Dockhands skip around open hatches. Carts thump across wooden planks. Work songs rise and fall in rhythm. Stevedores shout directives as heavy cargo disappears into ship holds, sometimes followed by the cries of injury. Cotton-menders furtively stuff fiber strands into their work bags.

Michael D. Thompson’s *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port* offers a vivid picture of the risks, rewards, and routine happenings of the nineteenth-century Charleston waterfront, viewed first and foremost from the perspective of its free and enslaved, black and white dockside workers. The book challenges the popular narrative of this post-1819, South Carolina town as in an irrelevant state of commercial decline by showing its laborers in uninterrupted motion—not only navigating the rising number of cotton bales, rice barrels, tobacco sheaves, and other goods circulating through its ports, but also negotiating contemporary concerns of slave rebellion, sectionalism, and illness that threatened their continued employ. Thompson emphasizes that the waterfront was “neither a safe nor easy place to make a living” but, for those able to take on its burdens, it offered much-desired moments of autonomy (p. 29). Indeed, *Working on the Dock of the Bay* ultimately contends that it was the daily struggles of antebellum dockside workers to dictate the conditions of their labor that laid the “groundwork for astounding triumphs [by organized labor unions] in the otherwise tragic New South” (p. 2).

These opportunities were located among the many dichotomies of Thompson’s text: control and mobility, security and prosperity, “slavery and freedom, restriction and agency” (p. 3). On one hand, *Working on the Dock of the Bay* situates its workers in a political, social, and cultural context dictated by the traditional big movers of history, including city officials, merchants, and slaveholders. The Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, he acknowledges, created a “siege mentality” among white Charlestonians, who lived with a black majority until about 1860 (p. 31). The overwhelmingly enslaved laborers on the docks, at least until midcentury, only cemented this anxiety. Slaveowners certainly wanted the money that came with leasing underutilized slaves to the waterfront, or more conveniently allowing these workers to contract out their own labor. Yet, they were uncomfortable knowing that this work brought with it contact with free artisans of color and sailors from the abolitionist North and, with this contact, an awareness of a life beyond slavery. But what, asks Thompson, were they to do? If they curtailed the ability of slaves to move freely in the antebellum city or required written agreements between masters for each hourly bit of work, they made this labor more onerous on themselves. Plus, in the lead-up to the Civil War, slaveholders were particularly sensitive about others telling them what they could do with their human properties, whether these demands originated from federal politicians or local city councils.

On the other hand, *Working on the Dock of the Bay* shows that Charleston’s waterfront workers found significant wiggle room despite, and sometimes because of, local and national fears. There continued, for example, to...
be efforts to confine the economic activities of enslaved laborers, including limits on where they could advertise for work, on their ability to reject job offers, and on their daily pay. Yet, a cap on daily wages from 1801 to 1837, meant to prevent overcharging, also helped slaves maintain their hold on waterfront labor by deterring white competition until midcentury. After 1845, these racial rivals—largely non-native Irish and Germans—acted in a similar manner, encouraging suspicions of black laborers as thieves while promoting themselves as good taxpayers. The tactic was aimed, unsuccessfully, at reserving higher-paying roles like that of stevedore for themselves. It was more successful in pushing free workers of color out of the market and to the North by 1861.

Thompson does not offer an explicit outline of this back-and-forth between employer and employed (as well as among employers) in his introduction, an omission that initially feels disorienting but that allows readers to immerse themselves expectation-free in his narrative. Chapter 1 sets the stage by recreating the seasonal sounds, rhythms, and tasks of the waterfront. The next three chapters, in turn, couple attempts to assert control through legislation with “creative and intrepid” efforts to extend the boundaries of such laws by dockside laborers (p. 31). Readers learn in chapter 2 of the occupational badges workers were required to wear at various times between 1783 and 1843, which indicated their legitimacy as laborers and set specific conditions of employ. Thompson follows this with examples of runaways attaining illicit work with badges they found and of supervisors simply ignoring badge requirements, all in the name of commercial expediency. Chapter 3 similarly takes on the Negro Seamen Acts and New York Ship Inspection Law, which were intended to prevent potential rebellion by limiting slaves’ access to people and news from the North—a weekly opportunity after the establishment of a New York packet service in 1822. Yet, again, Thompson shows how free sailors of color were permitted increasing proximity to Charleston’s docks so as to ease the mechanics of trade and how waterfront workers, in turn, located moments to converse and sometimes to run away. Chapter 4 introduces the dock’s post-1845 white workers and follows their futile attempts to use their political standing—a right inaccessible to black laborers—to petition for better work.

These many tug-of-wars come together in chapter 5, which looks at the struggle to maintain public safety, to continue business as usual, and to benefit from both concerns during real moments of crises—the cholera and yellow fever epidemics that appeared in Charleston from 1832 to 1858. As city administrators, doctors, and merchants argued over whether and for how long to quarantine ships coming from infected ports, black and white laborers struggled to keep their daily employ. They sought sometimes real, sometimes forged “certificates of acclimation,” which allowed them to work on the lighters that loaded and unloaded suspicious vessels not allowed into the harbor. And occasionally they were able to use their exposure to disease to negotiate for higher wages. Yet, Thompson acknowledges that, for the majority of laborers, illness was just another risk of working on the waterfront and the goal was not social advancement but economic survival. In seeking this end, however, they informed the larger conversations that shaped their city’s history.

Working on the Dock of the Bay certainly aims to ground the postbellum studies of other waterfront scholars, like Eric Arnesen, in an earlier period.[1] The text, for example, begins with a cross-racial strike in 1869, wondering how it was workers were able to unionize so quickly and effectively after the Civil War. Yet, I find Thompson’s study in better company with Seth Rockman’s Scrapping By (2008) and Walter Johnson’s Soul by Soul (2001), both of which recreate with great intimacy the everyday experiences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laborers, free and enslaved. Thompson might end on a brighter note than these two studies—although his dockside laborers are encumbered by their political, social, and cultural surroundings they still seem largely opportunists. Yet, read together, the three texts pose questions well worth further consideration, especially on the boundaries of agency in spaces of oppression.

Michael D. Thompson’s first book is worthy of the praise heaped on it by reviewers, not to mention the Hines Prize it received from the Program in the Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World at the College of Charleston. If I were to offer a mild suggestion, it would be to better incorporate the many maps, drawings, and photographs collected in the middle of the book into its pages, where they could visually augment Thompson’s rich written descriptions. Their individual value—which is significant—gets a bit lost as a result of their consolidation. Then again, these images’ appearance one after the other certainly fits the text’s overall effort to submerge readers in the lived and messy dynamics of an historical period from a lesser-known perspective. And, to this end, it is quite successful.

Note

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