

“Preservation in Practice: U.S. Southern Architecture for Fire Prevention”

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By the early nineteenth century, building to anticipate destruction had become a matter of architectural practice. Flammable goods stored in warehouses and new steam-driven industries made cities more prone to catching fire than ever before. Architects enfolded such threats into design through incombustible materials and spatial planning to staunch fires' spread.

Threat of fire also carried connotations of potential social divisions and unrest. After the successful uprising in St. Domingue, residents—enslaved and free—of U.S. cities with large enslaved populations, who had limited other means of martial action, began to see fire as one of the few tools that subjugated groups could easily wield against oppressors. Attempts to build to mitigate fires, and to project the image of security, thus made preventing fires precautionary acts of social control.

This research project considers architectural aesthetics and fire aversion efforts of early- to mid-nineteenth century in the southern U.S. as forms of deterrence to potential insurrectionists. As official architect to South Carolina in the 1820s, the architect Robert Mills designed jails, courthouses, and an arsenal, nearly all of which featured a brick vaulting system that Mills touted for its fire resistance. He began his 1822-1826 Public Records Office—“the Fireproof Building”—the same year that the Charleston judiciary executed the free Black carpenter Denmark Vesey for planning a revolt in 1822. A crucial part of that uprising, alleged co-conspirators testified, would have been to burn the city's buildings. I propose analyzing Mills's construction methods against this backdrop.

While architects devised instruments for deterrence—or at least fire suppression—in order to preserve buildings from potential threat, their designs also included proactive measures with aesthetic and moral dimensions inextricable from technical ones. In the U.S. Antebellum South, architectural fire prevention indexed a society that was liable to burn without such control measures in place.