

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Michael D. Thompson.** *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port.* Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World Series. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015. 312 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-474-8.

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The South's nineteenth-century ships, docks, and waterways have formed the backdrop for much important work in the field of labor history. The men—enslaved and free, black and white—who toiled on them connected the producers of staple crops to the regional, national, and international markets on which their commodities were sold. Southern maritime and riverine workers were not just crucial to the region's prosperity; they also brought other southerners into contact with transnational currents of news, information, and dissident politics. Little wonder, therefore, that these workers have attracted the attention of so many scholars. Michael D. Thompson's *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port*, which examines the dockworkers of Charleston, South Carolina, is a welcome addition to this corpus of scholarship. Indeed, as the first book-length study of southern waterfront workers in the years before the Civil War, Thompson's book breaks important new ground.

*Working on the Dock of the Bay* is a study of the pre-Civil War confrontation between Charleston dockworkers, their owners, and their employers, viewed through the street-level experiences and perspectives of the workingmen (p. 3). Chapter 1 describes the working lives of antebellum Charleston's black dockworkers. It uses travelers' accounts to paint a vivid picture of the bustling waterfront and then goes beneath the surface to reveal just how grueling and dangerous working on the wharves could be. Chapter 2 examines the incessant contest (p. 31) between the African American workers who monopolized jobs on the Charleston waterfront and

the owners, employers, and urban elites who aimed to both profit from and control black labor. Charleston's commercial economy required a flexible workforce, and the development of slave hiring to meet this challenge gave black dockworkers a great deal of autonomy in their working lives. Charleston's elite, meanwhile, was torn between embracing the profits based on this flexibility and worrying about the independence it gave to enslaved waterfront workers. Chapter 3 delves more deeply into what we might call the political culture of African American dockworkers. Herein, Thompson shows how life on the Charleston waterfront afforded these enslaved workers ample occasion to interact with northern and foreign mariners, stow away in dockside vessels and abscond to northern ports, and steal or pilfer valuable commercial goods (p. 63). The independence and recalcitrance of African American dockworkers met a stern response from Charleston's elite, however. Indeed, as Thompson shows in chapter 4, concerns about the restiveness of black waterfront workers was one factor in their partial replacement by white immigrant labor in the late antebellum period. Finally, however, chapter 5 demonstrates that the susceptibility of these immigrants to diseases such as yellow fever allowed African American men to maintain a toehold on the docks of Charleston up until the eve of the Civil War.

*Working on the Dock of the Bay* evokes some of the best work of the new labor history, and it shares many of the strengths of that school. First and foremost, the book is based on what appears to be extremely meticulous research in both archival and published sources.

This strong evidentiary base allows Thompson to paint a rich and detailed picture of the working lives of the black men who labored on Charleston's docks. His account of waterfront labor relations is particularly compelling. The revelation that enslaved dockworkers haggled over wages with potential employers adds a whole new dimension to our understanding of urban and industrial slavery in the antebellum South, for example. Similarly, Thompson does a fine job of revealing the conflicted attitudes of Charleston's elite toward the waterfront workforce. On the one hand, the city's prosperity required a flexible workforce, and this entailed accepting that black dockworkers would enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. On the other hand, and especially after the discovery of Denmark Vesey's conspiracy in 1822, sections of the urban elite saw this autonomy as a major threat to the social order and sought to restrict it. By capturing this conflict so vividly, Thompson helps us to understand the contradiction between market forces and slave discipline that plagued slaveholders throughout the antebellum South.

Thompson's focus on conflicts over working conditions on the waterfront does feel a little narrow at times, however, and I was left with questions about the families and social lives of Charleston's enslaved dockworkers. Where did they live, for example? Did enslaved hirelings stay in the homes of their owners or in accommodation

provided by their employers? Who prepared their meals, washed their clothes, and cleaned their dwellings? What did they do when they got off work? Where did they socialize and go to church? Answering some of these questions would have enriched our understanding of these men and their place in Charleston's black community. It would also have allowed Thompson to include at least some discussion of black women and their place on the waterfront and in the city as a whole. One cannot help but feel that such a discussion would have made a more satisfactory addition to Thompson's book than the discussion of disease and quarantine in chapter 5. The material in that chapter is fascinating in its own right, but it does relatively little to further the reader's understanding of labor relations on the waterfront and feels like a slightly uncomfortable fit with the rest of the book.

Overall, however, *Working on the Dock of the Bay* comes highly recommended. It is an unusually clear and well-written work of social history, based on impressive research, and makes an important contribution to our understanding of the antebellum urban South. It will appeal to scholars of nineteenth-century labor history and urban and industrial slavery, and would make a fine choice for an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course that seeks to connect these topics to a transnational context.

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