

## Introduction

On July 13, 1849, a slave named Nicholas Kelly and two accomplices armed with sledgehammers and pickaxes led an attack on the police and jailers at the Charleston slave workhouse. The three men helped dozens of their fellow captives escape from the workhouse and into the streets of Charleston. In the days and weeks following the rebellion, newspapers documented Nicholas's long history of resistance while white Charlestonians debated the consequences of the revolt. Who was Nicholas? Why did the workhouse revolt occur? How did white Charlestonians react to the incident?

Historians, however, have missed Nicholas and the workhouse revolt because the evidence is so scattered. It took me twenty years to amass the documentation for this volume. My first glimpse of the revolt was through the *South Carolina Historical Magazine's* publication of selections from a diary in which Jacob Schirmer made note of an incident at the workhouse. When I turned to the press for further treatment of the incident, I was shocked to learn that it was, in fact, a slave revolt, although the *Charleston Courier* and *Mercury* attempted to downplay it. The abolitionist press, on the other hand, offered extensive coverage of the rebellion, as William Lloyd Garrison, founder and editor of *The Liberator*, published a letter from a Philadelphia abolitionist

and former resident of Charleston that outlined the significance of the event.

\*\*\*\*

White Charlestonians, terrified of local slave insurrections at a time of heightened national tensions over the future of slavery, attempted to silence the incident. If we were to judge from the historical record, they largely succeeded, relegating Nicholas's extraordinary story to the occasional footnote. Yet so fascinating was his life that Nicholas clearly deserves biographical treatment, one that does him posthumous justice by ranking him alongside the likes of Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner, the most famous slave rebels in all of American history.

Beyond Nicholas's exemplary story, I argue that the workhouse rebellion was significant in two additional ways. First, the rebellion was important in its own right as a part of the wave of revolutions, including slave revolts, which swept across the Atlantic World during the half century before his birth and whose abrupt end practically coincided with his hasty execution. Those rebellions helped to shape the slave rebel Nicholas became, and his direct resistance to slavery eventually led to his imprisonment in the workhouse, a place that epitomized the brutality and inhumanity of southern slavery, where Nicholas chose to fight his enslavers head-on, despite knowing that violent resistance meant certain death. Second, the workhouse rebellion had immediate social and political ramifications for Charleston's slave society. The prospect of slave resistance and rebellions led enslavers to impose strict controls on the men, women, and children they

## INTRODUCTION

enslaved. Leading white Charlestonians investigated the workhouse rebellion, and they concluded that no major changes were necessary. They did find, however, that there was something exceptional about Nicholas, especially his religious beliefs and the way he resisted his enslavers. Nicholas embodied the revolutionary sentiment of the period in which he lived, and he acted upon it.

\*\*\*

In the chapters that follow I situate the workhouse rebellion within the larger historical context of slave rebellions in the Age of Democratic Revolutions. Colonial era slave revolts in South Carolina and New York had instilled a pervasive fear of insurrection among white southerners, who built a social and political system around subjugating African Americans, both enslaved and free, and maintaining white dominance. Although slave rebellions proved increasingly difficult in the antebellum period (the forty years leading up to the Civil War), slaves practiced resistance – often directly and violently – on a daily basis. They did not merely submit to their oppressors. In South Carolina, the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy proved inspirational to slaves, but it became increasingly difficult to plan a revolt after Nat Turner's failed rebellion in Virginia in 1831. Slaves resorted to spontaneous revolts, including two shipboard rebellions that took place during the 1840s.

I go on to describe the brutality and inhumanity of urban slavery, especially the operations of the Charleston slave workhouse, in which whites sought to impose their authority upon slaves. The workhouse

served as a house of correction where masters sent their slaves for brutal punishments, mainly in the form of whippings and paddling. The workhouse maintained a treadmill, a pair of horizontal cylinders with a succession of stairs on them and connected to millstones. Slave owners also sent their slaves to the workhouse for safe-keeping, especially while slaves awaited sale. Moreover, Charleston authorities lodged runaway slaves in the workhouse until their masters could claim them. This chapter reveals the ways in which the workhouse functioned to reinforce white dominance in a slave society. Although urban slavery has often been imagined as less harsh than plantation slavery, the evidence from Charleston suggests otherwise.

Nicholas's encounter with the inhumanity of the Gulf Coast Slave Trade, in his case that between Charleston and New Orleans, the two largest ports in the internal slave trade is important and I detail that with care. Enslavers relied on a credit system that helped finance mortgages on slaves, allowing many of them to speculate in slave property. Between 1820 and 1860, one million slaves were sold out of the states of the southeastern seaboard and into the Old Southwest. Nicholas was one of them, for as Charleston's economy bottomed out in 1845, Nicholas's master, William Kelly, decided to take his slaves to New Orleans, where the economy was booming. There Kelly would look for ways to make money as a contractor, hire his slaves out, and sell some of them, most likely at a tidy profit considering the higher prices paid for slaves in New Orleans.

## INTRODUCTION

Nicholas's more than two-year stay in New Orleans proved transformational and contributed greatly to his growth as a slave rebel.

I show that Nicholas resisted his enslavers violently upon his return to Charleston after more than two years in New Orleans. For his audacity and insubordination – because of his defiance of racial domination, and because of the great practical and ideological dangers he posed to the institution of slavery – he was subject to a sequence of brutal punishments. Attempts to subdue Nicholas culminated with his incarceration following his assault of two members of the Charleston City Guard in 1847. Nicholas lost his capital murder trial and appealed his first conviction. In both trials, defense attorneys argued he was insane and therefore could not be guilty of his crimes – for no sensible slave would resist in the manner in which he did. In a retrial, he faced a lesser charge, was convicted, and sentenced to three years imprisonment in the workhouse.

Nicholas languished in the workhouse for more than a year before deciding to battle his jailers and lead thirty-six slaves into the streets in a desperate and ill-fated bid for freedom. I describe the workhouse revolt and Nicholas's daring bid for freedom. It was the most important slave rebellion to occur in South Carolina since the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy. Several slaves were able to remain at large for nearly two weeks following the revolt, while the entire white community was forced to reckon with what had occurred that day. The Court of Magistrates and Freeholders prosecuted many of the participants, including Nicholas and two enslaved men who remained at his side throughout the revolt.

I discuss the two investigations that followed the workhouse revolt: namely an examination of the workhouse operations and an inquiry into the role of Calvary Episcopal Church in the revolt. More than one thousand whites gathered at Calvary Episcopal Church a day after the rebellion, and they threatened to destroy the building still under construction. Subsequently, civic leaders formed a Committee of Fifty, whose members came from the slaveholding class, to study Calvary Episcopal Church and the religious instruction of slaves generally. The Committee of Fifty published its findings several months after the rebellion took place.

Finally, I trace the degree to which the workhouse rebellion had enduring consequences, as white Charlestonians investigated its causes and made policy changes that included more restrictive policing of slavery and the construction of a new workhouse. More generally, the workhouse rebellion contributed to a growing sense of alarm among white South Carolinians, many of whom believed that Congress and abolitionists were inspiring slaves to revolt, and that South Carolina should secede from the United States. From the state capital, Governor Whitemarsh Seabrook called for a variety of reforms aimed at tighter controls of the slave and free black populations. The revolt occurred as the sectional crisis escalated with the annexation of new territory acquired through the Mexican–American War, and as such it helped inspire South Carolina’s First Secession Crisis.

South Carolina exemplified the contradictions inherent in the democratic revolutions that occurred in the Atlantic World during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

## INTRODUCTION

centuries. White South Carolinians demanded the maintenance of the institution of slavery while also counting slaves as three-fifths persons toward political representation in the House of Representatives. Liberty and equality applied to white men only. Slaves understood that contradiction well, and they communicated their desire for freedom – sometimes demanding it through rebellion.