1775: A Handbook* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 223.



People burnt out by the fire began to seek aid as soon as the flames were extinguished. Those most destitute turned to St. Philip's Church for relief. Unlike other colonial cities, Charleston had no formal city government until 1783. Instead, city services such as poor relief were administered through church parishes, which in Charleston meant St. Philip's. Engraving of St. Philip's from *The Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1753, from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

relief was redistributed to those in need, but grants remained limited by donations. No grant was larger than £6, and the average grant over the first two weeks was about £3.<sup>13</sup> The size of the grants indicates the money was intended for immediate relief, particularly to allow sufferers to purchase food and other essentials, or to pay for small rented rooms while they awaited more permanent shelter.

Private donations continued to be the only source of relief in the city for the next several weeks, but as time passed, more and larger donations arrived to aid victims of the blaze. Indeed, private efforts provided surprisingly large amounts of money and supplies. St. Philip's Parish turned over money collected at a Fast Day service totaling more than £85 on November 28, and contributed a regular Sunday collection of £8 on December 1. An additional £18 was collected from donations to the vestry after the Sunday service. Parish officials likewise sought out their counterparts in neighboring parishes for help, and the response was heartening. St. Andrew's Parish collected more than £45 and other parishes forwarded smaller, but still significant, amounts of money and/or food. Individual citizens also continued to give directly to St. Philip's in amounts ranging from a £4 gold piece donated by "a person who desired his Name might be conceiled [sic]" to the £6 gift of the local Free Mason Lodge to the £188 (£1,500 currency) donated by the wealthy planter and merchant Gabriel Manigault. All told, almost £471 (£3,766 currency) was donated to St. Philip's between November 20, 1740, and February 18, 1741, by private, local sources.<sup>14</sup> This money dwarfed regular poor relief expenditures in the city, which averaged roughly £175 a year from 1734 to 1740 (see Table 1).

**WHO RECEIVED THIS AID? THOUGH ALL RESIDENTS OF** Charleston — rich and poor, black and white, male and female — were affected by the blaze, not all of them received assistance from St. Philip's. Unfortunately, we cannot tell a great deal about those who came to the church for help, but we can draw at least a few generalizations from the existing data. First, recipients were not among Charleston's elite. No one asking for money from St. Philip's was serving or would serve as a member

<sup>13</sup>Vestry Minutes (SCL), Nov. 20, 1740 (first and second quotations). The average grant was £20.8 currency. A total of £135 (£1,080 currency) was given out to fifty-two individuals or heads of households from November 20 through December 4, 1740. Vestry Minutes (SCL).

<sup>14</sup>Christ Church and Goose Creek parishes contributed £2 (£14 currency) and £18 (£142 currency) respectively. Vestry Minutes (SCL), Dec. 2, 1740; Jan. 21, 1741; Nov. 25 (quotation) and 29, 1740, and Feb. 18, 1741. The £471 figure does not include the £188 from the Assembly. With that money included, the total is £659 (roughly £5,266 currency). The last donations appear in February records, but "fire money" continued to be distributed in small amounts through January 1742. Vestry Minutes (SCL), Nov. 20, 1740; Feb. 18, 1741; Jan. 25, 1742.

**TABLE 1:  
PUBLIC RELIEF EXPENDITURES IN  
CHARLESTON, 1734-1740, BY GRANT TYPE AND YEAR**

Type	Year	Amount (in Currency)	Amount (in Sterling)
Poor	1734	£1,000	£125
	1735	£1,500	£188
	1736	£1,600	£200
	1737	£1,000	£125
	1738	£1,500	£188
	1739	£1,528	£191
	1740	£1,825	£228
	<i>average</i>	£1,422	£178
Fire	1740-1741	£3,766*	£471

\* Does not include £1,500 grant (currency) from Assembly.  
Source: Minutes of the Vestry of St. Philips Parish, Vol.1, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

of the Assembly, which, as we shall see, was clearly not the case with those who received money from the Parliamentary grant. Moreover, few of the names appearing in the vestry records appear on the Parliament list: only eighteen of the 171 people filing petitions received any aid from St. Philip's.

The absence of elites was mirrored by an absence of the truly destitute. It is difficult to determine the occupation or status of many of the names listed, and while some recipients were surely in impoverished circumstances prior to the blaze, it seems most were not drawn from Charleston's "lower sort." The population of poor people was growing in Charleston at the end of the 1730s. Official reports noted an increase in "idle" and "vagrant" people, and the general economic distress in the city following the blaze no doubt had an impact on the poor. Why they don't appear in the vestry records is unclear. It is likely the poor were not considered worthy of assistance because the fire was not the cause of their condition. The vestry records often included language such as "burnt out," and "suffer'd by fire" after names, indicating both that the individual had some property destroyed by the blaze and that officials were careful to distribute aid only to victims of the fire. It is also conceivable that at the time of the conflagration, some of the poor already were receiving aid in the recently erected poorhouse in the city, and did not seek additional aid from the vestry. Finally, it is possible that the poor were granted money, but that vestry officials did not note the names of individuals who were given less than £5 currency (the

smallest grant noted) or who received non-monetary aid. The latter was clearly the case on two occasions when the records indicate that one barrel of rice was distributed to "sundry poor people."<sup>15</sup> Regardless, few recipients overall were identified as being "poor" prior to the blaze.

Instead, most recipients appear to have come from more middling ranks of society, although perhaps from the lower end of those ranks. Most seem to have had some livelihood or means of support prior to the blaze; many were small artisans or shopkeepers who lost everything in the fire and were reduced to poverty or near-poverty. John Scott, for example, was a gunsmith in the city who sought aid from the vestry twice for a total of £4 (£30 currency) and one barrel of rice. Other artisans, including a carpenter, a hatter, and a goldsmith, likewise received aid on more than one occasion. It must have been difficult for these men to come to the door of St. Philip's. Poor relief in the eighteenth century was associated with failure and dependence, and skilled artisans were likely in dire circumstances if they sought aid. Many struggled to maintain their independence without resorting to relief from the vestry, but the want and distress caused by the fire left them few choices. William Gibson was one such person. Gibson was a pilot on the Charleston waterfront whose boat, and thus his livelihood, was destroyed by the fire. He managed to survive for a period without assistance, but he eventually turned to St. Philip's for help in buying a new boat. Gibson and others perhaps thought of aid from the vestry as a loan which would be repaid, thus enabling them to maintain their sense of independence.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, the fire forced many artisans to St. Philip's who otherwise would not have been there.

Several shopkeepers in Charleston were likewise "burnt out" and sought assistance from the vestry. Mary Bedon, for example, ran a tavern in Charleston that was destroyed in the fire. She rallied quickly, placing an advertisement in the *South-Carolina Gazette* the following week informing her customers that she "hath taken the house where Mr. Carr lately kept tavern," and that she would do her best to provide for their "reception and entertainment." Despite her best efforts, she was forced to seek aid to support herself and her three children in February 1741. A majority of recipients, like Bedon, received money to help support their families. The imprecise wording of the vestry minutes allows for only a broad level of analysis, but at least 52 percent of all recipients were responsible for at least

<sup>15</sup>Vestry Minutes (SCL), Nov. 22, 1740; Jan. 16 and 21, 1741. For a general discussion of the poor in Charleston, see Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders*, pp. 15-20.

<sup>16</sup>Vestry Minutes (SCL), Nov. 24, 1740; Jan. 9, 1741; and Feb. 2, Apr. 12, 1741. Robert M. Weir argues that few "able-bodied" men received aid from St. Philip's prior to the Revolution, and those that did "seem to have considered it more of a loan." Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1983), pp. 222-223.

one "dependent" (a spouse and/or children). Among female recipients such as Bedon, the number was even greater: 56 percent of women were responsible for dependents, usually children, but occasionally husbands. A Mrs. Gates, for example, was granted "fire money" in January 1742 to enable her to open a shop to support herself and her husband, who was also a "sufferer in the said fire."<sup>17</sup> Although Gates received money in support of opening a business, most relief money continued to be used for purchasing basic necessities such as food and shelter.

Mary Bedon was representative of recipients in another way: half of all aid recipients were women, and three-quarters (75 percent) of them were widows. Widows received aid more often than any other group of sufferers. Widow Lidia Clark, for instance, turned to St. Philip's on several occasions. She was given £20 on December 3, another £1 (£10 currency) on December 12, and an additional £2 (£15 currency) on January 16, 1741. At least five other widows also received money from the vestry three or more times. Widows received larger average grants (£8) than either men (£6) or women in general (£6). Again, the majority of widows (59 percent) were responsible for children.<sup>18</sup>

It is unclear what economic position many women occupied before the fire, but it seems likely they represented all levels of the economic hierarchy. It is also clear that for some, whatever their previous positions, the fire destroyed their means of support and the money from the vestry was essential to maintain themselves. Even those who may have come from more middling and elite social positions encountered economic hardships in the wake of the fire. Many widows (and women generally) in Charleston supported themselves by lending money out as bonds with interest. While bonds represented a sound strategy for achieving economic independence, they were not liquid and thus did not offer ready cash. The fire forced cash-starved widows and others to the vestry for aid, but it is clear that for some the money was a short-term loan rather than outright relief. Widow Bassett, for example, needed immediate help after the fire and requested £6 from the vestry on December 3, but she paid back the money in full in February 1741.<sup>19</sup>

The number of women receiving money from St. Philip's was far greater than the number receiving money from the Parliament grant, as we shall see (see Table 2). It was also larger than the number of women who usually received poor relief in the city. While several historians have argued

<sup>17</sup>On Bedon, see *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 27, 1740; Vestry Minutes (SCL), Feb. 2, 1741. On women lending money, see Elizabeth Pruden, "Family, Community, Economy: Women's Activity in South Carolina, 1670-1770" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1996), pp. 243-278. On Gates, see Vestry Minutes (SCL), Jan. 4, 1742.

<sup>18</sup>Twenty-seven of the thirty-six women receiving aid were widows.

<sup>19</sup>Vestry Minutes (SCL), Dec. 3, 1740; and Feb. 2, 1741.

that women dominated public relief in New England, this was not the case in Charleston in the first half of the eighteenth century. According to Walter J. Fraser, Jr., it was not until the 1750s that "women heading single-parent households, single women, and young children" formed the majority of poor relief recipients in Charleston. Prior to that time, relief was directed at "ancient" and "infirm" men and women. The fire, however, dramatically expanded the population in need and pushed more women, in particular more widows, to St. Philip's vestry seeking public assistance.<sup>20</sup>

One group noticeably absent from the vestry records is African Americans. It is unclear whether any of the city's slave or free-black population received aid. There is no evidence in the vestry minutes indicating any recipients as people of color, but African Americans were certainly affected by the fire. Charleston had a small number of free blacks during the colonial period, but many were skilled artisans who may have had small shops or tools destroyed in the blaze. Others were likely part of the "lower sort" in general, and were burnt out of their living spaces or work locations in the city. Slaves, too, most likely suffered from the fire. Many slaves in Charleston worked on their own time, "hired out" by their masters for various jobs in the city. They often lived in white households, but at least some rented rooms or separate houses, a practice that continued despite laws to prevent it passed following the Stono Rebellion. In theory, masters furnished essential provisions for their slaves, but since some slaves lived independently in the city, they may have required immediate assistance after the fire and sought aid from St. Philip's. If they were granted aid, however, there is no record of it. Whatever their losses, slaves and free blacks apparently had little official help recovering from the fire.<sup>21</sup>

**PRIVATE DONATIONS FROM LOCAL SOURCES CONTINUED TO** be the only form of relief in the city through the end of January 1741, at which point private donations were supplanted by a major grant from the South

<sup>20</sup>Fraser, "The City Elite," p. 169. Unfortunately, we have little hard data on the poor population prior to the fire, or after. The existing arguments are based on scattered, mostly qualitative sources.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Morgan estimates the free-black population at twenty-three in 1760, so it was perhaps half that number in 1740, although, as he notes, since the city was a "mecca" for transients, it is probable that these numbers are low. See Morgan, "Black Life in Eighteenth Century Charleston," *Perspectives in American History* 1 (1984), pp. 187-232. See also Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in South Carolina from Settlement through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 157. Robert Cray suggests that in New York City, manumitted slaves and other free blacks often received "outdoor relief" (food and firewood) which was not recorded in the formal poor relief records. It seems possible that this happened in Charleston as well. See Cray, "White Welfare and Black Strategies: The Dynamics of Race and Poor Relief in Early New York, 1700-1825," *Slavery and Abolition* 7 (December 1986), pp. 273-289.

Carolina Assembly. Although the bill allocating £188 (£1,500 currency) passed in December, the money did not arrive at the vestry until February 2, when it was distributed immediately. The funds were divided among seventeen individuals and families in grants ranging from £6 to £21. These grants were more substantial than earlier ones, and the money was disbursed all at once rather than spread out over several days or weeks. Most, but not all, of the recipients received money previously, but there is no explanation of why individuals were or were not granted Assembly money. It is possible the Assembly — rather than the vestry — determined the recipients. The vestry minutes state that the church wardens were “order’d” to pay the “underwritten persons,” language that does not appear elsewhere in the vestry records, and the grants were larger than any earlier ones. Perhaps these recipients were given special consideration because of particularly devastating losses. One grantee, Joseph Bee, was a local carpenter who tried to save the city watch house from flames. While struggling to fight the blaze, his clothes caught fire. Several people threw buckets of water on him to quench the fire, but somehow the water and flames (or a combination thereof) caused a “violent distemper” that “deprived him of the use of his limbs and sight.” Bee received aid from St. Philip’s a few weeks after the blaze, and was given a barrel of rice in early January, but his condition worsened over time and he was granted £19 from the Assembly money. Even that was not enough. Unable to work, and showing no signs of recovery, he petitioned the Assembly itself for direct aid and received an additional £19 in mid-March.<sup>22</sup> But if the rationale for the distribution of Assembly funds was unclear, the end result was not: several individuals or families received a welcome and relatively sizable amount of money from public coffers in early February 1741.

The governor and Assembly played one other important role in the relief process. Besides granting £188, government officials coordinated efforts to obtain aid from sources outside South Carolina. A few days after the fire was extinguished, Lt. Governor William Bull drafted letters to his counterparts in the northern and Caribbean colonies seeking any assistance they could offer. His letters emphasized the despair in Charleston and the “Streights and Hardships” of the city’s residents. He asked Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Penn to forward news of the fire “to the many wealthy inhabitants within your Province, who by that means will, I doubt not, be prevailed to extend some part of their Abundance to the Relief of their Suffering Neighbors.” Bull’s letters brought results: a shipment of bread

<sup>22</sup>Recipients are listed in Vestry Minutes (SCL), Feb. 2, 1741 (first quotation). There is no evidence in the Assembly records indicating a debate on the disbursement of the funds and there is no list in the Assembly records of those receiving money. On Bee, see Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1739-1741*, pp. 489, 533.



and flour arrived in Charleston from Philadelphia in May 1741, and money and food from Boston, Philadelphia, and Barbados continued to be sent through 1742. Most aid came from private individuals, with local governments acting as middlemen, collecting the aid and shipping it to the Assembly in Charleston, who then delivered it to the vestry for distribution.<sup>23</sup>

One historian has claimed that Boston's efforts at soliciting relief following the 1760 fire represented the first time a colonial city organized a collective campaign for relief. According to G.B. Warden, "Boston's misfortunes became familiar topics throughout the colonies.... Never before had an American town received so much sympathy and notoriety."<sup>24</sup> But this clearly was not the case. News of the "Great Fire" of 1740 was reported throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean basins, and Bull made sure that newspaper reports were not the only accounts that circulated. His letters helped publicize Charleston's misery and furthered the process of obtaining aid by appealing directly to colonial officials. Charleston did not receive as much aid, or from as many places, as Boston did in 1760. Nevertheless, relief efforts following the 1740 fire represented an important first step in the development of a colonial relief network that increased in both size and reach over the next several decades.

**BULL ALSO WROTE TO ENGLAND AND PLEADED FOR HELP FROM Parliament.** "Many unhappy Families," he wrote, "who by an honest Industry applied for many Years past had acquired a comfortable subsistence in the World, [were] exposed to the severst [sic] Want and Misery." All colonial officials solicited aid from England in the aftermath of fires and other disasters, but unlike other requests, Bull's received a positive response. Parliament debated this request in March 1741, and granted Charleston £20,000 sterling in April. Though £20,000 was a significant sum of money, these funds were not intended for general relief. Rather, the money was

<sup>23</sup>William Bull to Thomas Penn, Nov. 29, 1740 (Ms. 266), Chester County Historical Society, Chester, Penn. (Thanks to Lucy Simler for bringing this document to my attention.) See also "A Brief by His Excellency the Governor [of Massachusetts]," (Boston: J. Drapier, April 13, 1741). Walter Edgar states that the total contribution of money and provisions from other colonies was £7,094. Edgar, *Letterbook*, Vol. 2, p. 478n. Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1741-1742*, pp. 3, 549-550. Apparently the money from Massachusetts was sent directly to a private individual in South Carolina. The money collected from other colonies was turned over to the Assembly committee responsible for the disbursement of the Parliamentary grant, and was distributed in similar proportions. *South Carolina Council Journal, 1742-1743*, South Carolina Historical Collections (microfilm copy in "Records of the States"), Dec. 4, 1742, pp. 116-117.

<sup>24</sup>Warden, *Boston*, pp. 149-150. Carl Bridenbaugh makes a similar claim, stating that the relief from other colonies was an "inspiring sign of growing intercolonial sympathy for the welfare of all Americans." Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt*, p. 101.

meant to reimburse losses and aid in the rebuilding of the city: according to the Parliamentary committee "some Provisions should be made for the re-settling and re-establishing the Inhabitants" of Charleston.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, by the time the money was actually distributed, well over a year had passed since the blaze. The money was thus not "relief" in the sense of easing immediate distress. As a result, the manner in which it was distributed and the recipients themselves differed greatly from those seeking aid at St. Philip's.

Parliament issued no orders regarding the means by which the funds were to be distributed. Instead, Peregrine Fury, South Carolina's agent in London, proposed that a committee of eight members from the Council and Assembly be established to determine the actual losses of individual residents.<sup>26</sup> In order to ensure a fair and equitable distribution process, and to guard against creative accounting by persons hoping to reap something extra from Parliament's largess, anyone seeking money had to state to the committee the sum of their losses, and then sign a statement that included an oath swearing the amount declared was accurate. Only losses not covered by insurance could be claimed, which brought down the total for many individuals. Overall losses, however, were still substantial. The committee was free to "interrogate" persons if there appeared to be a questionable request. Having ascertained the total losses, the committee then issued "certificates" or "fire tickets" which were redeemable through the Exchequer in London.<sup>27</sup> While ensuring a fair distribution of the funds, this system also meant that the money would be slow in reaching residents of the city. The committee met in December 1741 and January 1742, at

<sup>25</sup>Easterby, *Journal of Commons House of Assembly, 1739-1741*, p. 408 (first quotation); Scott, "Sufferers in the Charleston Fire," p. 208; *Journals of the House of Commons, 1737-1741*, p. 695 (second quotation).

<sup>26</sup>The members of the committee were Benjamin Whitaker, David Hext, Joseph Wragg, William Middleton, James Abercrombie, John Hammerton, Andrew Rutledge, and Joseph Blake. Scott, "Sufferers in the Fire," p. 208.

<sup>27</sup>Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1741-1742*, p. 269. Fury's suggestions for the committee are found in a letter to the Board of Trade, July 2, 1741, in Colonial Office Records 5/368/62, Public Record Office, Kew. The total estimated losses agreed upon by the committee (after insurance payments were deducted) was £60,486 sterling, but this only includes those people who filed claims. Actual losses by all residents were probably somewhat higher. *South Carolina Council Journal, 1742-1743* (microfilm copy), p. 50. Some residents in Charleston had formed a "friendly society" in 1735 to help protect themselves against fire losses, but the 1740 blaze overwhelmed the society's resources and forced it into bankruptcy. See *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 15 and Dec. 13, 20, and 27, 1735. Also, Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, p. 372. Others in the city had connections to London insurance companies.

**TABLE 2: NUMBER AND AVERAGE SIZE OF FIRE RELIEF GRANT,  
BY TYPE OF RECIPIENT**

	Number	St. Philip's Relief Percent	Average Grant*	Number	Parliament Grant Percent	Average Grant*
Men	36	50	£7	132	77	£126
Women	36	50	£7	34	20	£66
Merchant House	n/a	n/a	n/a	5	3	£232
Total	72	100	£7	171	100	£116

\*All Money in Pounds Sterling

Sources: Minutes of the Vestry of St. Philips, Vol. 1, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.; South Carolina Council Journal, South Carolina Historical Collections (microfilm copy in Records of the States), pp. 46-51. For exchange of currency to sterling, see John McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1776: A Handbook* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 273.

Charles Shephard's tavern on Broad Street.<sup>28</sup> The depositions were completed by the end of January, but the committee did not declare its work finished until May 26, and Bull did not approve the recommendations and send them to the Lords Commissioners for Trade until sometime in early June 1742.<sup>29</sup>

The records of the South Carolina Council contain a list of sufferers, their stated losses, and the amounts granted by the committee.<sup>30</sup> As Table 2 indicates, this was a quite different group than those who gathered at the vestry door for relief. First, the majority of recipients (77 percent) were men. Moreover, among those receiving aid were some of the colony's wealthiest and most prominent leaders. Miles Brewton, an import/export merchant and arguably the richest man in Charleston, claimed losses of £213 and received £70 from the committee. George Seaman, another merchant and vestryman at St. Philip's in 1741, claimed losses totaling £5,330, and was granted the largest share of the Parliamentary money, £1,762. Along with the wealthy were the powerful: the names of forty-four men who were or would become members of the Assembly appear on the list, constituting 25 percent of the total grantees.

Furthermore, the money was not distributed simply to individuals. Several prominent merchant houses in Charleston received large sums. Although the total number of merchant partnerships was small (3 percent), they were granted significant sums of money. For example, the merchant house of Ebenezer Simmons and Benjamin Smith, both of whom would serve in the Assembly and in a variety of other public posts, was granted £516. Watson and McKinzie, another major mercantile operation, claimed losses of £1,300 and received £429. One historian of Charleston's merchant community argued that as individuals or in partnerships, merchants received 70 percent of the total relief money granted by Parliament.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike those who received money from St. Philip's, only 20 percent of

<sup>28</sup>The *Gazette* notice states that the meetings took place at the "House of Mr. Shephard," which most likely meant his tavern. The Assembly frequently used Shephard's tavern for meetings. See Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup>The instructions for the committee are found in Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1741-1742*, p. 262. For announcement of committee meetings, see *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 7, 1741.

<sup>30</sup>*South Carolina Council Journal* (microfilm copy), June 4, 1742, pp. 46-51. In 1963 Scott reprinted the list in this *Magazine*. Scott, "Sufferers in the Charleston Fire," pp. 209-211.

<sup>31</sup>Both Smith and Simmons served as Charleston's firemaster for a number of years, although not in 1740. Walter Edgar and Louise Bailey, eds., *Biographical Directory of South Carolina House of Representatives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1974), Vol. 1, pp. 610, 625-627. Stuart Stumpf, "The Merchants of Colonial Charleston, 1680-1756" (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971), pp. 190-191, 211.

the names on the Parliament list were women, and women were granted considerably smaller sums than either individual men or merchant operations. This, however, was a reflection of women having fewer capital losses to claim. The committee granted all individuals and firms roughly one-third of their stated losses, and the women on the list — fourteen total — had significantly smaller losses than men. The largest was the £771 claimed by Elizabeth Jenys, but the average grant was £66, about half the £126 awarded to men (not including merchant houses). Some women on the list, such as Catherine Joor, were shopkeepers whose inventories and shops were destroyed.<sup>32</sup> Joor claimed losses of £259 and received £83. Other women claimed property losses for their homes and personal belongings.

While some of the men and women had outside insurance that partially covered their losses, damage estimates in the city still totaled more than £60,000 sterling. The arrival and disbursement of Parliament's grant was therefore an important and welcome dose of economic relief, despite the almost two-year gap before the money actually reached the hands of those who claimed losses. The grant provided a much needed boost to the local economy, supplying the means to help pay old and new debts. In March 1741 Pringle warned one trading partner to whom he was indebted that "it will be some time before [you] can Recover your Money" on account of the "very dreadful Fire." Pringle was just one of many Charleston merchants who found themselves economically stymied by the fire, and the money from Parliament enabled Charleston's economy to become more fully operational. Many residents who owed Pringle money simply turned over their fire tickets (and the necessary power of attorney) to settle accounts. And Pringle in turn forwarded the tickets to agents or relations in London to credit past due accounts and to pay for new shipments to the city. The fire tickets continued to be used as currency at least through 1744.<sup>33</sup>

A good portion of the grant money no doubt also ended up in the pockets of local artisans and workers. Pringle informed a friend in Boston in the wake of the fire that building supplies would be in great demand and that he should send as many nails, shingles, and bricks to Charleston as soon as possible. Labor was likewise scarce. "House Carpenters & Joiners will be much wanted here & Brick Layers," Pringle wrote to one correspondent, and he advised another "if you can Indent Two House Carpenters as Servants for four years [they] may be of good Service here." This labor shortage was accentuated by an unwillingness to use slave labor to any great extent in the rebuilding process. Although slaves constituted an

<sup>32</sup>Joor placed an advertisement in the *Gazette* informing customers that she had managed to save some dry goods. *South-Carolina Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1740.

<sup>33</sup>Robert Pringle to John Smith, Mar. 23, 1742, *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, p. 304. On the fire tickets, see for example, Pringle's letter to his brother Andrew in London, Sept. 7, 1742, in *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, pp. 407-408. Pringle sent two fire tickets totaling more than £99 sterling, which were used to pay for cargo on the ship *John and Isabella*.



Some wealthy planters built brick houses prior to 1740 (as shown above, 1739). Though all of these were destroyed in the 1740 fire, the Assembly passed measures requiring that future buildings in the city be made of brick or stone and that houses were to be built back from the street and from each other. The above detail from the *London Magazine* engraving, "Prospect of Charles Town" by W.H. Toms after B. Roberts" (1739) is taken from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

important component of the skilled labor force, officials worried about having large numbers of slaves in the city. Memories of the Stono Rebellion were still too fresh, and many whites who believed the 1740 fire to have been the work of slave arsonists (accusations which proved false) continued to fear slaves' potential to commit arson or engage in other acts of resistance.<sup>34</sup>

While skilled and unskilled labor was in great demand, there was a limit to how much workers would profit from the rebuilding process. The Assembly passed a bill in December 1740 which capped the amount

<sup>34</sup>Gary Nash argues that grant money in Boston following the 1760 fire went to artisans and workers. See *Urban Crucible*, p. 246, 65n. Robert Pringle to John Erving, Nov. 29, 1740, *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, pp. 274-276 (quotation); Pringle to Andrew Pringle, Nov. 22, 1740, *Letterbook*, Vol. 1, p. 272. A bill was introduced into the Assembly requiring planters to supply every fifth male slave to Charleston officials for seven days to help in rebuilding, but the measure was defeated. Officials worried about their ability to control large numbers of slaves. Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1739-1741*, pp. 420-421. Individuals slaves, however, were used on some projects, including tearing down burned-out buildings. See *ibid.*, p. 486.

workmen could charge for their services. White master carpenters and joiners could charge up to £2 currency a day, while skilled black carpenters (slave or free) were limited to £1 currency per day. Carpenters' apprentices, black or white, were allowed seven shillings and six pence per day, although those numbers increased each year for three years. The same price controls applied to other skilled labor as well, including bricklayers and plasterers. Likewise, building materials had price limits placed on them. Suppliers of English bricks, for example, could charge no more than £6 currency per 1,000, and lesser quality New England bricks had a cap at £3, 10 shillings currency. The other major action taken by the Assembly was to pass a law regulating the process of rebuilding itself. Houses were ordered to be built a safe distance back from the street, and all buildings were henceforth to be built of brick or stone. Officials hoped such actions would reduce the frequency of fires in the city.<sup>35</sup>

**THE MONEY FROM PARLIAMENT CLEARLY WAS NEEDED AND** welcomed by residents of the city, but an important question remains: why was Charleston successful in getting money from Parliament when no previous or subsequent disaster in other colonies could open England's purse? Why was England willing to help Charleston's planters and merchants, but not others in the British Empire? South Carolina was among the crown's most valuable colonies and its rice exports made a tidy profit for the government and for private merchants in London, but economics was not the primary factor in Parliament's decision. Barbados, for example, was an equally, if not more, valuable colony in 1675 when it was devastated by a hurricane, but Parliament offered no relief and rejected pleas for a reduction in duties on imported goods such as lumber, essential for the island colony's reconstruction.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it seems probable that the wealth of colonies like Barbados worked against appeals for assistance, as English officials assumed rich planters could afford to rebuild on their own.

Given that probability, Parliament's willingness to grant a large sum of money to Charleston instead is best explained by the specific economic, social, and political circumstances in which the fire struck. South Carolina, as Bull outlined in a letter to the king, had been plagued by a "series of misfortunes" during the late 1730s. The fire came on the heels of

an impending Danger of an Invasion from the Spaniards ...;  
which was soon followed by the Small Pox which raged in  
Charles Town, during the whole Year one thousand, seven

<sup>35</sup>The restrictions were printed in a postscript to the *South-Carolina Gazette*, Dec. 18, 1740.

<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of the economic importance of South Carolina and Barbados, see McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, pp. 144-188.

hundred and thirty eight; and swept off a great Number of the Inhabitants; and by the Loss [of] many more in a malignant Fever in the Autumn of the Year one thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine.<sup>37</sup>

And Bull didn't even mention the Stono Rebellion of 1739, the largest slave revolt of the colonial period, which shook the social foundations of the colony and left thirty-five whites dead. This internal turmoil was magnified by outside threats. Without help from England, Bull argued, South Carolina would be open to attacks from the Spanish in nearby Florida, and the survival of the colony as a British possession would be jeopardized. "Your Petitioners [cannot] flatter themselves with any Hopes of supporting themselves under so many difficulties," Bull explained.<sup>38</sup>

Parliament's action, therefore, should be seen as not simply a response to the fire in Charleston, but to an ongoing series of crises in the colony of which the fire was the last, and perhaps the most threatening. As the committee reviewing Bull's request noted, "the Province of South Carolina has been greatly weakened by the late dreadful Fire" and they agreed that "some Provision should be made ... in order to better secure and strengthen the said Province of South Carolina in this time of war." The £20,000 was disaster relief, but it was intended to bolster the struggling colony and, in particular, the economic elites of Charleston in a period of social, political, and economic turmoil. The money was for the "re-establishment" of Charleston, not simply for its "relief." Restrictions placed on the distribution of the money underscored this objective. The aid was expressly intended for "inhabitants" of Charleston (although, as noted, not all inhabitants received money from the grant). Only residents, not foreign merchants who had economic interests or even property in the city, could claim money. As Robert Pringle explained to one Londoner who lost property in the fire, "no Person that were Sufferrers by the Fire in this Town are entitled to any of the Money given by the Parliament, excepting the Sufferrers that are Inhabitants of this Town, and them only."<sup>39</sup> While the grant might have functioned like insurance money, it was a geographically limited insurance. Its main purpose was to help secure Charleston and Charleston elites from external and internal threats rather than compensate non-resident merchants and traders for lost goods.

In this sense, it is not surprising that England granted money to aid the colony. The king and Parliament frequently appropriated money to secure

<sup>37</sup>Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1739-1741*, pp. 408-409.

<sup>38</sup>Wood, *Black Majority*, pp. 308-326. Wood also talks about the initial fears of many whites that the fire of 1740 was another slave uprising, p. 295.

<sup>39</sup>*Journals of the House of Commons, 1737-1741*, Vol. 23, p. 695; Robert Pringle to James Maintru & Co., Jan. 6, 1743, *Letterbook*, Vol. 2, p. 478.



militarily its American possessions or to reimburse colonists for damages sustained in wars. Residents of St. Christopher and Nevis, for example, received compensation for losses incurred during the French invasion of those islands in 1706. And at the time of the Charleston grant, England was also sending financial aid to Georgia to help secure that colony's borders against the Spanish and Native Americans.<sup>40</sup>

Charleston thus received "disaster relief," but the money was not given strictly, or even primarily, out of humanitarian concern. Instead, the grant must be seen within its mitigating historical context. The rationale for Parliament's action meant that relief "of the poor sufferers by fire" was differentiated by class and gender. While some small artisans and shopkeepers received money, the majority of the funds were granted to wealthy and powerful men in Charleston society. This relief was not meant to ease the suffering caused by the fire. These (for the most part) men were not impoverished by the blaze, but they did have their economic lives disrupted, and, coming when it did, the fire threatened to disrupt more than the economy. Parliament's grant was intended therefore to ease elite economic losses and in the process, protect their social position.

Finally, although it is difficult to determine the importance of the money in helping Charleston withstand the threats posed by economic depression, war with Spain, and internal social disorder during the turbulent 1740s, it most certainly had some impact. The money appropriated by Parliament in particular provided much needed help for a city slipping into depression and helped hundreds of individuals rebuild their homes and businesses as well as pay off accumulated debts. "It is to that Bounty," the Assembly noted in a letter of gratitude to the king in 1742, "that some of the unhappy Sufferers already owe their Re-settlement and Re-establishment in Charles Towne."<sup>41</sup> Local relief efforts also played an important role in easing the burden of many "unhappy Sufferers," particularly women and small artisans. The money involved was considerably less, but local efforts provided immediate, humanitarian assistance to a number of individuals and families whose livelihood were destroyed by the blaze. If the money did not have major economic repercussions, it did alleviate suffering and perhaps saved lives. Rebuilding Charleston — socially, economically, and physically — would take time, but without local and metropolitan relief, difficult social and economic conditions in the 1740s would have been much worse for both rich and poor.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the British West Indies, 1633-1713* (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 136-138. (Thanks to Natalie Zacek for alerting me about this relief effort.) For grant to Georgia, see *Journals of the House of Commons, 1737-1741*, Vol. 23, p. 624.

<sup>41</sup>Easterby, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1741-1742*, pp. 540-541.

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## THE LEGACY OF AINSLEY HALL

TERRY W. LIPSCOMB\*

*When the wealthy Columbia merchant Ainsley Hall died in 1823, he left behind a set of feuding heirs, a last will and testament that vexed the state's best legal minds, and two mansions on Blanding Street that were destined to become historic houses. A century later, his estate records turned up in the Richland County Courthouse and supplied much of the evidence needed to piece together his remarkable story.*

**WHERE THE ARCHITECTURE OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS IS** concerned, attribution is in the eye of the beholder. A defective or misleading documentary trail can point speculation in the wrong direction, as happened in the case of Columbia's Ainsley Hall Mansion — restored in modern times as the Robert Mills House. “[W]hile I have been able to find no records,” the author of a 1919 paper on Mills concluded regarding the mansion, “the character and detail of this building are so distinctly Roman, that I am quite sure it is not Mills’ work.” The writer credited the design to J. Graves, architect, based on a signed drawing in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary library that showed the Hall mansion with existing annexes and proposed additions.<sup>1</sup>

But during the 1920s county historian Edwin L. Green found that documents linking Robert Mills to this dwelling house existed in the Richland County Courthouse. The 100-year-old records had been introduced as evidence during an 1820s court fight over Ainsley Hall's estate.<sup>2</sup> Green's research led others to the file. Preservationists in the 1960s saw the papers as valuable ammunition in their efforts to save the mansion from demolition and they urged that steps be taken to safeguard them.

In 1961 James H. Hammond, president of the University South Caroliniana Society, called the matter to the attention of South Carolina Senator Walter J. Bristow:

That phase of the litigation, amounting to four or five old papers ... is lodged in the back of the Clerk of Courts office in files No. 251-266. These files sooner or later will be

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<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Wilson, *Robert Mills, Architect* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1919; Bulletin No. 77), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin L. Green, *A History of Richland County* (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1932), p. 42; Edwin L. Green, “Ainsley Hall, Merchant,” *The State* (Columbia, S.C.), July 5, 1931.