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THE BLOOD-THIRSTY TIGER: CHARLESTON AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FIRE

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How many hearts seemed to riot in joy amid the devouring flames, even as does the blood-thirsty tiger upon the carcass of the torn victim.

"We have to delay our paper to a late hour this morning, on account of a most disastrous FIRE which has been sweeping resistlessly all night through the very heart of our ill-fated city."¹ So reported the *Charleston Mercury* at 1 a.m. on Saturday, April 28, 1838. Beginning about 9 p.m. the previous evening in a small fruit store at the corner of Beresford and King streets, the fire spread rapidly east and north, driven by its own increasing fury. A long spring drought had drained the city's always precarious water supply and left its buildings tinder-dry; and before the night was over, demolition crews ran out of powder. Firemen and citizens alike could only gaze horrified at "the rapidity with which the fire progressed and the intensity of the heat, [which] not only created a high wind, but produced currents and eddies which [,] hurrying the flames in various directions, formed the basis of new conflagrations." Outreaching all attempts to contain them, "the flames . . . swept onward like a tempest, and the resinous vapors of the wooden buildings, converted the atmosphere into a sea of fire, which overwhelmed everything within its reach."²

By morning nearly 700 acres of the Old South's major city lay in ashes. Here and there a brick building, slate-roofed, had escaped burning. For the rest all that survived were chimneys, rising nakedly to the sky. The city that lay in ruins, although its importance had sadly diminished since colonial times, was still a major port, center of South Carolina's rice and cotton growing Low Country, focus for the trading and social orbits of the region's planters, who often made the city their

* Both members of the faculty of University of Maine at Orono. They wish to thank Professor Earl Beard, who read an earlier version of this essay with the sympathetic eye of a volunteer fireman, and Charleston historian Elias Bull, "whose extensive knowledge of the city's past saved us from unnecessary errors." They wish to thank the Faculty Research Committee of the University of Maine at Orono and the American Philosophical Society, whose generosity has greatly facilitated their research.

¹ *Mercury*, April 28, 1838. All newspaper citations are to Charleston newspapers.

² Charleston, City Council, *Memorial and Proceedings of the City Council of Charleston, on the Subject of Securing the City from Fires* (Charleston, 1838), p. 17.

second home. Without question Charleston was the Lower South's capital—culturally, politically, economically.

Nonetheless, Charlestonians were uneasy about their future. By 1830 it had become clear that Charleston, then a city of 30,000, was being passed by. Northern ports, especially New York, had usurped much of its trans-Atlantic trade. The Gulf ports of Mobile and New Orleans threatened its future even as a Southern entrepôt. Its hinterland languished as the heart of cotton culture followed the black belt toward the Mississippi. Clearly if Charleston was to save its urban future, it must extend its internal trade westward and redeem its overseas trade. To this end, in the 1830s, the city displayed remarkable vigor: initiating both the Charleston and Hamburg and the Louisville, Cincinnati, and Charleston railroads, chartering new packet lines, expanding banking facilities, and adding new hotels, stores, and warehouses to Charleston's commercial section. By 1835 the city was booming and once again sure of its future. But, three years later, already shaken by two major fires, the 1837 banking panic, and the explosion of the new steamship *Home*, Charleston faced catastrophe. By mid-morning of that fateful April Saturday in 1838, one-third of the city lay in ruins.

* * *

Experience had proved that almost anything could start a fire. An illuminated kite could fall at night and bring fire. Small boys could pour turpentine on a cat's tail, light it, watch the cat scurry into the stable, and then realize that it had set the hay afire. A man could trip on the stairs, drop his lantern, ignite his house, and gut several city blocks. As the causes seemed infinite, so the ringing of firebells sometimes seemed unceasing. Most Charlestonians had witnessed fires in the past and feared them in the future. Yet their very frequency dulled their impact. A minor fire was almost a routine event—destroying some houses here, a business block there. Jacob Schirmer, a cooper and volunteer fireman, recorded at least sixty-nine fires in his diary of the 1830s, reflecting the calm anxiety with which many lived in a fire-prone city.³

Major fires blasted that placidity. One of them, on a blustery February night in 1835, totally destroyed St. Philip's Church. That first, which began in Cornel June's sailors' boarding house (a brothel "of the very lowest and degraded character"⁴), had by morning consumed nearby

³ *City Gazette*, May 13, 1830; *Courier*, January 25, 1830, February 18, 1833; Jacob Frederick Schirmer, *Diary of Jacob Schirmer, Charleston Merchant, 1826-1886*, South Carolina Historical Society.

⁴ *Mercury*, February 17, 1835.

shops and homes occupied by blacks and whites who were either "very poor" or of "moderate circumstances."⁵ Yet the shock for most Charlestonians came from losing their oldest church, whose squat, domed steeple had caught some flying sparks. The church need not have burned, it was said, had only the firemen been more efficient, had only they acted more quickly.⁶ But when the steeple began to glow like a large torch, it was too late to save the rest. "I saw it when it began," one young observer wrote, "as I was watching in the garret and felt a great deal as I saw it gradually descend to the body of the Church."⁷ The heated bellows set off melancholy sounds from the organ, and the bell in the tower tolled dolefully before it crashed into the embers below.⁸ The loss of the church, observed Charleston physician Samuel Dickson, was "a sort of National Calamity."⁹ There was less comment on the loss of the fifty or more buildings of "small value."¹⁰

That fire, however, only began the tragedy. Within three months, on June 6, 1835, a second major fire ravaged the city just north of the February destruction. Striking again primarily the homes and businesses of modest citizens and the poor, it leveled 125 buildings over an eight block area. Although William Gilmore Simms exaggerated mightily when he reported that 400 houses had burned, he but stated the obvious when he added, "It makes a huge gap in the look of things, I assure you."¹¹

Devastating and numbing as they were, the fires of 1835 lacked the wild drama of the April 1838 holocaust. The Reverend Thomas Smyth realized an "awful sublimity" in it. The searing heat and swirling tongues of flame were orchestrated by an endless tolling of church bells, the roar of a fire storm, and deafening explosions as building after building was blown up. People, driven by the advancing flames, "hurried from the approach of all-devouring death." "[T]he incessant and mingled shouts" of the "scorched multitude" marked the night as actual and potential victims ran hysterically, trying to save what they could,

⁵ *Mercury*, February 16, 1835; *Courier*, February 16, 1835.

⁶ *Courier*, February 16, 1835.

⁷ [Unsigned] to Mrs. Ralph Izard, jr., February 19, [1835], Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

⁸ *Courier*, February 23, 1835.

⁹ Samuel H. Dickson to Joseph Milligan, February 16, 1835, Milligan Papers, Southern History Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹⁰ *Courier*, February 16, 1835.

¹¹ *Courier*, June 8, 1835; *Mercury*, June 9, 1835; William Gilmore Simms to James Lawson [ca. June 7, 1835], in William Gilmore Simms, *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms*, collected and edited by Mary C. Simms Oliphant, Alfred Taylor Odell, T. C. Duncan Eaves (5 vols., Columbia, 1952 ff.), 1:69.

showered by "flaky sparks borne on the increasing wind . . . swelled almost into a gale." In the end "a city of blackened walls and smoking ruins" remained.¹²

* * *

Certainly fire and its prevention had been over the years a central concern of Charleston as it had always been for all cities and towns from earliest times. City council had, on numerous occasions in the past, adopted fire prevention ordinances. The state legislature, too, following the general practice of the day, had passed fire control regulations specific to the city. But their effects were limited. A law dating from the eighteenth century mandated brick and stone as the only approved building materials, but after its first few years it was seldom enforced. Nor did the city act in 1835 on a suggestion that wooden buildings be roofed with noncombustible materials. With varying degrees of strictness city officials had for years fined those responsible for chimney fires and restricted or prohibited dangerous occupations such as distilling, soap and rosin boiling, baking, and steam milling within city limits. They had also regulated storage of combustibles like hay, fodder, gunpowder, and naval stores.¹³ But the frequency and severity of fires in the 1830s demonstrated the minimal utility of city ordinances once fire had started.

If Charlestonians would not build to avoid fires, they were at least expected to fall out for fire-fighting duty. By the 1830s, volunteer organizations and city engines drawn by slaves but supervised by white city employees had brought some expertise to the city's fire department. Occasionally their efforts were supplemented by complements of sailors from ships in the harbor or by platoons of federal troops garrisoned locally. The rest of the citizenry now acted primarily after the fire, sheltering the homeless and aiding the destitute. They organized public concerts and exhibitions to raise funds for disaster relief. They served on *ad hoc* ward committees, collecting and distributing contributions

¹² Thomas Smyth, *Two Discourses on the Occasion of the Great Fire in Charleston* . . . (Charleston, 1838), pp. 8-19.

¹³ Charleston, City Council, *A Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, From the Year 1743 to Oct. 1844* . . . (Charleston, 1844), "An Act for Better Security of Charleston from the Accident of Fire," March 28, 1778, pp. 412-417; Protestant Episcopal Church, St. Michael's, Charleston, Vestry Book 1824-1869, Minutes February 22, 1835, typescript in Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; *Digest of Ordinances*, "An Ordinance to Authorize the Appointment of a Board of Fire Masters . . .," June 30, 1815, pp. 64-68, and "An Ordinance to Amend an Ordinance, Entitled an Ordinance to Appoint a Board of Fire Masters, and for Other Purposes therein Mentioned," February 3, 1828, p. 69.

throughout the city. And, as participants in an informal network, they both gave and received aid as one city after another experienced disasters and responded to similar events elsewhere.¹⁴

After the fires of 1835, however, Charlestonians began to question the old ways. Significantly they did so just when the city was evolving a massive plan for urban development and economic growth. If the city was to recover physically and psychologically, and if it was to prevent fireborne tragedy in the future, it must consciously turn present loss to future advantage by devising a long-range plan for reconstruction. Otherwise, as in the past, fire after destructive fire would continue to devastate the peninsular city with numbing regularity.

"All that is wanted to make our city one of the healthiest and most prosperous in the United States," wrote one would-be reformer, "is to arouse our citizens from that dreadful lethargy under which they have been so long slumbering."¹⁵ "A Taxable Citizen," "Observer," "Go A-Head," "Public Opinion," and others like them proposed wide-ranging programs in the local press. Premised on both public and joint private initiative, their plans demanded at a minimum that streets be improved and new building be of modern, fire-proof construction. Beyond that several proposed that the burned-out area around the old market contain a mall complete with covered walkways and an arcade "on which shall open the stores of taste and fashion, and the confectionaries of luxurious indulgence."¹⁶ Another letter to the editor suggested that fire-proof town houses be constructed on the best Boston model to lure northern merchants to the city as permanent residents.¹⁷ Through them all ran several common themes: making the city safer, more prosperous, and more attractive; invoking governmental or corporate planning; and finally eliminating the crowded "rookeries" which had previously proliferated along narrow alleys. However accomplished, the measures should help realize Charleston's destiny "to be the commercial rival of New York."¹⁸

The city fathers seemed to agree. "Council have purchased all the lots, about the neighborhood of the market, where the last fire was,"

¹⁴ The general pattern of activity is derived from a variety of sources, the major ones of which include *Digest of Ordinances*; Charleston, Board of Firemasters, "Record Book 1819-1836," MS, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Charleston, City Council, *Ordinances of the City of Charleston: From the 5th February, 1833 to the 9th May, 1837 . . .* (Charleston, 1837); *Courier, City Gazette, and Mercury*.

¹⁵ "X" in *Mercury*, June 9, 1835.

¹⁶ "Go A-Head" in *Mercury*, June 11, 1835.

¹⁷ "Observer" in *Courier*, June 15, 1835.

¹⁸ "Public Opinion" in *Courier*, June 15, 1835.

one woman wrote ecstatically in July 1835, "& I believe will widen the lanes, & allies, & make Streets of them & build fine houses." More reserved, lawyer James Petigru merely observed on the "many plans for improvement." The best that one could hope was that the city might build some "good houses" or turn the burnt-out area "into a common or Park."¹⁹

* * *

Petigru's reserve, it turned out, was well based. Few of the projects—public or private—ever materialized, although those that did were impressive. A private corporation—with considerable city aid—built a block of granite wholesale stores along the new Pearl Street, which had replaced two burned-out alleys. The massive Charleston hotel opened by the spring of 1838 in Meeting Street nearly opposite the newly rebuilt public market. City Council began paving, widening, and better connecting the streets of its grid system. But the general character of reconstruction was more clearly marked by new wooden buildings still crowded together along narrow and congested streets.

Few of those burned out could afford to invest in real estate development. Even fewer were prepared to sacrifice private gain to public improvement. Charlestonians were no more ready than most other nineteenth century Americans for city planning or urban renewal in the public interest; and apparently less willing than their peers in Northern cities like New York and Boston to enforce building material restrictions in the central city to protect private property from fire loss. Even more hazardous to enlightened self-interest, they failed wholly to correct the weaknesses within their fire department which the 1835 fires had underscored and which proved disastrous three years later.

For over fifty years the city's fire department had been managed by a Board of Fire Masters—from ten to fifteen men appointed since 1815 by the city council. Composed of both the prominent and the aspiring, the Fire Masters often made decisions as political as their appointment; for in their hands lay not only routine supervision and firefighting management, but also the power and responsibility to decide, at the crisis, whose property would be blown up to stop the fire. Often totally inexperienced in firefighting, one or two of them at each fire were expected to supervise the volunteer fire companies, the managers of the city's sixteen fire engines, and the chief engineer, who was charged with the demolition work. Organized in independent, chartered companies re-

¹⁹ An[—?] to Rev. William M. Reid, July 28, 1835, Jacob Rhett Mott Papers, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; James L. Petigru to Adele P. Allston, June 22, 1835, Allston-Pringle-Hill Papers, South Carolina Historical Society.

flecting specific firefighting skills—axemen, hosemen, enginemen—the volunteers enjoyed both their camaraderie and their rivalry. On the one hand these high-spirited young men railed at the inexpertise of the Fire Masters, who presumed to give them orders; and, on the other, they scorned collaboration with the city engines manned entirely, except for white supervisors, by slaves. Although the city paid them for each fire they turned out to fight, as it also paid the slaves commandeered to pull the city engines, the volunteers nevertheless viewed themselves as a group apart from the city fire department, as select members of private clubs who fought fires as a public service. Their chief rewards were the social and political benefits which association with fellow club members brought. Mostly clerks, artisans, and mechanics, they might or might not take advantage of the special prerogatives sporadically offered in return for firefighting—exemption from jury or militia duty. By contrast they cherished both their chartered right to elect their own officers and the community standing to which their drills and uniforms entitled them.²⁰

This diversely motivated and qualified group—Fire Masters, engineer, city engine crews, and volunteer corps—made up a single fire department. That they work harmoniously was imperative; that they did not was perhaps inevitable. “The complaint,” observed the *Mercury* in June 1835, “is general and loud against the inefficient organization of the Fire Department. [It is] really discreditable to the city.”²¹ Yet any solution must respond not only to the conflicting values of fire department members but to legislation and tradition which had enshrined divided authority and unclear responsibility.

At first glance it seemed clear that both authority and responsibility were legally focussed in the Board of Fire Masters. State laws dating back to 1778 charged them with directing fire-fighting, providing the requisite equipment, insuring that wells and cisterns be located for an adequate water supply, and inspecting private property for fire hazards. But the Fire Masters’ complete command at fires ill-comported with the role of skilled officers who were elected by their fellow volunteers to drill and command the various specialized companies. Moreover a city ordinance adopted in 1827 which delegated the care of fire equipment to a chief engineer gave him no specific authority to use it at fires. That same ordinance also enlarged the responsibility of mayor and aldermen

²⁰ The general characteristics of the fire department are constructed from a careful reading of the press of the period and from the various ordinances adopted by the city over the years and collected in the sources noted in footnotes 14, 15 and 23.

²¹ *Mercury*, June 8, 1835.

from simply keeping fire lanes open to an ambiguous but possibly sweeping supervisory role by providing that "when a fire shall happen" they should assemble at City Hall and "as soon as a quorum shall be formed, make such arrangements in relation to the fire as they shall in their discretion see fit."²²

It was this kind of confusion that incensed a writer to the *Courier* after the St. Philips fire. "All was bustle and confusion—no concert of action—no understanding between the Fire Masters. . . ." Only a change in the system to concentrate authority and responsibility in the chief engineer could, he argued, avoid this chaos.²³

The engineer's response to subsequent criticisms of his deficiencies underscored the need to change something. Martin Strobel, who served as Chief Engineer during most of the 1830s, fumed and sputtered after the June 1835 fire. The inadequacies for which critics blamed him were beyond his control. Admittedly late in arriving at the fire, he had his reasons. Once the alarm had sounded, he had to pull on his trousers before he could rush to the magazine to get his equipment. Lacking a competent cadre, he had, once there, "to press in service at least six negroes; this is done," he continued, recounting his woes, "with great delay and difficulty, for by the time I get some and think them secure, whilst in pursuit of others, the former escape. . . ." Then he had to supervise their loading the wagons with explosive caissons and fuses. At last the wagons were dragged "with some difficulty to the fire. . . . Surely," he concluded bitterly, ". . . it cannot be expected, under these circumstances, that I can be at the fire the moment the alarm is given."²⁴

Both angry denunciations and feeble responses made Charlestonians consider earlier proposals to vest firefighting in the militia where clear lines of authority, elected officers, and general training promised disciplined and efficient action in any emergency. Already city militia units turned out at major fires to patrol and guard property.²⁵ Why not make them the city fire department? At least this would eliminate the divisiveness which the volunteers' "silly notion of 'independence'" interjected into fire fighting and which "destroy[ed] all the advantages which might

²² Charleston, City Council, *A Collection of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston from the 10th Day of October 1826 to the 13th Day of March 1832* . . . (Charleston, 1832), pp. 18-21.

²³ "A Citizen" in *Courier*, February 19, 1835.

²⁴ *Mercury*, June 11, 1835.

²⁵ See, as well as general press coverage, Washington Light Infantry, Minute Books [1827-1840], MS, typescript copy, various entries for September and October 1835 and October 1836, College of Charleston, Charleston.

arise from united exertions." At the same time it would give the militia something to do more useful than marching and parading. By such an arrangement the city would utilize an institution already established, consistent with local tradition, and embracing virtually every able bodied man in the community.²⁶ The idea received sufficient popular support for Brigadier-General James Hamilton, commander of Charleston's Fourth Brigade, to endorse the "absolute necessity of . . . uniting as citizen soldiers, under an effective organization which military discipline and authority alone can confer," and to offer the services of his brigade as the fire department.²⁷

The Fire Masters, however, were unimpressed by a solution which would eliminate them. The furthest any of them was willing to go was to suggest concentrating authority and responsibility in the Chief Engineer, who would thus become undisputed head of the city fire-fighters when they were in action. That, like the militia proposal, died quietly at a Board meeting. There simply was no detectable enthusiasm by the Board of Fire Masters to strip itself of power. Nor was City Council seriously interested in a reorganization which, whatever it might do for fire protection, threatened the political status quo. So, after briefly considering in the summer of 1836 a plan for a quasi-military reorganization of the fire department, they backed off, left exclusive responsibility to manage fire-fighting with the Fire Masters, left the volunteer companies free of city supervision except at fires, and then rather lamely raised the Chief Engineer's salary, gave him two assistants, and created a City Superintendent of Engines. Subsequent legislation did little more than spell out fire procedures more clearly. In no way did these new regulations confront the basic problems: the dispersal of responsibility and authority, the jealousies and ambitions which fed it, and the need for professionalism in the municipal fire department.²⁸

Their failure was sickeningly evident in April 1838. The Chief Engineer and his new assistants failed to provide adequate powder for the demolition work. Neither the City Superintendent of Engines nor the volunteer companies could produce sufficient hose to cope with a major fire. Neither Fire Masters nor City Council had procured an adequate

²⁶ "An Old Officer" in *Courier*, June 11, 1835.

²⁷ *Courier*, June 11, 1835.

²⁸ See, in particular, *Courier*, July 16, 1835; *Digest of Ordinances*, pp. 353-354; *Ordinances of the City of Charleston* [1833-1837], 75-77, 164-169; and Charleston, City Council, Petition of the City Council of Charleston Relative to the Regulation of Fires, etc., [1836], MS, Legislative System, Charleston, South Carolina Archives, Columbia.

water supply. Serious fire was almost guaranteed when fire hazards had gone uncorrected and building codes unenforced. Chaos and confusion were assured as a still undisciplined and largely untrained city fire department faced one of the worst fires in Charleston's history. As flames devoured block after block, the truth once again struck home: Nobody was effectively in charge. A speedily exhausted water supply, demolitions too little and too late, an explosion which killed a city engineer, and ultimately panic and desertion among the volunteer firemen but reinforced the point.²⁹

Who was responsible? Was it elected city officials who failed their constituents? Or did their inaction only reflect a cultural milieu and the community they governed? Certain it is that the patterns of rivalry and camaraderie within the fire companies mirrored underlying tensions in Charleston society. Bound together by task but separated by race and condition were the sixteen engines manned by blacks and the five proud companies of white volunteers: the Engine, the Vigilant, the Aetna, the Phoenix, and the Axemen. The latter were free men working with and competing against slaves. They were a fraternity of aspiring and reasonably skillful volunteers sharing dangerous and glamorous exploits with men who had neither choice nor future and with city officials whose social position or political power often protected them from the results of their own incompetence. Both associations bred a resentment which festered when major conflagrations demanded long hours in dense smoke and harrowing conditions yet brought only storms of criticism from irate property owners, incensed voters, and the social elite, who challenged the right of the volunteers to elect their own officers or exert the manly independence which gave them status. Such, at any rate, were the perceptions which set one half of the city's 700-man fire department against the other.³⁰

The issue of differential treatment by caste and class came to a head as the city acknowledged those who had died fighting for its preservation. The entire city council attended the funerals of Frederick Schnierle and Charles Steedman and then voted to erect monuments to each of them. Schnierle had been a city employee, an officer in the Engineering Department, whose claim on the city resulted from his office. Colonel

²⁹ On the failure of response see especially *Mercury*, May 1, 1838.

³⁰ On organization and function see, for example, South Carolina, *Statutes at Large* . . . (vol. 8, Columbia, 1841), pp. 348-384; Charleston, The Mayor, *A Report Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities, From the First September, 1838, to First August, 1839*, by H. L. Pinckney, Mayor (Charleston, 1839), pp. 66-67; and the city press, *passim*.

Steedman, though not a city official, was the Custom House Naval Officer, fallen on hard times after a career as planter, bank president, and state legislator. Both were honored for gallant bravery in the explosion which killed them. A third man also died in that explosion; but no councilman attended the funeral of John Peart, a volunteer fireman and a mere artisan.

"The day of retribution is at hand," threatened one embittered mechanic. "[F]ull justice will be meted out" to those who demand exertions from "plebians" but reserve rewards for "patricians."³¹ "Let me ask every man who is possessed of a sound and discriminating mind," a youthful Charlestonian queried, "if such neglect as that, has a tendency to inspire the young men of this City to acts of valor and heroism? Will any young man, seeing the neglect with which his fallen brother has been treated, rush forward at the hazard of his own life, to prevent another's property from being destroyed?"³² In the end, Peart got his monument, but only through the efforts of his militia unit, the Charleston Riflemen.³³

The indignation that drew volunteers together to protest the class distinctions underlying the slight to Peart ignored completely the "several" Negroes—unnamed and apparently even uncounted—who had also died in the fire. As clearly as the Councilmen's action, the firemen's silence bespoke social attitudes. That the question involved both caste and class is attested by the volunteers' willingness to serve with slaves while they denounced any plan which would draw free blacks into the fire department.

No wonder then at the indignation which greeted a City Council proposal to permit free people of color to serve as part of the paid fire-fighting force. Most aldermen apparently accepted the argument that restricting free Negroes' civic obligations to militia fatigue duty was wasteful, that they could better serve the city as firefighters, and that they would be a more reliable labor source than slaves whose masters were reluctant to lose their labor. As citizens and council openly discussed thus enlarging the fire department and then reorganizing it under a single city authority, at least one fireman signalled the political consequences that either reform would engender. Rather than serve in a fire company whose officers he could not choose, he would "drop [his] *Spanner*, shoulder [his] musket, and become a *valuable* citizen by being

³¹ "Broad Axe" in *Mercury*, May 22, 1838.

³² *Mercury*, May 17, 1838.

³³ *Mercury*, January 8, 1839.

a *Militia Man*.”⁸⁴ Neither he nor his fellows would allow themselves to be reduced to the low status of the black engine crews. Social standing and psychic rewards were at stake. So too was the continued willingness of white clerks, artisans, and mechanics to perform fire duty.

Although the state legislature rejected as inexpedient the city's plan to use free blacks as firefighters, the issues of race and status haunted city government efforts when, at long last, it finally undertook late in 1838 a fundamental reorganization of the fire department. Going to the heart of the essential problems, Council drew clear lines of authority which made one person, a full time Chief Engineer, responsible for maintaining all fire equipment in the city and for directing its use. The Board of Fire Masters, reduced in number, would continue to make policy but the Chief Engineer was to have exclusive command at fires, to give orders even to the Fire Masters, to coordinate city and volunteer companies, and to determine where and when houses would be demolished. The Mayor and Aldermen, effectively stripped of their authority at fires, took on the equally important task of providing the city a system of 15,000-gallon wells and cisterns so situated that a fire in any part of the city could be fought with at least two streams of water.⁸⁵

When Council adopted this ordinance in February 1839, Charlestonians had every reason to anticipate unified leadership, clear lines of responsibility, and effective fire control in the future. Much, of course, depended on the Chief Engineer; but a salary of \$2500 promised to attract a competent professional whose attention to his duties would be assured by his posting bond for good performance. Denied any interest in city contracts and even the right to receive rewards other than his salary except with consent of Council, the Chief Engineer would be impartial and apolitical. Thus he could be trusted to oversee such fire-related matters as well, cistern, and street repair, the enforcement of building codes, and the upkeep of city and volunteer company fire equipment. But, most important of all, his expertise and impartiality would entitle him to direct the entire department personnel at fires: “Fire Masters[,] the assistant Engineers, the Superintendents and Managers of Engines, the respective Fire and Hose Companies, Axe-men, and others present at the fire.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ *Mercury*, May 21, 1838. See also Charleston, Citizens Petitions, “Memorial of the City Council of Charleston,” November 20, 1838; and Charleston, City Council, Petition of the City Council Praying Authority to Attach Free Persons of Color to the City Engineers, November 20 - December 5, 1838, both in Legislative System, Legislative Papers and Military Affairs, South Carolina Archives.

⁸⁵ Charleston, City Council, *Ordinances of the city of Charleston, from the 24th May, 1837 to the 18th March, 1840* . . . (Charleston, 1840), pp. 109-118.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Section 7 of the ordinance.

Clearly the plan tackled all the fire hazards and the deficiencies in authority, water supply, equipment, and demolition which public meetings, private citizens, and a blue ribbon fire committee had exposed in the months following the fire. But it ignored the political consequences of imposing a centralized and professionalized solution on a city whose business traditionally was transacted as a voluntary and unpaid service involving maximum participation by all citizens. The immediate objections of the volunteer companies sprang from this context. Admittedly much of their equipment, and even some of their fire houses, had been furnished by city funds. But to allow a highly paid professional and city appointee to inspect their hose, engines, and fire stations was to challenge not only their responsibility and expertise but the whole way that one group of citizens was meaningfully integrated into the community structure. Their vaunted independence may have been illusory, given city subventions and their own charters, which specifically subjected most companies to city officials. Nonetheless it represented to the volunteers the means by which they, as relatively humble citizens, played a significant role in a society which they believed gave power largely to "men of property" and "high standing."

Their civic standing as well as their organizations under attack, the volunteers denounced the proposed reorganization with little effect until they pledged themselves to "*resist and disobey all laws passed in violation and in repugnance to their charters;*" and, if necessary, "oppose the present Mayor and those Aldermen who are in favor of a Chief Engineer, at the next election. . . ." ⁸⁷ The open political threat drew the line. A battle was emerging in which public safety or administrative and operational efficiency were increasingly only surface issues in a struggle among competing political, social, and economic pressures. Property owners (councilmen among them) demanded protection for their property; while firemen, some of whom also owned property and who were genuinely concerned for public safety, were primarily bent upon maintaining that organizational independence which betokened their social standing and aspirations. So the city fathers were caught in the difficult if not impossible task of rendering public service in a world where legitimate but varied special interests led to conflicting priorities for that service.

At first they met the challenge head-on, asserting their intention to "vindicate [the Council's] authority and dignity."⁸⁸ In March 1839 the Mayor ordered the firemen to perform their duties as usual or see

⁸⁷ *Mercury*, March 25, 1839.

⁸⁸ *Mercury*, March 28, 1839.

their volunteer companies abolished and new ones established in their stead.³⁹ The Council was, however, unable to contain the controversy, especially after the *Mercury* took it up as part of a more general attack on the sins of recent city government. Berating the council for having reduced the Fire Masters "to a Board of Consultation for the Chief Engineer," and denouncing costly professionalization of city government—in this case making control of the fire department "an object of ambition and rivalry instead of an arduous public duty . . ."—the paper made opposition to the fire ordinance a political issue with popular appeal to the middling sorts.⁴⁰

Welcoming unexpected support, the Fire Masters, almost exactly a year after the 1838 fire disaster, urged a return to the system which had failed so miserably then. The crisis and the willingness to experiment were over. It was politics as usual. The council vacillated, and the mayor opened the path to retreat. He proposed to put the new ordinance up to referendum. And on July 1, 1839, the centralization and professionalization of the fire department were defeated three to one in an election which brought only a third of the city's usual voters to the polls. The combined pressures of the volunteer fire companies, the press, and the Fire Masters, acting from diverse motives of status and power, had pushed the protection of property into a position of secondary importance.⁴¹

In a bathetic denouement, Council patched together a new ordinance which again dispersed authority among fire masters, mayor, and aldermen, made the engineer a part-time employee salaried at \$400, and relieved the volunteer fire companies of systematic supervision.⁴²

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The failure, over time, to meet the challenge of fire prevention and fire protection with firmness was doubtless fed by yet another factor—the proclivity to find a scapegoat on which to blame the inexplicable or the uncontrollable. Either to make up for their own failures or to act out their underlying fears, Charlestonians were prone to blame fires on incendiaries. After each major fire, a series of "arson" attempts was reported, rewards were offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of arsonists, and the city guard or even special patrols were mobilized for arson watches. Thus, when Chareleston's efforts to restore

³⁹ *Mercury*, April 2, 1839.

⁴⁰ *Mercury*, April 23, 1839.

⁴¹ *Mercury*, May 9, June 7, 26, 27, July 1 and 3, 1839.

⁴² *Ordinances of the City of Charleston, 1837-1840*, pp. 154-164.

her commerce and generally refurbish her economic life during the decade were so rudely aborted by the long-term impact of the Panic of 1837, and when the cumulative force of three ever-more-devastating fires had shattered the city's confidence, it was easy to blame arson for saddling the city with "a fatal paralysis."⁴³

Therein lay the double tragedy of the Great Fire of 1838. Not only was it to that time Charleston's most destructive fire; it exposed—or fed—a paralysis which kept the city from responding rationally and coherently. As a body politic, Charleston could not reorganize to meet the threat of future fire; as individuals, Charlestonians transformed reasonable fear into immobilizing paranoia. Already haunted by the memory of Denmark Vesey's planned insurrection, they were now traumatized by fire. Not surprisingly many of them envisioned an incendiary conspiracy among their slaves. In June alone eighteen arson attempts were reported; and each time slaves were immediately arrested and questioned.⁴⁴ Though virtually none were convicted, the nature of white Charlestonians' response gave them away.

In his sermon delivered immediately after the Great Fire, Thomas Smythe had dramatized the pervasive fear of social collapse which fire had loosed. "How many hearts seemed to riot in joy amid the devouring flames, even as does the blood-thirsty tiger upon the carcass of the torn victim."⁴⁵ Often thereafter the fear of the tiger overwhelmed the fear of fire. Eleven years later when thirty-seven slave-inmates of the Charleston workhouse revolted and escaped, a mob of angry and frightened whites gathered before Calvary Church, being built for a black congregation, and prepared to put it to the torch. James Petigru, Charleston's persistent voice of measured reason, faced them down. "How can you be such damned fools . . .? Have you not seen enough of fire here to be afraid of it? It is the only thing that decent men are afraid of!"⁴⁶

⁴³ [Henry L. Pinckney], Address of the Citizens of Charleston to the Governor of South Carolina, MS dated April 4, 1838, should be May 4, 1838, Legislative Papers, City of Charleston, Petitions (on the burning of the city), South Carolina Archives. Also appears in *Mercury*, May 5, 1838.

⁴⁴ Henry L. Pinckney, *A Report, Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities, from the 4th September 1837, to the 1st August 1838* (Charleston, 1838), pp. 43-44.

⁴⁵ Smyth, *Two Discourses* (Discourse Second), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Robert Durden, "The Establishment of Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church for Negroes in Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXV (April 1964), 73, from James Petigru Carson, *The Life, Letters, and Speeches of James Louis Petigru: The Union Man of South Carolina* (Washington, 1920), p. 280.

PRESTON SMITH BROOKS: THE MAN AND HIS IMAGE

ROBERT NEIL MATHIS *

Recalling a vivid memory of 1856, a distinguished Northern woman reminisced, "At the hotel I had remarked a handsome man, evidently a Southerner, with what appeared to me an evil expression of countenance. This was Brooks of South Carolina."¹ These revealing words of Julia Ward Howe graphically exemplify what was to become of the historical image of Congressman Preston Smith Brooks, the perpetrator of the notorious assault upon Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. For Howe, mere abhorrence of Brooks's precipitous deed, without any substantive knowledge of the man or his principles, was sufficient reason to see in his image "an evil expression of countenance." Regretably, historians have often been guilty of the same indiscretion.

Indeed, few men of American history have been mentioned so prominently yet investigated so carelessly as Preston Smith Brooks. While the life of his antagonist, Charles Sumner, has been thoroughly scrutinized by several able biographers, Brooks has remained in the public mind an obscure and enigmatic individual.² The image of Brooks which has generally endured in both popular and scholarly accounts is predominantly the identical one which appeared in Northern orations and publications at the time of his encounter with Sumner. The misused South Carolinian emerges continually in historical literature as "Bully Brooks," a "hotheaded," "hot-tempered" representative of Southern so-

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¹ Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston and New York, 1899), p. 179.

² An excellent example of the negligence accorded to Brooks is the frequency of references to him as the "nephew" of Andrew Butler. A survey of thirteen popular history textbooks at the college level revealed that only two correctly identified Brooks as the "cousin" of Butler. The error is even repeated in such respected reference works as: Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1958), II, 88; Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York and Evanston, 1961), p. 221; *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* (Springfield, 1972), p. 198. In reality, Brooks's father Whitfield Brooks, and Andrew Butler were first cousins. See: Theodore D. Jervay, "The Butlers of South Carolina," *this Magazine*, IV (October, 1903), 296-311.