Overview

In 1849 a mob of white supremacists eager to seize anti-slavery mailings attacked the US Post Office in Pendleton, South Carolina. They burned leaflets and letters in a bonfire on the village green to make clear their stance against incendiary ideas. This essay explores the context of these events by considering an initial spate of mailings that happened in 1835. This examination includes: their author, William Brisbane; the Calhounist culture of Pendleton that fueled this demonstration; the sad fate of the young man, John Barrett, who was arrested for the distribution of such materials; and those held captive in the middle of it all, the enslaved African Americans of Pendleton.

IGNITION

In Pendleton, South Carolina, 1849, John B. Sitton had a difficult decision to make. He knew his neighbors were angry at him. He had a position as a postmaster with a small stipend. That job put him at the center of every local event, decision, and dispute. He was situated, too, in the very center of town on the Pendleton Green. The central post office, one of the largest in the area, operated out of the prominent Farmers Hall behind substantial white columns, a Greek revival building that couldn’t be missed. The authority of the postmaster and the strength of the federal government, which accorded him power, was underscored by the placement of the post office.

Sitton knew that some of his white neighbors had recently received unwelcome antislavery pamphlets in the mail. Word had spread that there were likely many more of such seditious materials in the sack behind his counter, waiting to be sorted and picked up. Pendleton’s newly formed “Executive Committee on Vigilance and Safety,” which had been established in part to encourage by their local political luminary, John C. Calhoun, was now fired up. What followed might seem merely like a small, local action: Pendletonians gathered on the village green and read aloud excerpts from offending documents, ran into the post office, and roughly pushed aside Sitton, who was trying to defend, perhaps half-heartedly, the mail. The white villagers found what they sought. On Pendleton Green, the mob burned thirty-eight pamphlets that were literally and figuratively “incendiary.”

At first glance, this event might seem insignificant to the town. Although antislavery newspapers in the North picked up the story, there seem to have been no further episodes of collective burnings in Pendleton. No one appears to have held any ill will against Sitton, the postmaster. Indeed, he was elected mayor a few years later. This event occurred twelve years before the Civil War and was more of a symptom of growing tension than a cause of further rupture. Overall, the event reinforced how righteous white Pendletonians wanted to see themselves as on the vanguard of a battle, defending their way of life against anyone who might see things differently. In particular, it represented something unique about the place and the space—the town elites of Pendleton were insistent about policing ideas that might reach the less elite white neighbors.

And yet, the event was enormously consequential for a young man from Ohio, John M. Barrett. As those pamphlets burned, he sat in jail in nearby Spartanburg County throughout the summer heat. There he was abused and terrorized into giving up a story of those mailings and how they had found their way into the hands of citizens across South Carolina. He never fully explained the evidence made clear to his allies and enemies that he was indeed involved in the scheme. Before he could confess or take on the mantle of hero or martyr, Barrett died while out on bail awaiting trial. Newspapers in Indiana, where he died, reported this as a consequence of his suffering in Spartanburg.

And the event was consequential, too, for the enslaved population of Pendleton, who knew and saw what was happening. The bonfire was a public spectacle for Black people, as well as any white dissenters. It was a calculated warning.

This essay explores the broader context of these events by understanding the initial spate of mailings that happened in 1835. This examination includes the author and instigator of these mailings, William Henry Brisbane; the Calhounist culture of Pendleton that fueled this demonstration; the sad fate of the young man, John M. Barrett, who was caught up in the excitement of anti-slavery agitation; and the people held captive in the middle of it all, the enslaved African Americans of Pendleton.

TEST RUN: 1835 ANTI-SLAVERY MAIL CAMPAIGN

Arthur and Lewis Tappan, a Massachusetts pair of evangelical philanthropists, directed much of their money to activist causes, particularly towards antislavery organizations and endeavors. In 1835, the Tappan brothers funded an extraordinary undertaking: they helped the American Anti-Slavery Society send unsolicited abolitionist messages, newspapers, and tracts to many ministers, prominent business people, and public figures in several states below the Mason-Dixon line. This brush with postal freedom would later have been, to use the words of one historian, “a campaign that sparked the country’s first crisis over postal censure.”

While mailings fanned out across various states, it was in South Carolina that they were met with the most dramatic fury. When a large bundle of them arrived at the Charleston Post Office in late July, some were delivered, but several recipients...
Aside from activist abolitionists, many political figures, even those who often clashed, could come to some shared perspectives—President Andrew Jackson advocated a federal law that would authorize censoring abolitionist mail. Senator John C. Calhoun argued that congressional legislation required northern postal officials to obey southern state legislation that prohibited transmission of abolitionist texts. He saw this as a power derived not from the Constitution but from states' rights and nullification, which were issues dear to Calhoun's heart.

Postmaster Huger stalled before eventually deciding to have the abolitionist materials, including copies of the *Emancipator* newspaper, set aside in a distinct and separate bag. To no one's surprise, vigilantes calling themselves ‘the Lynch Mob’ broke into the post office. They burned the offending materials along with an effigy of antislavery activist William Lloyd Garrison. Torch-lit parades to protest these mailings were then held in towns throughout South Carolina. As an 1835 lithograph suggests, the riot was well-publicized, and a gauntlet was now thrown: slavery advocates demanded mail censorship.

**THE FIREBRAND: WILLIAM HENRY BRISBANE**

Nothing intrigues more than that which is banned. The burnings attracted attention that occasionally thwarted rioters’ goals. Abolitionist pamphlets and newspapers and the growing debates over eradicating slavery contributed to a battle for minds. Certainly, too, the white supremacists' bonfires would have affected the Black people who watched or heard about them, signaling to the enslaved that there was opposition elsewhere, that people in bondage weren't alone but had allies in the broader world. That notion was precisely what had stoked the greatest fears of the Charleston “Lynch men”: the possibility that abolitionist pamphlets might incite violent slave uprisings.

One person who stumbled into conversations about abolition was the Reverend William Henry Brisbane (1806–1878) of Beaufort, South Carolina. A man of inherited wealth and property with considerable holdings that included men, women, and children, he found he could not fully counter abolitionist arguments and gradually came to denounce slavery. Eventually, he liberated most of the people he had controlled over and went on to help many of them relocate with him, as free people, to Ohio. Brisbane renounced his slaveholding past and joined with antislavery activists in the Midwest and nationally to rail against the cruelties of slavery.

Having been converted to the antislavery movement partly because of his own exposure to abolitionist pamphlets and arguments in the 1830s, Brisbane eventually added the cause by authoring his speeches, sermons, and tracts, often with very pointed arguments for those South Carolinians he felt were vulnerable to persuasion.

Brisbane began to draft opinions under the pseudonyms of “Brutus,” “A True South Carolinian,” and other aliases that targeted non-slaveholding white men, particularly those from the inland and upcountry regions of the state (including Pendleton and its adjacent districts and counties)—all areas which featured less dense populations and far less concentrated wealth than was found in the coastal or “Lowcountry” region. The three most northwest counties of the state (Oconee, Anderson, and Pickens—often understood as the “Pendleton District”) were perceived as being vulnerable to arguments that might appeal to white citizens feeling unrepresented or disenfranchised by the dominance of the planter politics of the state. Brisbane hoped to win “upstate” or
These were hardly radical distracts. They didn’t reference immediate abolition and didn’t dwell on the inhumane practices of slavery. But that was the point; those liberal pronouncements against injustices burdening the life of white southerners were designed to pique the interest of otherwise indifferent or complacent citizens.

Brashe, along with other activists from northern states, planned to launch another wave of mailings that would not overtly advocate emancipation, but would primarily rail against the injustices of a state ruled by an elite. He also hoped this would stir around some of the further restrictions passed after the 1835 campaign. He and his co-conspirators recruited a young man from Indiana, John M. Barrett, to travel through South Carolina, gathering names and addresses and facilitating the mailings, all under the guise of a “gazetteer,” collecting innocuous data for commercial reference work.

Using information and addresses supplied by Barrett, several of Brashe’s tracts were mailed to South Carolinians in 1849. Most of those did not directly advocate for the immediate abolition of slavery, much less urge uprisings or rebellions. Materials authored by Brashe and later found in the Spartanburg post office were quoted by the Spartanburg as pointing out that “the great mass of citizens of the state have no PERSONAL INTEREST in the maintenance of slavery, and they know that the benefits of the institution are confined to a very small number of the white population.”

As characterized by the New York Tribune, the materials Barrett was accused of circulating materially that declared “the inequality of representation between the strong slaveholder and comparatively non-slaveholding portions of the state; the rigid monopoly of office by the great slaveholders; the degraded condition and gloomy prospects of the white freemen of South Carolina who do not own slaves, etc.” As this paper continued: “there is such thing as answering the facts set forth in them [the materials found with Barrett]. The slaveholders have sought to keep them from being read.”

The New York Tribune indignantly pointed out that Barrett had not advocated for abolition at all. “[Barrett] is accused of… enlightening the White Non-Slaveholders of South Carolina with regard to the glaring oppressions to which they are subjected by reason of the dominance of Slavery.”

Regardless of such indirect arguments or the northern interpretations of the events, white South Carolinians in power knew a threat when they saw one. Being in possession of Brashe’s work could carry it with a death sentence.

THE SPY: JOHN M. BARRETT

John M. Barrett (1825–1850) was, by his own admission, a passionate Free Soiler. He opposed the expansion of slavery into the United States’ free territories and was generally aligned with abolitionist sentiment. Although he was only nineteen, he agreed to undertake a covert and dangerous mission alone. The Anti-Slavery Society of Ohio, inspired by the 1835 campaign and with the leadership of the Reverend William Henry Brashe, who by now had relocated to Ohio, sent young Barrett traveling throughout South Carolina. His job was to gather names of prominent clergymen, businessmen, and other white citizens, both those who enslaved people and those who did not.

The plan seems to be that he would gather information and names of these influential people at various locales and send that information back to his handlers in Ohio, who would generate mailings. Occasionally his handlers would mail him things directly and ask him to forward post them on their behalf. In each imagined scenario, Barrett would be sure to leave town weeks before any incendiary mailings might arrive. This plan left Barrett vulnerable, alone, and far from any rescue if he attracted local attention.

Initially, things seemed to work as intended: post offices across the state received an onslaught of pamphlets. But authorities caught on fairly quickly: first in Columbia, where a warrant was issued for Barrett’s arrest. He then turned up in Winnsboro. There he was let loose for lack of evidence. Likely in April 1849, he made his way through Anderson County and the Pendleton District. When he reached Spartanburg, a letter from Columbia warning that he might make an appearance arrived with local officials. They detained and arrested Barrett when a letter directed to him (under a pseudonym) was found to contain what one paper termed “celebrated incendiary publications.”

Vague and clumsy references to letters in code and ciphers in his correspondence directed to Barrett made his situation look damming. One newspaper from North Carolina noted that if it hadn’t been for clumsy ciphers, the entire affair would have seemed quite innocent.

When local law officials found Barrett at Colonel R. C. Poole’s Spartanburg hotel, the suspect materials, including a “Brashe” tract railing about the disproportionate political power of slaveowners and some cryptic letters from a “B.R.C.” were hard to explain away.

Not surprisingly, as Brashe had suggested, the charges against Barrett were dropped. The Spartanburg Committee announced that “our object will be to prevent by all means in our power the spread of these abolitionist writings among our people if harsh means be necessary ‘we will not hesitate to use them’ and any incendiary heresies caught, may expect rough treatment—by this Committee.”

As had happened with Postmaster Hog in Charleston in 1835, the hapless postmaster of Spartanburg, George W. H. Legg, was now caught in the middle of the controversy as he, too, refused to turn over the mail to unauthorized recipients who demanded it. By August of 1849, a warrant for Legg’s arrest was issued, and he was held at least briefly in the same jail as Barrett. Legg, unlike Barrett, was quickly able to post bond. And while he was free, everyone waited for clear directions from the federal authorities, including the attorney general, about policy.

Barrett sat in the Spartanburg jail throughout the summer. And while he sat there, more unwelcome pamphlets and documents began to arrive across the state, stirring up fury and reviving or launching many local vigilance committees. These committees were well organized and increasingly militant. The Spartanburg Committee announced that “our object will be to prevent by all means in our power the spread of these abolitionist writings among our people if harsh means be necessary ‘we will not hesitate to use them’ and any incendiary heresies caught, may expect rough treatment—by this Committee.”
They signaled their threats to lynch Barrett or any others: "In carrying out the views of the duties imposed on us, we may in some instances have to rise above the Law." The *Liberator* quoted Brisbane stating that John Barrett had been threatened with death, "law or no law," and that if he were to stand for trial, Barrett would be sure to face "Lynch's law."

While there were some contrary expressions, on the whole, white South Carolinians followed the story with indignation and increasing fury. And even though the disseminated materials promoted the Brisbane-style of argument that white non-slaveholders should oppose slavery because it disproportionately empowered elites, several newspapers in southern states assessed this argument as likely to incite rebellions and uprisings among the enslaved. The *Charleston Daily Courier* wrote: "There can be no doubt remaining but that this said John Barrett, is an emissary sent amongst us to further the Hellish purposes of the Abolitionists."

As the story developed, reporters who visited Barrett noted his ill health. A letter from him to his family was republished by the *North Star* in October of 1849 in which, perhaps to save his life, Barrett continued to assert his innocence and denied any knowledge of Brisbane. He was despairing, though, writing: "I almost feel that I am never to enjoy much happiness in this world. It seems to me that I am doomed to be a companion with misfortune in my course of life."

After several months, his father came down to South Carolina and finally secured his release by paying $200 in fees and posting $1,000 bail. Barrett never returned to Spartanburg for trial. He died a few months after returning to Indiana. As the *New Castle Courier* reported:

"The paper goes on to explain:

Perhaps because Barrett never lived to see a resolution to his case and died while still professing his innocence rather than admitting guilt, he was never identified or honored as a prominent martyr for the antislavery cause. There was little recognition for his sacrifice aside from a few comments here and there, often quoting the *New Castle Courier* notice excerpted above. However, his co-conspirators, including Brisbane, would have carried the memory of Barrett's sacrifice with them for the rest of their lives.

**THE OUTRAGED: PENDLETON IN 1849**

Rumors and truths about Barrett reached towns across the state (often before any mail did). Citizens in Pendleton could read aloud to each other accounts of the unfolding drama of Barrett and the Spartanburg Post Office. They were keyed up for anything untoward that might appear. And then it did.
There was no doubt in the minds of Pendletonians about the origin of these documents. The Pendleton Messenger wrote: "the most remarkable thing about them is the particularity and correctness with which they were directed to individuals in this neighborhood and in Pickens District on the route which Barrett traveled, and where it is known and can be proved that he obtained the names of the people." 38

William Sloan, who read his letter aloud to the crowd, was a prosperous local farmer who enslaved several people. He was known as a leading citizen of the town. He and many of his relatives in town enslaved people, and neither he nor Calhoun would have been the working-class whites Brisbane hoped to reach. Sloan was also evidently comfortable enough in his civic standing, righteousness, and relationship with Calhoun to open a letter addressed to Calhoun.

Sloan and his neighbors, a group styling themselves the "Executive Committee on Vigilance and Safety," pushed their way into the building and overcame the resistance by John Sitton, a carriage maker, and merchant who also operated the post office. Appointed in 1835, he had run it from his home for a few years, but its operations had become so busy as to require a separate location. 39 By 1849, the Pendleton Post Office was officially situated in the Farmers Hall building on the Green.

A Pendletonian who witnessed the event wrote: "The Executive Committee . . . demanded the letters of the postmaster. On his refusal to deliver them, they entered his office and took them by force." 40 Postmaster Sitton was unlikely to have put up too much of a fight. All of the Executive Committee members probably pushed him aside and went over or around a counter in the small space, grabbing the bags they wanted. An architectural drawing of the Farmers Hall in the early twentieth century shows that the space was small. 41 Sitton was no abolitionist. He enslaved several people. But he did his duty as postmaster as well as might be expected with, at least, performative resistance.

This story differs from the conflicts elsewhere in South Carolina in part because Pendleton was unlike other communities. Barrett had gone through. Some postmasters did not resist as Sitton had resisted. James E. Hagood in nearby Pickens had personally and preemptively burned some fifteen to twenty pamphlets when he realized they had arrived in his district. Nor did he wait around for a mob to help him. Newspapers recorded other incidents of irritated recipients of antislavery materials across South Carolina. Individuals across the state proudly announced that they, too, had taken it upon themselves to burn such documents. 42 But the collective effort in Pendleton suggests a reaction that speaks to the particularity of that place and time.

While the most intense spate of mailings targeted the postmaster, Pendleton was no backwater filled with poor white citizens who might conceivably be receptive to Brisbane's argument against the entrenched and elite political class that ruled the state. It was, instead, a densely populated and established enclave. Significantly, Pendletonians culturally and politically aligned themselves not so much with the Appalachian Scots-Irish settlers in the mountains or the white working-class of non-slaveholders common in the Piedmont. Instead, the town was quite invested in identifying itself with the wealthy sojourners from the Atlantic coast who often vacationed there to escape the summer heat and who had built numerous mansions encircling the town boundaries. Many of the town people were merchants or tradesmen, not planters, but they certainly aspired to join those more elite ranks that gave their town a reputation for gentility. 43

While the Upstate or Piedmont region of South Carolina was generally white-majority with far fewer large slaveholders than the coastal region—and was populated with many small yeoman farmers who made a living on properties with poor soil or with the topographic challenges inherent at the foothills of the Appalachians—Pendleton itself was different. It boasted both female and male academies of some repute. It had a long-running circulating library. 44 Local white artisans, usually assisted by enslaved workers, operated high-end cabinet making and carriage construction businesses that attracted an elite clientele. Pendleton featured wealthier and more politically influential families than many other Upstate towns. The opulent summer houses, hunting lodges, and manor-style properties built around the town by enslaved labor signaled to inhabitants and visitors that they were now in a special and more affluent place than other Upstate villages of comparative size.

Most of all, this town aligned itself with the reputation and identity of their great patron, the illustrious John C. Calhoun, who had long called for protection of the mail when it came to abolitionist materials. 45 Calhoun didn’t just represent their state or district; he was their hometown celebrity and a founding member of The Farmers Society, which had built the impressive columned building that housed the post office.

That the round of mailings included at least one pamphlet directed explicitly to the now quite elderly Calhoun may have especially raised the hackles of Pendleton, always protective of the revered statesman. This connection did not go unremarked. As the Brooklyn Eagle noted: "It appears that [the cause of] Mr. John M. Barrett . . . has been taken up by some of John C. Calhoun’s minions in South Carolina.” 46

The alignment of Pendleton and Calhoun was common knowledge. In his newspaper, Frederick Douglass characterized the activities of the Pendleton vigilantes: "The hair-brained fools of South Carolina [sic] are at their work again" above a reprinted letter from a Pendletonian about the Barrett case. 47
The Pendleton Messenger directly faced the confrontation on the Green. The press was right there to witness, observe, opine, and energetically disseminate the happenings. The Pickens Review-Courier, another leading paper of the area which at that time was run by editors previously involved with the Pendleton Messenger, dedicated a lot of ink to the Pendleton happenings. 18

Long associated with Calhoun, the Pendleton Messenger had first published his most famous writings on nullification in the 1830s. It shouldn’t be surprising that the paper was especially protective of the celebrity politician who put Pendleton on the map. In general, citizens of the Upstate and the media acolytes of Calhoun were determined to be at the forefront of outrage and resistance. 19

While the Pendleton Messenger ended as the town’s newspaper in 1851, its building at 1254 Exchange Street on the Green still stands as the locus of a different kind of political and media power. As of 2022, the old Pendleton Messenger building currently houses the office of longtime US Senator from South Carolina, Lindsey Graham.

THE BLACK WITNESSES

Burning mail on the Pendleton Green was probably one of the least violent acts many of these white men enacted in any given week. Black men, women, and children, as well as many Native people, had long been held in bondage in the Upstate of South Carolina. They were controlled by the perpetual threat of violence that, as Orlando Patterson famously codified in his study Slavery and Social Death, was one of the defining and vital tools that enabled the practice of enslaving another human being. 20 The power of violent coercion, usually through implicit or explicit threats, was necessary to maintain control over others.

The burning of the antislavery mail was simply another manifestation of this thrust. It was a violent rhetorical performance and visible event designed for publicity and to send a message to abolitionists and to white non-slaveholders in the southern states that no contrary thinking could be countenanced.

Black people, the resisters and agents of abolition and antislavery long before the creation of any organizations with those names, would not have needed pamphlets with tital arguments to tell them of injustices. But what might they have thought or felt upon seeing the flames in Pendleton?

Direct records of African Americans’ thoughts are not currently part of the material archive. While we have the outrage of Black audiences expressed in northern papers, we must be careful in speculating about the reactions of Black witnesses in Pendleton. But we would be remiss not to speculate. Their historical presence at the scene is indispensable. To affirm a different kind of Black memory work, we must grapple with the many people watching or smelling that bonfire were aware that their presence was impossible, unregistered, and ignored. And yet, their presence was part of the story, perhaps the most crucial part.

Understood in part as an act of publicity and surveillance, the Pendleton bonfire and its newspaper coverage ensured a wider awareness of violence and racial control. Editors knew well that papers elsewhere and would pick up and reprint their reports. The bonfire also had the cruel effect and intent of warning anyone in the Black population not to feel emboldened or hopeful that they might have allies for liberation. The bonfire was, in many ways, for their witness.

Of course, that message was mixed: white townspeople were kicking up a fuss about a cultural force that had escaped their control. And as they rallied against antislavery mail, perhaps it encouraged some Black villagers to self-liberate. Cyrus, for one, enslaved at a labor camp near Pendleton, escaped in 1841. 21 Although recaptured, he clearly had decided he wouldn’t wait for someone to intervene on his behalf.

Anderson courthouse records indicate that in the 1840s a woman named Sylvia not only evaded a man until she acquired set some clothing in nearby Pendleton and was discovered. The enslaved man in Pendleton who harbored her, Harry, was sentenced to fifty-seven lashes. What happened to Sylvia is unclear but the family and friends of Harry and Sylvia knew of the rough treatment the Pendleton area authorities endured. 22 They had carved out some moments of resistance, but the surveillance culture of the Upstate left little room for the triumph.

Like most southern-state newspapers of the era, the Pendleton Messenger drew a solid revenue stream from advertising sales of women, babies, children, and men. Almost every issue throughout the 1840s featured such advertisements. In one dated October 27, 1843, the local sheriff’s office not far from Pendleton offered for sale Lenah and Jack with their children Beck, Peter, and three “younger ones” in order to pay off their enslaver’s debts. From its inception the Pendleton Messenger specialized in silencing the voices and diminishing the personhood of Black people, marketing families like Lenah and Jack’s. Literature or not, enslaved persons would have known to be wary of the ways in which news traveled. 23

The Pickens Review-Courier ran advertisements for enslaved people aligning them with sales of animals such as one in February 1, 1851, notifying the public of eighteen people available for purchase. 24 The circulation of print in Upstate South Carolina helped set the value of the enslaved and affirm the values of enslavers.

Black activities from afar took note of the frantic reactions to antislavery mailings. “These violent measures resorted to by the slave mongers,” wrote Frederick Douglass, “may be regarded as evidence that they see their weakness and the untenableness of their position.” 25 That fact that updates about John Barrett and the protests were carried in The Liberator, periodicals with significant Black readership, indicates a kind of displaced testimony to the events, particularly when you consider how these papers frequently reprinted in their entirety articles which had initially appeared in the South Carolina papers.

More concretely, we can return to the site of Pendleton to imagine the role of Black witness. The archival record doesn’t record specific witnesses by the people most affected by the event, but when we adjust our attention to see the presence of Black life around that village green, possibilities for seeing the space anew emerge.

Many Black people lived and labored within a short stroll to the Green. Many of the Pendleton men involved in the bonfire, if we had seen the event, perhaps peeking from windows or viewing from alleys. Perhaps from porches at mansions only a block away. Perhaps from the distant hills. The enslaved were all around, on acreage outside the town limits as well as close by to attend to domestic tasks. Elam Sharpe, a blacksmith in Pendleton, in 1849, had a newspaper office. At the time of the bonfire, his shop was only half a block away from enslaved workers. Indeed, almost every house close to the Green in that period was owned by an individual who shows up as an enslaver on the Federal Slave Schedules of 1850. Black people must have seen the event, perhaps peeking from windows or viewing from alleys. Perhaps from porches at mansions only a block away, enslaved people washing linens or handling horns saw the smoke and heard the yells. Would they have shrugged and kept their heads down? Likely they realized this agitation represented something more. Were the white people in Pendleton enraged because they were being challenged? Somebody had caused problems and drawn their ire. Doubtless the news traveled.

The enslaved were all around, on acreage outside the town limits as well as close by to attend to domestic tasks. Elam Sharpe, for example, owned a large house steps away from the Green, held six enslaved people according to the census record of 1840; by 1850 a slave schedule reported he owned thirteen unnamed people. Some of those were women and young
seen a stream of agitated white men passing by their home on the way to the town center. Would you have heard the cheering and smelled the smoke? Sharpe’s brother-in-law was the editor of the Pendleton Messenger, operating two blocks away, so his household, including the enslaved, would undoubtedly known about the events. The carriages or horses of the Pendleton Vigilance Committee would have passed by the front porch on the way to the conflagration.

Owned and run by the Maverick family in the 1840s, Montpelier, one of the large plantation labor camps sited on what is now Old Greenville Highway was only a few minutes by wagon from the town center. At least thirty-seven men, women, and children were held in bondage there. Would word reach them, soon after the event? Would they know people out there in the world were decrying slavery and perhaps had felt a little less alone?

Given the social space of Pendleton, many Black people would have been in the vicinity of the bonfire, watching it or perhaps doing their best to keep far away. Pendleton’s population (both the town proper and the broader “Pendleton District”) during the early nineteenth century was notably more diverse than in many other areas of the Upstate, and their holdings of enslaved people considerable, distributed among numerous white families. White Pendletonians enslaved people at higher rates than surrounding white populations. According to the 1860 census, the combined population of Oconee and Pickens counties, which encompassed much of the Pendleton District, included 569 enslaved people who held 4,195 people in bondage. That’s a high number but nothing like the comparative statistics in the central or southern parts of the state. 4 Consider how Charles Harlan, in his study of the All Saints Parish in coastal South Carolina (known as the Lowcountry) demonstrated that in the 1860s fifteen wealthy planters enslaved 4,830 people. 5 Certainly the Upstate or Pendleton District was quite unlike the Lowcountry. But, the small town of Pendleton was itself quite different from its surrounding areas—and would have felt a bit like a Lowcountry town in its affluence and its ratio of enslaved people to white slaveholding populations. The town of Pendleton, as the 1860 census reported, counted 383 white people, one lone free person of color, and 470 enslaved persons. Individual enslavers in town held humans in their inventory but so did old business entities: The Pendleton mercantile firm of W.H.D. Galliard & Co., for example, listed four enslaved laborers sited on premises near the Pendleton Post Office. 6

Even though many of the affluent white southerners from the Lowcountry who spent extensive vacation periods in Pendleton left the bulk of their enslaved work crews to endure the rice or cotton plantation labor camps, they would have traveled with a domestic retinue of the enslaved to their Pendleton retreats.

There were more Black people close to the Green for other reasons, too. A few free Black people could even conduct business at the establishments there, but almost every business owner in the town held a few people in bondage. James Hunter, for example, ran a blacksmith shop right off the Green, doubtless assisted in part by one of the three Black people he enslaved, most likely the unnamed eighteen-year-old man listed in the 1850 slave schedule. 6

There were boarding houses and hotels located within shouting distance of the Green, all of which had travelers with enslaved servants passing through as well as a handful of enslaved people, ensuring that hosting routines went smoothly. They, too, might have seen the fires or the ashes. The Female Academy of Pendleton was located kitty-corner from the Green while the white students did not board there (they tended to live at houses within walking distance), at least one or two enslaved Black workers stayed on hilly site to tidy the property, clean the classrooms, stoke the fires, and stand ready with carriages and horses to pick the young ladies up and transport them as needed. 6 

A creative cognitive map of Pendleton’s enslaved population of 1849 reveals plenty of Black people in proximity to the fiery events. They would have mapped the terrain differently as their perceptions of joined places and slave neighborhoods would not have coincided with officially sanctioned property lines defined by enslavers. 6 The entire township, not merely a particular site of bondage, would have encompassed their neighborhood.

The Pendleton Green, town center for white villagers, was likely traversed with great vigilance by those seeking the attention of US Senator Lindsay Graham, whose office overlooks the Green, as do gift stores and a Mexican café. This restaurant is located on the first floor of Farmers’ Hall, where the post office once operated. Photograph by and courtesy of the author.

CONCLUSION

Pendleton today benefits from proximity to nearby Clemson University and tourism. The entire town is on the National Register of Historic Places, making it one of the country’s largest designated districts. It features over fifty buildings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While now promoting restaurants and antique stores more than carriage making or agriculture, it’s a lovely place to stroll.

The Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture has worked hard to redirect and enrich much of the public discussion about local history. They have drawn attention to local sites important to Black history; in particular, the significance of the Keese Farm site, only a few hundred steps from the Green, which in the early twentieth century became a gathering place for African Americans. 6 The story of the Green demands a more complex reckoning than the current historic markers allow. The Farmers Hall still stands in its stolid beauty with its colossal columns. A bustling restaurant called the 1826 Bistro on the Green now occupies its first floor, where the post office once operated. A bookstores overlooks the Green as do gift stores and a Mexican café. 6 Farmers markets, annual festivals, and local protests, particularly those seeking the attention of US Senator Lindsey Graham, whose office overlooks the Green, regularly enliven the public space.

But the story of the gathering of white supremacists attacking the federal post office and casting pamphlets into a bonfire remains little known.

About the Author

Susanna Ashton is a professor of English at Clemson University. She studies the writing and witness of enslaved people, particularly those from South Carolina. Ashton holds an MA and a PhD in English from the University of Iowa and received her BA from Vassar College. She has held fellowships at Yale, Harvard, Emory, and the University of South Carolina, and has served as a Fulbright Faculty Fellow at University College Cork in the Republic of Ireland. Most recently, she was a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard’s Harman Center for African and African American Studies for 2021-2022. Ashton’s current project, John Andrew Jackson, the Hidden Inspiration Behind Uncle Tom’s Cabin, is forthcoming from The New Press, 2024. She lives approximately three miles from the Pendleton Green.

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room at the roughs main runic in greenalse, the pentleton branch runic in literature and the south carolina state department of archives and history (particularly dr. steve turle) went beyond the call of duty in helping me assemble the materials underlying this project. the curators at the south carolina state dept of archives and history were especially helpful in getting me court documents related to the trial, including an actual and rather extraordinary copy of the particular brutus tract the spartanburg authorities held as evidence against barrett. a research subtitable from clemson university's college of architecture, arts, and humanities allowed me the luxury of time to hone my professional skills as well as complete this modest storytelling endeavor.

i'm grateful to the editorial team of southern spaces and the anonymous peer reviewers, all of whom helped me further develop this project and bring it to the public. 7)

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farmers' hall, pendleton, south carolina, 1933. photograph courtesy of library of congress.

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3. West argues in From Women to Redneck that this type of upstart vigilantism was largely carried out by the slaveholding elite and was "aimed to censor political expression that appealed to the interests of non-slaveholders"; for this region of South Carolina, West argues that "it appears more of an attempt by members of the slaveholding minority to police opinions among the slaveless majority." West, Women to Redneck, 65.

4. The jail time in Spartanburg is linked to Barrett's death in his obituary as noted in New Castle (IN) Sentinel (Indianapolis), April 11, 1850.


6. For an overview of how this was received in different states, see Wyly Brown, Bertram, 'The Abolitionists' Postal Campaign of 1835,' The Journal of Negro History 50, no. 4 (1965): 227–386.


15. The anti-abolition pamphlet, "An Address to the Citizens of South Carolina," by "Brutus" circulated in the 1849 campaign (and was actually found with John M. Barrett in Spartanburg). The pamphlet was included in his indictment.

16. The most thorough and broad context for this incident can be found in Manisha Sinha's book, Yeoman to Redneck: The Mobilization for Secession in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850–1915


18. "Law in South Carolina."

19. "Law in South Carolina."

20. David J. McCord, ed., The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, vol. 7 (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnson, 1840), 589–90. According to Act 55, theft of an enslaved person was a felony without benefit of clergy, at that time meant that if convicted, you would be whipped, branded, or "suffer death as a felon."


24. See Topography of the Mule," Baltimore (NC) Register, reprinted in North Star (Baltimore, NY), October 5, 1849, https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026365/1849-10-05/ed-1/?sp=1&r=0.086,0.73,0.275,0.143. Also see Richard R. John, "Hiland Hall's 'Report on Incendiary Publications'," 99.


29. Barrett's letter to his father, Centreville (OH) Sentinel, reprinted in North Star (Bloomington, IN), October 12, 1849.

30. "Death of John M. Barrett, Esq.," New Castle (IN) Sentinel, reprinted in Indiana State Sentinel (Indianapolis), April 11, 1850.

31. "Death of John M. Barrett, Esq.

32. See the August 17, August 21, September 21, and October 5, 1849 issues of the Pendleton Messenger.
40. After losing his horse’s place on the Wallen Lowe in 1846, he moved the post office to a tavern that ran into his first floor for a few years (perhaps to better protect the mail), but the post office operations were later moved back into the Farmers Hall a few years later. See “Sitten House,” Pendleton, City Profile, accessed July 20, 2022, https://www.cityprofile.com/south-carolina/sitten-house.html.


46. West, Yorren to Redick, 52.


49. See West, Yorren to Redick, 63. West argues persuasively that the hollabaloo about the press coverage of the Barrett case was not soon forgotten. When, in 1849, vigilantes in Greenville seized a man for holding books and pamphlets they found objectionable, they sought to keep it quiet and out of the newspapers.


52. “Commit to Jail as a Runaway,” Pickens Courier (SC) Courier, February 15, 1851.

53. For the story of Sylvia and Harry, see W. J. Megginson, African American Life in South Carolina’s Upper Piedmont 1780–1930 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). W.J. Megginson’s work with the Anderson Court records provides many rich examples of the ways in which the culture of the justice system in the upstate of South Carolina controlled Black life.


56. Douglass, “Doings in South Carolina.”


59. For a good understanding of these numbers, see Megginson, African American Life, 8.


72. This incident of 1849 was first brought to my attention in Stephen West’s meritorious book, From Yorren to Redick in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1861 (University of Virginia Press, 2006) and it thereafter independently kept bumping into complaints about Brabane in antebellum newspapers from the Carolinas. It took a few years for me to be able to see how an angle on this story might be particularly about the ways that the Upstate of South Carolina, particularly Pendleton, saw its allegiance to the culture of Calhoun and the culture of the coastal Low Country. Even that made sense when the Black people at the heart of the story could be appropriately understood to be at the center, not the periphery, of the scene.

While little of my specific information in the Black Witness section comes directly from W. J. Megginson’s work, African American Life in South Carolina’s Upper Piedmont 1780–1930 (University of South Carolina Press, 2001), I am grateful to him for his deep and felt research that undergirds my approach to apprehending the different kinds of possible voices there. Brent Morris’s thorough and thoughtful work on the Reverend William Henry Brabane was also vital to this project and I suggest anyone seeking more information on Brabane start with Morris’s fine writings on the topic.