

Records of the Board of Port Wardens of Charleston, 1878–1881

The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library

Compiled by Nicholas Butler, Ph.D., and Kathleen Gray

Collation: 0.25 linear feet.

Description: This collection consists of an incomplete set of pages from a disbound manuscript volume, discovered at the City of Charleston Records Division. The volume had been used as a scrapbook, with newspaper clippings pasted over the script and some pages removed entirely. After cleaning and conservation, the volume was discovered to be the only known record of the Board of Port Wardens of Charleston.

The volume includes an index of ship names and sixty-four pages of official reports of inspections of leaky ships in the port of Charleston, spanning January 1878 through August 1881. At the request of the ships' captains, the port wardens inspected each vessel's seaworthiness, made recommendations for repairs, and then inspected the finished work. Each report was written and signed by the chairman of the Board of Wardens. With the exception of a few early reports signed by William Bird, the bulk of the reports are in the hand of H. F. Baker.

The reports of ship inspections name the captain and homeport of each vessel, but no information about passengers is included in these records. Cargos are frequently but only generally mentioned, and include such items as cotton, lumber, iron, phosphate rock, fertilizer, rum, sugar, molasses, and hay. Five types of vessels are mentioned in these records: barks, brigs, schooners, ships, and a few steamers. The homeports of these vessels include Arendal, Baltimore, Bilbao, Boston, Camden (Maine), Cienfuegos, Cork, Havana, Liverpool, Matanzas, Nassau, Norrtälje, New Haven, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, St. George's, St. John's, Stockton, and Swansea. Two ships, in particular, stand out amongst those listed, a bark named *Azor* and a steamer called *Planter*.

The *Azor* was owned and operated by the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company, an enterprise that sought to repatriate African Americans by providing passage to Liberia. On 21 April 1878, the *Azor* left Charleston with 206 emigrants on board, 23 of whom died before reaching Africa. The ship did not return to Charleston harbor until late 1878. Although the leaders of the Liberian Exodus Co. attempted to organize another trip to Liberia, the company failed and the courts auctioned off the ship in November 1879.¹ The Port Warden's survey of the *Azor* contained in the Records of the Board of Port Wardens is dated 23 September 1879.

During the Civil War, the Confederate Army employed a steamship named *Planter* as a transport vessel. On 13 May 1862, the African American pilot of the *Planter*, Robert Smalls, absconded with the ship and turned her over to Federal forces outside Charleston harbor. The *Planter* was utilized by the United States Army for the remainder of the War, before being returned to

¹Tindall, George Brown. *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia (2003). p. 153–168.

commercial service. According to the Department of the Navy, the *Planter* was lost in 1876.² The Records of the Board of Port Wardens contain a survey of a steamer called *Planter* dated 16 October 1879. Whether or not this steamship *Planter* is related to the former Confederate ship is unknown.

Historical Note: The Port Wardens of the City of Charleston were first created by an act of the State Legislature in 1817.³ Acting upon the power thus invested with them, the City Council of Charleston elected five persons to be Port Wardens. These individuals were responsible for surveying vessels entering the port of Charleston in a state of distress or damage, or whose cargo was allegedly damaged. The wardens examined all pertinent portions of the vessels, including hull, masts, rigging, etc., and reported their state and the measures necessary to make the vessel seaworthy. They would also examine the cargo for proper, secure stowage and the state of any goods and merchandize. The wardens were required by Council to keep a record of all such surveys conducted.⁴

In the ensuing years, a number of amendments were made to the original ordinance, altering portions concerning: the assessments on surveys and official copies,⁵ number of wardens present at each survey and the prices thereof,⁶ notice and content of surveys,⁷ and eligibility requirements for wardens.⁸

In 1880, the State Legislature passed an Act creating a Harbor Commission for the City of Charleston.⁹ At the time of its creation the aforesaid Act made no mention of port wardens. However, an amendment to the Act passed in 1881 gave the Harbor Commission the power to elect or appoint as many port wardens as they deemed necessary, as well as define their duties and responsibilities.¹⁰ The Harbor Commission retained the post of Port Warden well into the Twentieth Century.

² <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-civil/civsh-p/planter.htm>. Accessed 28 Jul 2008.

³ *The Ordinances of the City of Charleston, Revised and Codified, and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating Thereto* (Charleston, S.C.: News & Courier Job Presses, 1875), 254.

⁴ *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, from the year 1783 to July 1818* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1818), 210.

⁵ *Collection of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, from the 28th of September, 1818 to the 12th of August, 1823* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1823), 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ *Ordinances of the City of Charleston, from the 5th February 1833 to the 9th May 1837* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1837), 58.

⁸ *Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 14th September 1854 to the 1st December 1859* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans, & Co., 1859), 40.

⁹ *Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina passed at the Regular Session of 1880* (Columbia, S.C.: James Woodrow, 1881), 398.

¹⁰ *Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina passed at the Regular Session of 1881-2* (Columbia, S.C.: James Woodrow, 1882), 604.

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Collection Outline

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