

“WITH ALL HER SAD DISASTERS, WHAT DO WE SEE IN THIS CITY?”:  
RECONSTRUCTION, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF DISASTER IN RICHMOND,  
1870-1920

by

Alyssa Toby Fahringer  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
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in Partial Fulfillment of  
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of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**“WITH ALL HER SAD DISASTERS, WHAT DO WE SEE IN THIS CITY?”:  
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In 1870, Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, endured three disasters. On 27 April, over sixty people died when the Capitol courtroom gallery and floor collapsed. The James River flooded on 30 September, resulting in thousands of dollars of damage. Eight people perished when the Spotswood Hotel caught fire on 25 December. This dissertation examines how Richmonders experienced, responded to, and remembered the 1870 calamities, as well as how the disasters affected a community in a time of extreme political and racial upheaval.

The five years following the end of the Civil War represented a time of hope for many Black Richmonders, while some white Richmonders viewed Radical Reconstruction as a threat to white supremacy. Richmonders' responses to the disasters were shaped by the political and racial contexts in which they occurred: despite significant tensions between white and Black Richmonders, journalists perpetuated a



false narrative of racial harmony between the two communities; after the flood decimated the primarily Black neighborhood of Rocketts, few reporters detailed their suffering; and the Spotswood Hotel fire victims received less laudatory press coverage because they were poorer and less socially prominent than the Capitol disaster dead. Northerners provided aid to their former enemies in the wake of the Capitol disaster, prefiguring eventual reconciliation between the North and South. Lost Cause adherents later co-opted the Capitol disaster and argued that it exemplified the failure of Reconstruction.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1870, the approximately fifty-one thousand inhabitants of Reconstruction-era Richmond, Virginia—the second largest city of the former Confederacy and also its capital—were recovering from wartime desolation. In the final months of the Civil War, Confederates abandoned the city and ordered soldiers to set fire to bridges, armories, and warehouses, so large portions of the city had to be rebuilt in the years following the war's end in 1865. During this period, Black Richmonders—almost half of the city's residents—voted in large numbers for Republicans and other politicians supporting federal Reconstruction policies. In 1867-68, twenty-four Black politicians were among the 104 delegates who attended the convention that crafted the new state constitution, which voters ratified, along with amendments to the U.S. Constitution that abolished slavery, recognized Black Americans as citizens, and enfranchised freedmen. Congress approved these actions and readmitted a supposedly fully reconstructed Virginia to the Union in January 1870.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2012). Louis Moore, "The Elusive Center: Virginia Politics and the General Assembly, 1869-1871," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 103, no. 2 (1995): 221; George Chahoon, Mayor 1870, page 1, George Chahoon Papers, 1870-1934, Library of Virginia; Edwin J. Slipek, "The Mayor Time Forgot," *Style Weekly*, 2 November 2005, 2; Richard G. Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention. General Schofield Rates the Delegates," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 80, no. 3 (1972): 341-342. This dissertation capitalizes Black and not white to recognize the shared sense of identity and community amongst Black Americans. Along with other major publications and organizations like the Associated Press and the Brookings Institution, the Columbia Journalism Review changed their styling guidelines in 2020, stating: "we capitalize *Black*, and not *white*, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and community. White

Despite the formal end of Reconstruction in Virginia, political and social upheavals and uncertainties continued to plague Richmond throughout the remainder of 1870. Notwithstanding political changes made throughout Reconstruction, Conservative opponents of these changes still maintained significant political power and attempted to block Republican policies. Specifically, the city was reeling following the passage of the Enabling Act in March, which allowed the governor to remove militarily appointed office holders and replace them with other officials, generally less supportive of federal Reconstruction reforms and policies, who would serve in their capacity until the next election. The governor-appointed Council for the City of Richmond elected Henry K. Ellyson, a Conservative, mayor of Richmond. George Chahoon, whom Major General John Schofield had appointed in 1868 during Radical Reconstruction, found the authority of the Council illegitimate and refused to give up his mayoral seat. The conflict over the mayoral seat devolved into violence, and both Chahoon and Ellyson developed their own rival police forces. Richmonders had hoped that the case would be resolved on 27 April, when the city suffered the first of three ruinous disasters.

On 27 April 1870, citizens of Richmond and visitors from across Virginia were at the Capitol building, awaiting the verdict in the Chahoon-Ellyson disputed mayoral case. Reporters, lawyers, and members of the public filled the courtroom and its gallery

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carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists.” See: Mike Laws, “Why We Capitalize ‘Black’ (And Not ‘White’),” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>. See also: David Lanham and Amy Liu, “Not Just a Typographical Change: Why Brookings is Capitalizing Black,” *Brookings Institute*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/brookingscapitalizesblack/>. David Bauder, “AP Says it Will Capitalize Black But Not White,” *Associated Press*, 20 July 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-cultures-race-and-ethnicity-us-news-ap-top-news-7e36c00c5af0436abc09e051261fff1f>.

beyond capacity. At eleven o'clock, the large girder that held the gallery snapped, causing the supports to loosen and separate from the wall. The gallery fell onto the courtroom floor, which collapsed and fell into the legislative chamber beneath the courtroom. Some spectators were crushed to death; others suffocated from inhaling the dust of the crumbled plaster. Clouds of dust and debris poured from the Capitol's windows and people in Capitol Square thought the building's boiler had exploded or that the building was on fire. Bells rang throughout the city to alert everyone to the catastrophe, and the fire department arrived and began rescue operations. The dead and wounded were pulled from the debris and placed in the Senate chamber or outside in Capitol Square, where city physicians attended to their injuries. Approximately sixty people died, and hundreds more were injured.<sup>2</sup>

Five months later, on 30 September, a ruinous flood engulfed the city when the James River rose six feet as a result of heavy rainfall. Throughout the afternoon, the river continued to rise at a rate of one foot every half hour. The storm downed many telegraph lines, so some Richmonders lacked the advance notice they needed to adequately prepare for the approaching deluge. The following day, floodwaters surged through the riverside community of Rocketts and approximately two hundred families fled their homes. No one in the city died as a result of the flood, but initial estimates of damages were profound, estimated at \$500,000 (in 1870 currency). A bar, feed store, toy and

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<sup>2</sup> George Chahoon, Mayor 1870, pages 2-3, George Chahoon Papers, Library of Virginia; "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 14, 1870; "The Richmond Calamity," *Harper's Weekly*, May 14, 1870; "The Scene Outside," *Petersburg Index*, April 29, 1870. The number of dead and wounded varies according to source: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* reported over 60 people died and 125 were wounded; *A Full Account of the Great Calamity* (Richmond: Ellyson & Taylor, 1870) reported 58 people died; Edwin J. Slipek wrote that 62 people died and 310 were wounded.

confectionary shop, grocery, pharmacy, harness shop, and fertilizer store were some of the businesses that sustained major water damage. Other businesses fared better: Haxall, Crenshaw, and Company's flour mills were not too badly damaged and resumed operations after a few days, and Tredegar Iron Works sustained minimal damage in the form of rusted tools. The proprietors of Morriss, the sugar refinery, reassessed their initial estimate and confirmed that the cost of damage was less than they had originally thought. Elsewhere in Virginia, the flood destroyed several bridges of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad and washed away a mile of track, resulting in roughly \$100,000 worth of damage. In Albemarle County—approximately seventy-five miles to the northwest of Richmond—at least fourteen people died and the flood destroyed fifty mills and dams.<sup>3</sup>

Less than three months later, a third costly disaster befell the former Confederate capital. On 25 December at about two in the morning, the night watchman at the Spotswood Hotel noticed smoke coming from a crevice in the weather boarding surrounding the pantry. When he broke the pantry door down, he discovered that the entire pantry was on fire. In less than half an hour the fire had expanded to every one of the five floors of the hotel. Occupants evacuated and stood outside in freezing temperatures. The fire destroyed the office of the Southern Express Company, located on

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<sup>3</sup> All dollar amounts will refer to 1870 values unless otherwise noted. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, \$500,000 in January 1913 (the earliest date available) equals \$13,514,132.65 in March 2021. See: [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm). "Destructive Flood in Virginia," *Alexandria Gazette*, 1 October 1870; "The Rising James," *Daily Dispatch*, 1 October 1870; "The Great Flood," *Alexandria Gazette*, 3 October 1870; "The Flood Fallen," *Daily Dispatch*, 4 October 1870; "The Losses by the Flood," *Alexandria Gazette*, 4 October 1870. In *Alexandria Gazette's* column "The Great Flood," the writer noted the following about Rocketts residents: "The families who had removed in the houses, hoping the flood would subside, commenced crying from the upper windows for help. Boats were brought and they were saved...Two hundred families in that portion of the city are houseless to-night." There was no indication, in the *Alexandria Gazette* or elsewhere, of who rescued those families.

the ground floor. Strong winds moved the flames to the west, and adjoining buildings also caught on fire. The fire burned for three hours. The following day, workers dug through the debris to recover the bodies of the eight people who died. The Richmond *Daily Dispatch* called for an inquest into the cause of the fire. It was the custom of hotels to have only one clerk and two servants on the ground floor of the hotel after midnight, leaving the remainder of the floors unsupervised. Following the disaster, state legislators planned to introduce a bill requiring all hotel-keepers in the state to have a watchman or watchmen visit each floor of hotels every ten or fifteen minutes throughout the night to ensure the safety of the hotel's occupants, but these efforts were unsuccessful.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation examines the three disasters that occurred in Richmond in 1870—the Capitol disaster, James River flood, and the Spotswood Hotel fire—and uses them as a lens through which to understand how inhabitants of the Virginia capital experienced, responded to, and remembered the calamities, as well as how the disasters affected a community in a time of extreme political, economic, social, and racial upheaval. The five years following the end of the Civil War represented a time of hope for many Black Richmonders, while some white Richmonders viewed the short-lived period of Radical Reconstruction as a threat to the white supremacist structures that they valued and sought to preserve in the postwar era. The first of the three disasters struck at a precarious time in the re-establishment of local political power, and throughout the remainder of the year Richmonders—white, Black, Conservative, Republican—continued

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<sup>4</sup> “Disastrous Fires,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 27 December 1870; “Our Last Disaster,” *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870. After searching *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia* for the years 1870/71 and 1871/72 there was no evidence of such a bill being passed. See: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008885427>.

to push for further reform or a regression to antebellum structures. Reporters detailed the disasters, published obituaries and calls for financial assistance for victims and their families, and, in the decades afterwards, recalled the calamities when other deadly catastrophes rocked the city. News of the disasters circulated throughout the country, and some northerners expressed sympathy and provided aid to the impoverished Richmonders. The Capitol disaster was the only one of the 1870 catastrophes for which Richmonders formed an ad-hoc relief committee; Richmonders in need were left to fend for themselves following the flood and fire. Richmonders and journalists remembered each of the three disasters in the decades after they occurred, and the Capitol disaster continues to be referenced in the twenty-first century.

Studying the Richmond disasters of 1870 reveals that Richmonders responded to the disasters in some ways that were typical of Americans coping with calamities in the nineteenth century. Richmonders sought to understand why the disasters happened, either by turning to religion or looking for more rational and scientific explanations; created an ad-hoc relief committee; and produced narratives of the disasters which glorified dead white men with political and social cachet. None of these actions would have been unfamiliar to Americans in the wake of a catastrophe in post-Civil War America.

The political, social, economic, and racial contexts in which they occurred shaped Richmonders' response to the disasters. Throughout Radical Reconstruction, Black Richmonders had succeeded in gaining greater political, economic, and social agency, but by the time the Capitol disaster took place, their power was waning and tensions between the white and Black communities remained at an all-time high. Despite Richmonders'

racial anxieties, after the Capitol disaster, journalists perpetuated a false narrative of racial harmony between the two communities. While some victims of the Capitol disaster were lauded for their accomplishments, victims of the Spotswood Hotel fire were not because they were comparatively poorer and did not have high social standing. Black residents of the Rocketts community received hardly any attention in the press despite the flood decimating their homes. Because of white journalists' visceral reporting of the great suffering and need in the Virginia capital, northerners were motivated to provide aid to their former enemies in the wake of the Capitol disaster. These gestures of goodwill were a significant milestone in the process of reconciliation between the North and South after the end of the Civil War. In addition to the help of northerners, the Virginia legislature appropriated \$5,000 to the relief of the sufferers. While the disasters continued to be remembered after they occurred, Lost Cause adherents co-opted the Capitol disaster and held it up as an example of the failure of Reconstruction and the ways in which Radical Republicans sought to maintain political and social control.

My analysis of the three Richmond disasters of 1870 draws on a rich and growing body of scholarly literature that views disasters as cultural events and seeks to use these episodes as windows onto their larger historical contexts. The most basic definition of what comprises a disaster is an event that causes significant suffering or damage to a community. Experts use "the number of fatalities or the dollar amount of property losses...[or the] geographic scope, duration, length of forewarning, [and] speed of onset" of an event to determine whether it can be deemed a disaster. Scholars no longer conceive of disasters as singular events but instead view disasters as entire social processes



composed of environmental, social, economic, political, and biological factors.

Calamities can occur slowly over time—droughts or toxic exposures, for example—or happen rapidly and without warning, as in the case of earthquakes or nuclear accidents.

Anthony Oliver-Smith contends that disasters express “continuity and contradiction, cooperation and conflict, power and resistance. All are articulated through the operation of physical, biological, and social systems and their interactions among populations, institutions, and practices.”<sup>5</sup>

While it is tempting to distinguish the Capitol collapse and the Spotswood Hotel fire from so-called natural disasters, such as the James River flood, disaster studies scholars view calamities along a continuum and argue that there is no such thing as a wholly "natural" disaster. Experts such as Ted Steinberg posit that disasters are not “acts of God” that stem from random natural forces and instead are always at least partly the result of human action or inaction. Oftentimes, politicians overemphasize the natural factors that cause disasters and underemphasize the human, social, and economic factors in an effort to skirt blame for their severity and thereby evade calls for reform or regulation. Disasters are primarily the results of human choices and, to a lesser extent, natural occurrences, and have historically served to normalize the injustices of class and race. In Richmond, legislators did not enact any policies to mitigate flood risk for

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia A. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster: The Culture of Calamity from the Jamestown Colony to the Johnstown Flood* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 1. Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Theorizing Disaster: Nature, Power, and Culture,” in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, edited by Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 26. See also pages 23-47.

residents of the Rocketts neighborhood, and instead the Black inhabitants of that section of the city had to deal with the consequences of deluges for decades to come.<sup>6</sup>

Like increasing numbers of case studies of particular disasters, this dissertation builds on the idea that calamities are “occasions for extraordinary cultural production,” in the words of Kevin Rozario. Narratives created in the wake of disasters shape people’s identities, power structures, economics, and environmental practices. Rozario and others have examined how Americans have imagined and managed disasters from the seventeenth century through the present. Cynthia Kierner’s *Inventing Disaster: The Culture of Calamity from the Jamestown Colony to the Johnstown Flood* is one example of a cultural history of multiple disasters, in which Kierner analyzes how a culture of disaster emerged within the British Atlantic World, and later the American Republic, by studying the reactions and aftermaths of a variety disasters such as shipwrecks, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, and exploding steamboats.<sup>7</sup>

When disasters strike in the twenty-first century, Americans anticipate aid will come from governmental sources such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency and volunteer organizations like the Red Cross, but such relief would have been alien to most Americans living in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. As Cynthia Kierner demonstrates, Americans were accustomed to creating ad-hoc relief committees following disasters and relying on the benevolence of their contemporaries for the money

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<sup>6</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii-xxv. Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2020), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3. See also pages 1-29. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*.

and materials needed to rebuild, bury their dead, and provide food and shelter for those impoverished by the calamities. With the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865, the federal government significantly expanded its power—and possibly the expectations of those suffering in the wake of disasters—by providing assistance to freedpeople and refugees. Gareth Davies contends that after the Civil War a “*national politics of disaster*” emerged. It was notable that the Virginia state government provided relief to Richmonders following the Capitol disaster, because disaster relief from the state was extremely uncommon at that time, as was disaster relief from the federal government—which Richmonders did not receive. The \$5,000 appropriated by the Virginia House of Delegates was unsurprisingly not enough, however, and Richmonders created a local Committee on Visitation and Relief and also were the recipients of financial assistance from their contemporaries throughout the commonwealth and the country.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of ad-hoc relief committees was a common practice throughout the nineteenth century. A year after the Richmond disasters, when approximately three hundred people died and major portions of Chicago had to be rebuilt following a fire that blazed for three days in October 1871, Chicagoans established the Relief and Aid society and distributed over \$4,000,000 to those in need, particularly women and children. Similarly, in the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in Charleston in 1886, the mayor created a committee charged with collecting donations and providing shelter to those made temporarily homeless. In both Chicago and Charleston, privileged white people ran

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<sup>8</sup> Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*. Gareth Davies, “The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster, 1865-1900,” *Journal of Policy History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 305-326.

the relief committees in ways that tended to be unfavorable to other social groups, including Black and immigrant communities. While it is unknown how the funds received were disbursed to the needy after the Capitol collapse, it is likely that white families received a disproportionate share of aid in comparison to Black or poor families.<sup>9</sup>

The disasters of 1870 were not the first notable calamities to strike the capital of the commonwealth. In 1811, the Richmond Theater caught fire during a performance and seventy-two people died, many of whom were women and government officials, including the sitting Virginia governor. Historian Meredith Henne Baker argues that the fire revitalized religious sentiment throughout the city. Prior to the disaster Richmond had a smattering of churches, but in the wake of the fire and with the spike in religious fervor, more churches were built, including Monumental Church—which was erected to commemorate those who perished in the conflagration, and like the tablet created to memorialize the victims of the Capitol disaster, faced many funding challenges. Although the 1870 disasters did not seem to result in renewed and protracted religious sentiment among Richmonders, many did look to religion as a way to understand and justify the disasters. Additionally, the Richmond theater fire occurred in the early years of American republic, and the 1870 disasters took place five years after the end of the Civil War—so both the 1811 fire and 1870 disasters occurred during a fragile time in the establishment, or re-establishment and re-working of, political power. Strikingly, many newspapers

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Susan Williams and Stephen Hoffius, *Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

recalled the events of the 1811 theater fire when detailing the Capitol disaster, as it was the most deadly disaster to occur in the city since the 1811 fire.<sup>10</sup>

The few disaster studies scholars who have analyzed the historical memory of calamities find that the trauma of surviving the event itself blur the facts of what actually happened, and the details of the disaster are continually reshaped in the decades afterwards. In late August 1893, a hurricane tore through Beaufort, South Carolina, and killed between fifteen hundred to five thousand inhabitants of the coastal southern county. Those who survived the disaster remembered the experience differently, and in particular, members of the white and Black communities—the latter of whom were disproportionately affected by the calamity—had vastly disparate recollections of what happened. Caroline Grego posits that accounts of the disaster reveal white South Carolinians' concerns about Black South Carolinians' political power. Almost twenty years later, the *Titanic* sank in the North Atlantic, along with approximately fifteen hundred passengers, and became the most famous maritime disaster in trans-Atlantic history. Steven Biel finds that the mainstream press valorized the white men who died in the years after the sinking, which often did not match with how working-class and Black communities remembered the disaster. Similarly, this dissertation studies how Richmonders remembered the disasters in the decades after 1870, and how politics and racial tensions shaped the memory of each catastrophe—particularly how conservatives used Lost Cause mythology to remember the white men who died at the Capitol.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America's First Great Disaster* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Grego, "Disruption, Dispossession, and the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893," (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 2019). Steven Biel, *Down With the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic*

The 1870 disasters did not happen in a vacuum—they were significantly influenced by the political and racial forces at work during Reconstruction. The most significant aspect of Reconstruction was the participation of Black Americans in the formal political process: Black men voted and served in the local, state, and federal governments. Defining politics as “collective struggles for what might be termed socially meaningful power,” historian Steven Hahn argues that Black Americans “continually made and remade their politics and political history in complex relation to shifting events.” In the five years after the end of the Civil War, Black men and women continued to exert political agency. Black men participated in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1867-68, and even when Conservatives and Democrats regained control of local and state governments, participated both formally and informally in the political process, despite the dangers to themselves and their families. The “nation under their feet”—their family and community life—were integral to Black Virginians, and also underwent significant change throughout Reconstruction. Within Richmond, a Black middle class emerged, Black children went to schools established by the Freedmen’s

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*Disaster* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996). For other pertinent disaster studies scholarship, see: John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Michele Landis Dauber, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012); Kathleen Donegan, *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016); Joanna L. Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco’s 1906 Earthquake* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017); Cindy Ermus, *Environmental Disaster in the Gulf South: Two Centuries of Catastrophe, Risk, and Resilience* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2016); Lorri Glover and Daniel Blake Smith, *The Shipwreck That Saved Jamestown: The Sea Venture Castaways and the Fate of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008); Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Jacob Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Catherine E. Rigby, *Dancing With Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Bureau, and Black laborers were compensated for their work, however fairly or unfairly they might have been paid.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the eagerness of many white American across the United States to put the war behind them was one explanation for the outpouring of sympathy and financial assistance Americans in northern cities provided to their counterparts in the former capital of the Confederacy. This aid, which was instrumental in helping Richmonders recover, particularly after the Capitol disaster, was a prelude to an eventual rapprochement between northerners and southerners. David Blight studies the memory of the Civil War and argues that race was “the central problem in how Americans made choices to remember and forget their Civil War.” Blight describes three visions of Civil War memory: reconciliationist, white supremacist, and emancipationist. Ultimately, he argues, “the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture...the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race.” While Blight posits that reconciliation between the North and South did not begin until the mid-1870s, the reaction of northerners to the Richmond disasters of 1870 demonstrates that the process of reconciliation may have begun earlier. Decades later, the memory of the Capitol disaster was co-opted by those adhering to Lost Cause ideology. White southerners—and, particularly, white supremacists—created the Lost Cause movement to control the history and memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Throughout the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, white Richmonders utilized the myth of the

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3, 7.

Lost Cause to perpetuate false narratives of Reconstruction and the events surrounding the Capitol disaster.<sup>13</sup>

The first chapter of this dissertation describes the period of Reconstruction in Richmond beginning in 1865 with the end of the Civil War through Virginia's admittance to the Union in January 1870, and the reshaping of political, economic, social, and racial structures throughout the commonwealth. This chapter places a specific emphasis on the political work of Black Virginians who participated in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1867-68, as well as the ways in which Black laborers sought to leverage their power as freedpeople while negotiating the terms of work contracts with whites. While many Black Virginians saw the period of Reconstruction as one of hope, their goals of political, social, economic, and racial equality were never fully realized. It was in this transitional environment of a newly ratified state constitution, the disbandment of the

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<sup>13</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2, 98, 259. In 1979, William Gillette attributed the retreat from Reconstruction to a variety of factors: the waning of popular support and waxing of conservative sentiment; northerners' desire for reconciliation; reduction in the number of federal troops in the South; resurgence of racism in political campaigns; judicial decisions restricting federal action; and the initiation of a conservative southern policy starting in 1875. William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). Eric Foner echoes Gillette's findings in *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. He argues that northerners in Congress in 1870 were already tired of Reconstruction and "continued to view the South as a land of 'rebels' undeserving of federal largesse." Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014). For other pertinent Reconstruction historiography, see: Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998); James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).



Freedmen's Bureau, and the regression of economic conditions to their pre-war state that the three disasters of 1870 took place.

The second chapter details the three disasters and compares the circumstances of each and how Richmonders and Virginians outside of the capital responded to the calamities. While the flood is the only calamity that could be termed a "natural disaster," it did not result in any loss of life and the majority of Richmonders recovered fairly quickly from the deluge, with the exception of the residents of Rocketts, a Black neighborhood. Deadly fires in urban spaces were a common occurrence in the mid-nineteenth century, and while the Spotswood Hotel fire resulted in the deaths of eight people, that disaster was not deemed as newsworthy as the Capitol disaster. Because it occurred suddenly and was an unprecedented event in the history of the city, together with the political and social standing of the majority of the victims, news of the Capitol disaster circulated widely throughout the commonwealth and the country. In the days and weeks following the disasters, Richmonders reflected on the history of disasters in the capital, specifically the Richmond theater fire of 1811. Local publications published potentially hyperbolic stories of Richmonders setting aside their political and racial differences in the wake of the calamities. Many Richmonders turned to religion to understand and process the deadly disasters, while others looked for scientific explanations.

The third chapter examines how newspapers disseminated information about the disasters to Virginians living outside of the commonwealth's capital and to Americans living outside of the commonwealth, and how contemporaries reacted to news of the

disasters. The disasters in Richmond received national attention, including vivid accounts and arresting sketches in popular magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. This affecting coverage led some northerners to display feelings of goodwill and sympathy for the southerners in the Virginia capital reeling in the aftermath of damaging calamities. Some northerners provided aid that proved imperative for disaster recovery efforts, as the former capital of the Confederacy was still desolate and many Richmonders continued to find themselves in dire financial straits. Such efforts demonstrate that the Richmond disasters provided the impetus to begin the process of re-establishing friendly relations between the North and South despite their years of political and social conflict during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The fourth chapter studies the recovery efforts that followed each disaster. The Capitol disaster was the only calamity of 1870 for which Richmonders formed an ad-hoc relief committee and were the recipients of local and state government support. Despite the damage done to businesses in the capital, Richmonders did not create a relief committee after the flood. This inaction can be attributed to the greater need of their contemporaries throughout the commonwealth—who fared far worse—and the Richmonders most affected by the flood were Black and impoverished. Similarly, the conflagration at the Spotswood Hotel did not result in any efforts by Richmonders to assist those affected by the disaster, possibly because of the ubiquitous presence of fires in urban spaces at that time. Instead of focusing on financial relief, Richmonders and their contemporaries contemplated the safety of public buildings and how best to protect oneself from fires.

The fifth chapter analyzes how Richmonders, Virginians, and Americans remembered each disaster in the decades after they occurred, and how contemporary political and social circumstances shaped the memories of the disasters. Of the three calamities, the Capitol disaster was the most widely remembered, and continues to be referenced even in the twenty-first century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adherents of the Lost Cause narrative used the Capitol disaster as an example of the failure of Reconstruction. While a fund to create a memorial for the victims of the Capitol disaster was established in the months afterwards, it was not until 1920 that a tablet was unveiled. The flood was the least discussed of the three disasters, and the Spotswood Hotel was remembered in the wake of other deadly fires, particularly the conflagration at Richmond's Jefferson Hotel in 1901. A memorial for the eight victims of the hotel fire was erected in 1871 with little fanfare.

The Richmond disasters of 1870 provide insight into how Americans experienced, responded to, and rebuilt after major catastrophes, while also exposing political, racial, social, and economic tensions that shaped the everyday lives of white and Black Richmonders. The details of the disasters, how Richmonders coped afterwards, and the ways in which contemporaries recalled them in the decades later are important in understanding the history and culture of disasters in Reconstruction-era America.

## **CHAPTER ONE: NOT SO RADICAL: RECONSTRUCTION IN RICHMOND, 1865-1870**

Black Richmonders took to the city streets on 3 April 1865 to celebrate the incoming Union Army. Black residents danced, sang, and prayed while a military band of Black soldiers played “Year of the Jubilee.” The next day, Lincoln visited the city and crowds of Black Richmonders joyously welcomed him. Seven months later, a writer for the Hampton, Virginia, Black newspaper *The True Southerner* explicated in its inaugural issue: “The chains which held [freedpeople] in involuntary servitude are broken. The whip that lacerated their flesh has fallen harmless to the ground; the impediments which lay between them and a land of freedom have been put asunder by the bloody hand of war, and the stars of liberty now shines beneficently upon them.” The writer advised readers that those in power want to “rob them of every vestige of liberty and subject them to a servitude no less oppressive than that to which they have been subjected for ages past.” The writer’s prescient warning foreshadowed the challenging years to come for Black Americans during the era of Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

The era of Reconstruction in Virginia is typically divided into three separate phases. Presidential Reconstruction started on 3 April 1865 with the arrival of Union troops in Richmond until Congress passed the First Reconstruction Acts in early 1867. The months immediately following the war’s end were marked by presidential inaction—

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 592. Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 159-162. “Make the Best of Your Condition,” *True Southerner*, 24 November 1865.

President Andrew Johnson frequently vetoed federal legislation, especially laws that would give Black Americans more freedoms—and scrambling within the Republican party, as politicians tried to determine the best course of action for enacting change and ensuring the success of Reconstruction. Radical Reconstruction lasted from the passage of the First Reconstruction Act in March 1867 until the end of the Constitutional Convention in April 1868, and it was during these few months that Black Virginians were the most politically active. Black men were granted the franchise, and with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, should have had equal protection under the law. Military Reconstruction began after the end of the Constitutional Convention and lasted until Congress admitted Virginia back into the Union in 1870. During this period, white Conservatives seized political control in their fight to reestablish white supremacy.<sup>2</sup>

The city of Richmond was in ruins at the time of the Union Army's arrival, as were metropolises throughout the former rebel states. This was due to the Union's hard war strategy, wherein armed forces demolished as much of the city as they could in hopes of destroying both civilian morale and the infrastructure that fueled the Confederate war effort. Union forces targeted manufacturing and commercial sites in order to disrupt and halt productivity. Hard war also affected the psychological well-being of civilians who lived and worked in urban areas. Because it was the capitol of the Confederacy, Richmond was an obvious target for Union troops, and it lost over one-third of its buildings throughout the course of the war. In addition to wartime ruination,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 88-89, 96, 104.

Confederates set fires to trades and businesses as they retreated from the city in late March and early April 1865. This destruction created an entire burned district of the city and damaged Richmond's commercial activity while also causing chaos for civilians. Once the fires were extinguished, the rebuilding process began, which created new jobs for Black and white Richmonders. Workers repaired bridges and telegraph lines so quickly that by the end of April four rail lines that terminated in Richmond were already back in operation.<sup>3</sup>

While the physical space of the city of Richmond had to be reconstructed, the abstract structures that shaped the lives of Richmonders and Virginians generally were also due to undergo radical transformation. With the end of the Civil War, the era of Reconstruction began and for many Black Americans it represented the possibility of significant, progressive change in the country. This chapter examines the effects of Reconstruction on Black and white Virginians from the end of the Civil War until early 1870, when Reconstruction formally ended and Congress readmitted the commonwealth to the Union. However, the struggles of the previous five years continued unabated.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to understand the political, social, economic, and racial contexts in which the disasters that struck Richmond in 1870 occurred, because these dynamics shaped post-disaster relief and contemporaries' responses to them. In *Richmond After the*

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<sup>3</sup> Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 13, 10-11. Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, 60-61, 66. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 159-160, 164-165. Elna C. Green, *This Business of Relief: Confronting Poverty in a Southern City, 1740-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 85-86. Brent Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 275-276.

<sup>4</sup> Chesson, *Richmond After the War*. See chapter 4, "The City Reconstructed 1865-1870": 87-115. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 12.

*War 1865-1890*, Michael Chesson argues that 1902 was the true end of Reconstruction in Richmond with the adoption of the new state constitution that disenfranchised Black Virginians. He notes that many scholars contend that Reconstruction ended in January 1870 when Virginia was readmitted to the Union, despite the fact that riots, contested elections, and court battles plagued Richmond throughout 1870, culminating in white Conservatives reclaiming political power. Nevertheless, majorities in Richmond and the remainder of the state voted for the reelection of President Ulysses S. Grant, a Republican, in 1872, which would not have been attainable without the votes of Black Virginians. Because Republicans continued to wield significant political power in the state throughout the 1880s, Chesson argues that Reconstruction in Richmond endured until Black Virginians were disenfranchised by the 1902 state constitution.<sup>5</sup>

While the period of Reconstruction might have represented hope for many Black Virginians, Reconstruction was not without its significant challenges. Black Virginians contracted their labor throughout the state in order to make an income and provide for their families. However, these contracts were reminiscent of the conditions under which they worked during slavery, and their employers were consistently able to tip the balance of power in their own favor. In terms of politics, Black Virginians sought equal rights, served as delegates in the Constitutional Convention, and together with moderate and Radical Republicans, created a progressive constitution in 1868. White detractors and skeptics discredited their work by mocking their intelligence and experience, and through various loopholes were able to push back some of the more radical reforms Black

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<sup>5</sup> Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, 88.

Virginians and Republicans wanted to enact throughout the state and, ultimately, successfully reinstated white supremacy.

As Steven Hahn notes in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, Black people have always been politically active since they were first forcibly brought to America. Hahn defines politics as “collective struggles for what might be termed socially meaningful power.” When Black Americans gained the right to vote it was due to decades-long efforts made by Black men and Black women—who were never granted the right to vote during this period, and struggled to achieve the franchise through the early twentieth century. During Reconstruction, newly enfranchised Black men were politically active, with the most prominent among them participating in the progressive Constitutional Convention in 1867 and 1868.<sup>6</sup>

Following the end of the war, thousands of Black Virginians went to the capital of the commonwealth for a variety of reasons. In 1864, there were 14,275 Black people in Richmond, both enslaved and free; by May 1866, about thirty thousand Black people lived in the city. Many Black people traveled to the city to search for loved ones and family members, as enslavers frequently sold enslaved people without regard to their familial ties. Some Black Virginians came to Richmond to celebrate their freedom and the end of slavery and war. Other Black people from rural areas and smaller locales traveled to the city looking for work, particularly those with specialized skills, as there

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. Peter J. Rachleff details Black Richmonders’ political work during Reconstruction in *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1984), 34-54.



were more types of work available in the city than in rural areas. Some formerly enslaved Black people had labored in Richmond for a time and had social and family connections there.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the period in which Virginia remained under federal military rule after the end of the war, Black Virginians were, in many ways, not free. Punishments for minor violations were incredibly harsh and under vagrancy laws, which disproportionately affected Black people, any person who appeared to be experiencing homelessness or unemployment could be forced into labor. While whites in Richmond were free to travel anywhere within the city, Black people were required to adhere to a pass system that vouched for their status as local residents. If Black Virginians traveled without a pass, then they were subject to thirty-nine lashes on the whipping post. The army harassed, beat, and arrested Black people on Richmond city streets to prevent them from congregating, as white people and some members of the army stationed in the city were afraid of Black Virginians protesting these unfair conditions. Confrontations between Black civilians and white soldiers occurred frequently, and some ended in death. In one of their first acts of political organizing in the post-war era, Black people rallied against these harsh military policies. A group of Black Richmonders wrote a letter to the *New York Tribune* describing the conditions in the city and arguing that slavery, in essence, had barely ended. “Our present condition is, in many respects worse than when we were slaves and living under slave law,” they stated.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 14-15. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 271.

<sup>8</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 154-155. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 166. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 35-37. Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, 90-91. [Untitled], *New York Tribune*, 17 June 1865.

Tired of living under such harsh conditions, Black men and women used their political power to enact change. On 10 June 1865 Black Richmonders convened at a local church and approved a motion of censure against the U.S. Army. Fields Cook, a Black barber and church leader, delivered the censure to President Johnson. The motion of censure was a contributing factor to President Johnson's decision to replace Major General Edward Ord, commander of the Army of Occupation headquartered in Richmond, with General Alfred Terry. Terry pledged that the military would treat all Richmonders as equals and voided the vagrancy laws that were the basis for the pass system. Even more change came at the federal level when the Secretary of War terminated pass requirements and told the military that Black people were to have freedom of movement. Despite these top-down changes, many members of the army stationed in Richmond still believed that it would be best for Black people to continue working on the land of former forced labor camps. Marie Tyler-McGraw contends that Black Virginians' swift actions against army policies might have averted the reinstatement of civil codes that controlled the agency of free Black Americans in the antebellum era.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to protesting their harsh and unfair treatment at the hands of soldiers, Black people continued in their decades-long political struggle and relied on their churches as a social network. In the spring and summer of 1865, Black Americans came

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<sup>9</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 154-155. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 166-167. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 35-37. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 269-270. In *The 1619 Project*, the editors prefer the term "forced labor camp" to the euphemistic "plantation" in order to "more accurately convey the historical situation of enslavement" (see "A Note About This Book"). Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

together in meetings and parades, and drew up petitions demanding equality and the right to vote. Black Richmonders sought to purge the local government, which former Confederates controlled. Black churches continued to be a mainstay of Black communities. In 1860, the four Black churches in Richmond had over four thousand members. These churches were spaces in which Black people could build community, socialize, and establish organizations devoted to political, social, or cultural causes, including equal rights, temperance, trade, debate and drama. In addition to religious services, churches also provided evening classes, dinners, social events, and excursions. The postwar period brought huge growth to the city's Black institutions. By the 1870s, over four hundred Black organizations, including churches, existed in Richmond.<sup>10</sup>

Black Americans created their own educational opportunities. In 1861 Mary Peake, the daughter of a free Black mother and an English father, established the commonwealth's first school for Black people in Hampton, Virginia. After the end of the Civil War, Black Americans set up schools in abandoned warehouses and billiard rooms throughout southern cities. Only a month after Union forces arrived in Richmond, Black residents had already established schools with help from Black churches and the American Missionary Association. Over one thousand Black children and seventy-five Black adults were attending classes in those schools.<sup>11</sup>

While Black men and women continued their centuries-long traditions of political action and creating and maintaining social networks, many Black families underwent

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<sup>10</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 110, 111, 88, 95. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 16. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 273-274.

<sup>11</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 97.

significant change as formerly enslaved Black women used their agency as freedpeople to decide how their household should function and the types of labor in which they would engage. Many left their work as domestic laborers for white women and focused their efforts on their own homes and families. Newly emancipated Black women now had the ability to establish their own household and decide which forms of domestic labor or non-domestic labor they wanted to undertake. Many Black women chose traditional marriages that adhered to gendered divisions of labor. Black women's decisions to contract their labor depended a great deal on whether their husbands performed skilled labor, held property, or were involved in trade and church societies. Prior to the war Black women formed political auxiliaries and benevolent societies, and they continued that work during Reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Reconstruction-era Richmond saw the emergence of a Black middle class. The Black men who rose to prominence during Reconstruction in the city had been engaged with churches and secret societies—a network of social organizations that had many functions, including providing funerals and death benefits, trade organizations, education, religious advancement, and political gatherings—in the years before the war. The Black men who were early leaders for their communities in Richmond comprised men who had been enslaved, were born free, and others who purchased their own freedom. For example, the first Black pastor of the First African

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<sup>12</sup> Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 168. Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

Baptist Church, Reverend J.H. Holmes, and Reverend John Jasper of Sixth Mount Zion, had both been enslaved until the end of the war. The positions these Black leaders held before the war had less to do with their post-war prominence than their ability to earn enough income so their wives would not have to work outside their homes. A paternalistic household that adhered to gendered divisions of labor was a signifier of the Black middle class in the Reconstruction era, as were evangelical religion, benevolence, steady work and income, and education.<sup>13</sup>

In March 1865, Congress passed the Freedmen's Bureau Act, which established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. It was the task of the Freedmen's Bureau to provide "provisions, clothing, and fuel" to "refugees and freedmen from rebel states." This remit meant the Bureau had many responsibilities, of which providing relief and help to freedpeople, issuing clothing and rations, operating hospitals and refugee camps, managing disputes and complaints, establishing schools, legalizing marriages of the formerly enslaved, and assisting Black people traveling to reunite with their families were only some.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 13. Rachleff argues that secret societies, the extended family, and churches formed three pillars of a vibrant Black community in post-war Richmond. Secret societies began in the antebellum period and membership was kept confidential to protect the identities of the free and enslaved Black people that took part. During Reconstruction, "secret societies enlarged their social role, transcended their antebellum limits, and expanded their membership" (25). By the early 1870s, there were 400 secret societies in Richmond. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 168, 170. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 275.

<sup>14</sup> "Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866," United States Senate, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm>. "Records of the Field Offices for the State of Virginia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872," National Museum of African American History and Culture, [https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/sova\\_nmaahc.fb.m1913](https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/sova_nmaahc.fb.m1913).

In Richmond, the Freedmen's Bureau assisted white and Black residents by providing them with food and rations, and provided other forms of relief to many members of the Black community. In October of 1865, the Bureau issued 230,180 rations to freedpeople throughout the commonwealth. During the winter months and early 1866, the Bureau spent over \$23,000,000 on fuel and clothing for those in need. The Bureau also took over operations of Richmond's Chimborazo Hospital, which was in use as a shelter for Black and white residents experiencing homelessness, and converted it into a temporary almshouse for freedpeople.<sup>15</sup>

White Richmonders' feelings about the Freedmen's Bureau quickly turned from gratitude for their much-needed assistance to annoyance, particularly because their actions undermined efforts to reestablish white supremacy. The Freedmen's Bureau established schools, and white Virginians saw that as a threat to what had been ready access to Black labor. Freedmen's Bureau agents defended the rights of Black Virginians within the court system, and assisted Black laborers with writing labor contracts.<sup>16</sup>

One of the ways in which Freedmen's Bureau agents accomplished its function as an extension of federal and state power created to implement free labor relations—its other function was to operate as a benevolent organization to assist newly emancipated Black people—was through overseeing a system of labor contracts between freedpeople and former enslavers. Bureau agents approved many of these contracts, although freedpeople and former enslavers could, and did, engage in contracts without such

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<sup>15</sup> Green, *This Business of Relief*, 86-87, 91, 93. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 271-272.

<sup>16</sup> Green, *This Business of Relief*, 87. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 271-272.

approval. To further protect the rights of freedpeople and Black laborers, in 1866 the Virginia General Assembly passed a law that required public officials to witness labor contracts.<sup>17</sup>

Entering into labor contracts with former enslavers or white employers was one way in which Black Americans and newly emancipated people asserted their newly established rights to control their own labor. Nevertheless, despite Black people and Freedmen's Bureau agents advocating for the rights of the employed, whites frequently created labor contracts that reestablished their supremacy. Labor contracts created throughout Virginia reveal that the balance of power between former enslavers and the newly emancipated tipped heavily in the favor of the former. Because they needed to work in order to feed, clothe, and house themselves and their families, Black men were in a poor position to bargain for better terms in these agreements. Labor contracts were a tool for former enslavers to assert their social and economic power over Black Americans during a time of major political and social transition.<sup>18</sup>

Some components of labor contracts, including compensation, rations, and living arrangements, seemed to be former enslavers providing grudging concessions to Black Virginians' new freedoms, although in some important respects they replicated the control and conditions that whites wielded during slavery. Contracts were very specific as to the pay and rations laborers were given, the work they were to perform, and the length of their employment. Some Black laborers were paid in food and shelter, which is what

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<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South, Virginia, 1860-1890* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 35-37, 41, 49. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 271.

<sup>18</sup> See the Freedmen's Contracts CSV for data on freedpeople's labor agreements published by the Library of Virginia: <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/data/>.

they had received as enslaved people in the antebellum era. White landowner John Daniel Imboden hired freedmen Baker Mosely and Moses Richards from August and September 1865 until 25 December. During that time, Richards and Mosely worked as field hands. In exchange, Richards received “3 [pounds] of meat a week, 2 quarts of meal a day & peas, and five dollars a month in money” and Baker Mosely received “3 [pounds] of meat a week and 2 quarts of meal a day, and Twenty dollars in money.” Edward Twyman entered into a contract with Martha Graves Garth and is one example of a labor arrangement that provided housing for the laborer. As long as Twyman performed general maintenance work and gave Garth an apportionment of the crops he raised, he and his family could live rent-free on a house on Garth’s lot of land.<sup>19</sup>

One way for white employers to exert influence over their employees and buttress their control was to detail all the reasons they could dismiss laborers from their work. Elsie, Abraham, and Jim were hired to work for Clement Carrington McPhail but if they “misbehave[d] in any way the said C.C. McPhail may annul the contract at any time.” In his contract with John Daniel Imboden, Moses Richard agreed that if he were to “quit & go off before my time is out without cause I forfeit my wages, or if I neglect my business I may be dismissed at any time.” If another of Imboden’s employees, Baker Mosely, conducted himself improperly or neglected his responsibilities, Imboden had the right to dismiss him and Mosely would leave “in debt” and have his wages forfeited. What

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<sup>19</sup> Contract, 14 September 1865, between John Daniel Imboden and Moses Richards, section 41, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Contract, 8 September 1865, between John Daniel Imboden and Baker Mosely, section 41, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Agreement, 9 November 1868, between Martha Graves Garth and Edward Twyman, section 8, Garnett Family Papers, 1814-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.



characterized improper conduct was never described, and was likely a catch-all phrase that helped to enhance white power. As a part of the contract between Martha Garth and Edward Twyman, the latter was instructed to “conduct himself respectfully at all times,” ensure that his family did the same, and “not to allow his children to annoy her.”<sup>20</sup>

Contracting their wives’ labor was a method for Black men to indicate to former enslavers that their wives and children were no longer the property of whites or under their control. As Tera Hunter notes, marriage gave Black men property rights in their wives and in the paid and unpaid labor these women performed, and Black women’s freedom was transferred from their enslavers to their husbands. Israel Mosely was one freedman who contracted out the labor of his wife. The unnamed woman was to perform the cooking and “any other work she is capable of performing” for John Daniel Imboden. If she “neglects her duties” she would be eligible for dismissal at any point and “sent off with her children.”<sup>21</sup>

While contracting out the labor of their wives and children was one way to establish themselves as the head of their household, Black men also used these labor contracts to ensure that their families would be fed and clothed. In the agreement between George Cunningham Hannah and Wyatt, a freedman, Wyatt’s contract stipulated that his

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<sup>20</sup> Contract, 10 October 1865, between Aaron Read and C.C. McPhail, section 39, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Contract, 8 September 1865, between Moses Richard and John Daniel Imboden, section 41, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Contract, 8 September 1865, between Baker Mosely and John Daniel Imboden, section 41, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Agreement, 9 November 1868, between Martha Garth and Edward Twyman, section 8, Garnett Family Papers, 1814-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>21</sup> Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 221-222, 225. Agreement, 28 August 1865, between John Daniel Imboden and Israel Mosely, section 41, Carrington Family Papers, 1744-1940, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. See also: Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 171.

wife would receive rations of “1 peck meal per week.” In the same labor agreement, Hannah agreed to provide two pounds of meat and one peck of meal per week to Rita Clark, the wife of Stokes Clark, another freedman in his employ. While these agreements might have been one way for Black men to demonstrate their authority over their families, they also fulfilled a very real need for Black families: the need to be paid for their work in order to feed, house, and clothe their families.<sup>22</sup>

Just as in more rural areas of the commonwealth, Black Richmonders had to secure employment in order to mitigate the harsh economic conditions that were a reality for many during Reconstruction. The most significant difference between labor in the city versus work on former forced labor camps was the variety of occupations available to city-dwellers. In Richmond, the two most common positions for Black men and women were tobacco factory workers and domestic service, respectively. Women who were not working as domestics earned a living as seamstresses or took in washing. Black men worked in industrial settings, including for the railroad and as factory hands, or in other occupations that required heavy manual labor, such as carpenters, whitewashers, and plasterers. Others worked in skilled trades and found employment as bakers, coopers, shoemakers, and barbers. Black men also made money as wagoners and newspaper carriers. Outside the city limits, men worked in the coal pits of Manchester and Midlothian. In addition to the multiplicity of occupations, Black Richmonders also

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<sup>22</sup> Agreement, 1 January 1867, between Phil Walker, Tom Hannah, Horace Sag, Cornelius Green, Lazarus Clay, Henry Clay, Wyatt [undecipherable last name] and his wife, Harly, Paul, George Branch, Stokes Clark, and Rita Clark, and George Cunningham Hannah, section 41, Hannah Family Papers, 1760-1967, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

benefited from community activities, whether organized through churches or secret societies, and political organization.<sup>23</sup>

Another realm in which Black Virginians fought for equality was in politics, particularly by voting for sympathetic representatives to the Constitutional Convention to create a new framework for state government. When Presidential Reconstruction failed to enact progressive change, Radical Republicans in Congress passed two Reconstruction Acts in early 1867. These acts divided the former Confederacy into military-run districts; disenfranchised former high-level Confederates; ratified the Fourteenth Amendment; and called for popular conventions to create new state constitutions. John Schofield, a lieutenant general in the army who would later serve as the Secretary of War under Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant, was appointed the commander of the First Military District, which comprised Virginia. One of the duties of military district commanders was to register new voters, put the newly-created constitution up to a popular vote, and ensure the integrity of elections. Black Americans, newly declared citizens of the country via the Fourteenth Amendment, seized this political opportunity and held political meetings and voter registration drives to promote suffrage.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to recognize that Black Virginians did not comprise a monolithic political entity. There were rifts amongst Black Virginians from rural and metropolitan areas of the state and between older and younger people—as is so often the case regardless of race or time period. Many Black Virginians felt that the Black political

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<sup>23</sup> Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 27-32.

<sup>24</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 73-74.

leaders were too conservative. For many Black Virginians, and Black people throughout the nation, the Republican party was the party of Lincoln and of emancipation. Virginians who had wanted to remain in the Union during the war and those who moved to the state in the years after the war's close—known contemporarily as scalawags and carpetbaggers, respectively—led the organization of the Republican party in the commonwealth. Republicans wanted to ensure Virginia's Republican party would complement the national Republican party, attract those who had been Whigs in the antebellum years, and sought northern investment in the rebuilding of the South. They were proponents of equal protection of all men before the courts and the right of men to hold public office, and championed universal manhood suffrage and a public school system. Radical Republicans, who were more extreme in their goals, advocated for the redistribution of land, a restructuring of the tax system, and a public system bolstered by significant state support.<sup>25</sup>

At the start of the Constitutional Convention in late 1867, men who did not adhere to Republican values and who disagreed with the charge of the Convention established the Conservative party. The Conservative party consisted of former Whigs who did not support the Republicans and Virginia's antebellum Democrats who were not barred from voting by federal law. A large proportion of Conservative members had been active politically as Whigs, while others were lawyers with ties to banks, railroads, and other industries. Men who had held high-ranking positions within the Confederate government

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<sup>25</sup> Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, 97. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 173. Jane Elizabeth Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 19.

were not legally allowed to hold office at this time, but their sympathies lay with the Conservative party. The main charge of this party was to preserve elite white leadership throughout the state and to boost the economy. In order to make sure Virginia would return to the Union with Conservatives in control, the Conservative party attempted to cultivate support to a wide range of voters—including Black voters. At the same time that Conservatives were widening their voter base, there was a rift in the Republican party and some Republicans left to join the Conservatives. Together, local committees representing this new Conservative coalition held meetings to attract new voters and supported some less reform-minded Black Virginians to run on the Conservative ticket for open seats in the legislature.<sup>26</sup>

Despite appealing to Black voters and supporting some Black candidates for political office, white Conservatives worked to reestablish white supremacy. According to a reporter for Richmond's Conservative *Daily Dispatch*, there was a sense among white Conservatives that it was the responsibility of "real white men" to ensure that the new state constitution would not have any hidden "dangers"—meaning that Radical Republicans would not be successful in pushing through components of their agenda, particularly universal manhood suffrage. In the same column, this reporter explained that some Conservatives felt that they had "negro suffrage and negro dominion" forced upon them in the two years following the end of the war. These white Conservatives did not

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<sup>26</sup> Brent Tarter, *A Saga of the New South: Race, Law, and Public Debt in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 19. Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 19. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 177. Louis Moore, "The Elusive Center: Virginia Politics and the General Assembly, 1869-1871," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 103, no. 2 (Apr. 1995): 212. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 278.

want Radical Republicans to persuade the “negroes and black-white men” to create a constitution in line with their Radical policies. A sympathetic white journalist urged white Conservatives to remain steadfast to their principles, and said that “if Virginia is to perish, let her stand like the Roman sentinel—a monument of devotion to a principle—rather than fall like a slave in ignominious flight from a danger.” The main goal of white Conservatives was, according to one reporter, to form “a white man’s party.”<sup>27</sup>

The Virginia Constitutional Convention met for the first time on 3 December 1867 in the Capitol at Richmond. Out of the ninety-seven delegates, seventy-nine members were white, twenty of whom moved to Virginia after 1860 from non-Confederate states, and twenty members were Black. John Underwood was elected to lead the proceedings. Underwood was a Lincoln-appointed federal judge, antislavery advocate, and active in the Republican party. Born in New York in 1809, Underwood moved to Virginia in the early 1850s. Underwood ensured Republicans controlled the Convention by choosing a disproportionate number of whites from outside Virginia and the former Confederate states to participate in and lead the standing committees. He believed that the most fundamental principles the new constitution should ensure were “universal suffrage and universal education.” Underwood was one of the five Republicans representing Richmond in the Convention; the other four included James Morrissey, James Hunnicutt, Lewis Lindsay, and Joseph Cox.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “The Constitutional Convention,” *Staunton Spectator*, 12 November 1867. “Our Norfolk Letter. Correspondence of the Richmond Dispatch. Thanksgiving Conservative Ward Meetings...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 30 November 1867. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 278.

<sup>28</sup> Richard L. Hume, “The Membership of the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1867-1868: A Study of the Beginnings of Congressional Reconstruction in the Upper South,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 86, no. 4 (Oct. 1978): 463-464. Brent Tarter, “Underwood, John C. (1809-1873),” *Encyclopedia*

James Hunnicutt was another prominent Republican who pursued a Radical agenda and was recognized for doing so by the Black community. Hunnicutt, born in 1814 in South Carolina, was a white pro-slavery minister and newspaper publisher in the antebellum era. He did not want the South to secede from the Union and rightly believed slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War. Hunnicutt's political opinions changed and he became anti-slavery and pro-Black rights following the South's secession. During the Constitutional Convention, Hunnicutt served as the chair of the Committee on the Elective Franchise and Qualifications for Office and was a member of the Committee on Agricultural and Industrial Interests and Immigration. Hunnicutt championed universal male suffrage, although he did not want to grant the franchise to Confederates who had previously worked for the Confederate government. Conservative whites feared Hunnicutt's influence over other Radical Republicans and Black Virginians. After giving a speech in September 1867 in which he allegedly told the Black men and women in a crowd of supporters to "apply the torch to the dwellings of your enemies" he was arrested, with his warrant citing that he "intended to incite the colored population to make insurrection by violence and war upon the white population, and thus disturb the public peace."<sup>29</sup>

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*Virginia*, 12 February 2021: <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/underwood-john-c-1809-1873/>. "Underwood Writes to 'Old Rye,'" *Daily Dispatch*, 19 January 1869. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 176. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 280.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew S. Gottlieb, "Hunnicutt, James W. (1814-1880)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 12 February 2021: <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/hunnicutt-james-w-1814-1880/>. "From Richmond—Arrest of Hunnicutt—Convention, &c.," *Alexandria Gazette*, 30 November 1867. "An Ohio Radical in Richmond—What He Saw and Heard—What He Thinks of Underwood, Hunnicutt, and the Convention," *Daily Dispatch*, 19 March 1868. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 173.

Lewis Lindsey and James Cox were two Radical Republicans who advocated for the rights of Black Virginians throughout Reconstruction and the Constitutional Convention. Born enslaved in 1843, Lindsey learned to read and write when he began working at a seminary in his adolescence. He vacillated between calling for mutual respect between white and Black people and defending the use of violence when necessary to achieve racial equality. During the Convention Lindsey aligned himself with other Radical Republicans, including Hunnicutt, Cox, and Underwood. James Cox was born in the mid-1830s in Powhatan County, Virginia, and became a leader in Richmond's Black community during Reconstruction. Together with Hunnicutt and other Radical Republicans, Cox petitioned Congress to remove obstacles that were hindering a successful reconstruction of the state. They noted that white men and former enslavers were intimidating and oppressing Black Virginians, and called for the removal of state government officials who were not loyal to the Union. During the Constitutional Convention, Cox was a member of the Committees on the Legislative Department and on County and Corporation Courts and County Organizations, and the Committee on Finance. Cox introduced four resolutions to the Convention that supported Radical Republican measures for universal manhood suffrage.<sup>30</sup>

One of the many tactics contemporary critics used to discredit Republican politicians including Hunnicutt, Lindsey, and Cox, was to cast doubt on their intelligence.

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<sup>30</sup> Philip W. Stanley, "Lindsey, Lewis (1843-1908)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 12 February 2021: <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lindsey-lewis-1843-1908/>. "Telegraphic News. News from the Capitol," *Daily Dispatch*, 21 December 1867. William Bland Whitley, "Cox, Joseph (ca. 1835-1880)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 12 February 2021: <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/cox-joseph-ca-1835-1880/>.



At Lindsey's request, members appointed a stenographer to record the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention. A writer for the *Daily Dispatch* noted that the stenographer "seems to have labored hard to make decent speeches for the negroes" and commented: "Imagine Lindsay using such words as 'chivalric disposition' and 'immediate sanction'!" When describing the room in the Capitol where the Convention took place, one reporter observed books and papers on the desks of the Black members, but doubted their literacy abilities, saying: "I thought I saw one of [the Black delegates] actually writing; but upon closer observation I found him practicing Pot-Hooks and Hangers." White Republicans were not immune to being the subject of these disparaging comments, with one writer stating they have "little more intelligence than the negroes, and have doubtless come from the lowest ranks of the people."<sup>31</sup>

Some hostile white journalists also sought to delegitimize the proceedings by casting doubt on the mental health and well-being of Black delegates to the Convention. One writer for the *Daily Dispatch* believed that Lindsey was not used to earning \$6 to \$8 per day, and that was "more than he can afford to keep sober on." Another tactic journalists used was to conjecture as to the previous employment of some of the Black Convention members, and specifically call out their former enslavement. One writer believed that Lindsey was most likely "a good ox driver in days gone by." "At least twenty" of the Radical Republicans in the Convention had allegedly been tried for larceny, several of them sentenced to the penitentiary and at least a dozen of them

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<sup>31</sup> "The Debates in the Convention as Reported," *Daily Dispatch*, 13 January 1868. "A Picture of the Radical Convention. By a Neighboring Artist," *Native Virginian*, 3 January 1868. "Richmond Correspondence," *Staunton Spectator*, 28 January 1868.

publicly whipped. These hyperbolic statements not only discredited the reputation of the delegates but also made these men out to be unfit to participate in such a significant proceeding.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the efforts of Conservative critics to discredit Republican Convention members, the newly-created Virginia Constitution aligned with Republican values. Black men were granted the franchise, as were white men who were not restricted by federal Reconstruction laws. The new constitution required former Confederates who wanted to hold public office to swear that they never voluntarily aided the Confederacy. Many whites wanted public schools that would be open to both Black and white children to be segregated by race, but this measure was defeated and local officials were given the remit of deciding whether their schools would be divided. It looked as though the coalition of white and Black Republicans accomplished its goals of enacting progressive legislative reform.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the seemingly progressive constitution that the Convention created, there were several ambiguities that allowed for white men in power to chip away at Black people's political and social gains. While the constitution called for the creation of public schools, the General Assembly was given the power to organize and fund those schools. Additionally, the local officials who were to decide whether schools should be segregated were likely to be white and in favor of racial separation. Despite the constitution granting

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<sup>32</sup> "Lewis Lindsey Holds High Carnival For a Little While, and Barely Escapes the Calaboose," *Daily Dispatch*, 5 December 1867. "A Picture of the Radical Convention. By a Neighboring Artist," *Native Virginian*, 3 January 1868.

<sup>33</sup> Hume, "The Membership of the Virginia Constitutional Convention," 465, 467-469. Tarter, *A Saga of the New South*, 19. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 280-282.

universal male suffrage, the General Assembly was permitted to establish voter registration laws.<sup>34</sup>

After the Constitutional Convention ended in April 1868, and under pressure from white southerners in the federal government, Congress decreed that the Freedmen's Bureau would withdraw its agents from the commonwealth. With the exception of educational initiatives, all other services the Freedmen's Bureau provided would be discontinued by the start of the new year. By the time of its closure, the Freedmen's Bureau had spent over \$3,000,000 on food and clothing. Schofield directed the county and civil authorities to take over providing relief to those who required it, but those authorities had the power to refuse to provide those services to non-residents.<sup>35</sup>

In Richmond, some of the relief that the Freedmen's Bureau had originally provided shifted to the reluctant and unwilling City Council. After the insistent urging of Freedmen's Bureau officials, the Richmond City Council finally began providing relief for Black Richmonders in January 1869, almost four years after the war's end. Richmond City Council officials maintained that Black women and men from outside the city were not their responsibility; they argued that it was the duty of the towns and localities from which they had originated to provide the needed assistance. At the start of the new year the City Council began providing free medical care at the Medical College and the Freedmen's Bureau soup house was reopened under the auspices of the city.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Moore, "The Elusive Center," 215. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 283-284.

<sup>35</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 89. Green, *This Business of Relief*, 91. "Affairs in Virginia," *Alexandria Gazette*, 23 August 1867.

<sup>36</sup> Chesson, *Richmond After the War*, 95.

By 1869, Virginia and Tennessee were the two states in which southern Conservatives had regained political control. Conservatives had achieved this feat through their strategy of supporting the re-enfranchisement of former Confederates rather than outright opposing Black suffrage. Once elected to the presidency, Ulysses Grant called for a popular vote on the Virginia state constitution and put the disenfranchisement clause, which would have barred former Confederates from voting, up for a separate vote. While Virginians did not approve the disenfranchisement clause, they did ratify the new constitution, and Virginia was on its way to being readmitted to the Union.<sup>37</sup>

A gubernatorial election was held later in 1869 in Virginia. Republicans nominated the incumbent Henry G. Wells, a former Union general. Schofield had appointed Wells to serve as the governor of Virginia from April 1868 until September 1869, and during his tenure Black people were excluded from juries and from holding local political positions. Conservatives, whose strategy was to unite Conservatives and moderate Republicans in order to regain political control, nominated Gilbert C. Walker. Walker had moved to Virginia in 1864 and originally hailed from Pennsylvania and New York, and was involved in the banking, railroad, and manufacturing industries. Walker won the gubernatorial election with a significant margin, and the new coalition of Conservatives and moderate Republicans were elected to the legislature.<sup>38</sup>

Once elected, the coalition of Conservatives and moderates fractured and a new coalition of Conservatives, dominated by former Confederates, scaled back the political

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<sup>37</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 412-413, 421.

<sup>38</sup> Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 27-28. Tarter, *A Saga of the New South*, 20. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 412-413, 421. Tarter, *Virginians and Their Histories*, 284.

gains for which Black Virginians had fought so hard. Black people who could not pay poll taxes or had been convicted of petty larceny were banned from the franchise, and the number of polling places in predominantly Black locales were reduced. Conservatives gerrymandered cities in order to ensure their party retained power and gave the legislature power to appoint local governments. In Richmond, the Black vote was confined to the neighborhood of Jackson Ward. The interests of Black Virginians went unrepresented for the remainder of the 1870s.<sup>39</sup>

In the Virginia House of Delegates, Conservatives chipped away at the political advances Black Virginians had been instrumental in creating in order to re-establish themselves as the white man's party. They actively struck down measures supported by Republicans, including a civil rights bill that would have guaranteed equal civil and political rights to all Virginians; a bill that would prevent discrimination in the state militia and in the selection process for local school officials; and a bill that would have ended the use of chain gangs and whipping as punishment. Conservatives passed legislation that would require mandatory work on public roads—which Republicans feared would be used to force Black people into labor—and centralized control of the public school system, which ensured that Black people would have less control over their schools in their localities. By 1873 there were three times as many Conservatives in the General Assembly as there were Republicans, and Conservatives continued to strip Black Virginians of their rights. Conservatives abolished one-third of local political offices, which centralized political control; redrew election district boundaries to make it more

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<sup>39</sup> Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 36. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 422. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, 35.

difficult for Black Virginians to hold political office; and Conservatives barred anyone from voting who had been punished by whipping, a sentence most used for petty larceny convictions.<sup>40</sup>

Reconstruction in Virginia and throughout the South was an unprecedented time of change and uncertainty. Black Virginians exerted agency by contracting out their labor but white employers and former enslavers continued to maintain the upper hand, though they did make begrudging concessions in terms of compensation and rations. In the realm of politics, Black Virginians made significant contributions to the creation of a new state constitution, but the Conservative press published derogatory accounts of delegates to discredit their personal and professional reputations and cast doubt on the proceedings of the Convention. Ultimately, the dreams of Reconstruction—the hopes that Black Virginians had for political, social, economic, and racial equality—were never fully realized. It is in this transitory state—when a new state constitution had just been approved, a relief agency was briefly helpful and then disbanded, and economic conditions were regressing to their pre-war state—that the Capitol disaster, James River flood, and Spotswood hotel fire took place.

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<sup>40</sup> Moore, “The Elusive Center,” 217-219. Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 36-37.

## CHAPTER TWO: A “CITY OF DISASTERS”: RICHMOND IN 1870

At the end of 1870, a journalist for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* painted a bleak picture of Richmond, calling it the “city of disasters.” A set of “melancholy circumstances” had resulted in “losses of life and property that cast shadows, dreary indeed, over the entire city.” The melancholy circumstances the writer alluded to were the Capitol collapse, the James River flood, and the Spotswood Hotel fire. A total of seventy-one people had died from disasters that occurred in the capital of Virginia that year. The year began with a violent conflict over Reconstruction policies and their effects on local governmental authority and ended with a group of incarcerated laborers sifting through the debris of the Spotswood Hotel, looking for human remains.<sup>1</sup>

The three disasters that struck Richmond in 1870 were different in their form and in the public's response to them. Only the James River flood could be considered a so-called natural disaster, but it was the only calamity that did not result in any loss of life in Richmond—although other Virginians were less fortunate. The Spotswood Hotel fire killed eight people, and sixty-two people died in the collapse at the Capitol building. The Capitol disaster killed only white men, including some with significant political and social standing, while the fatalities of the Spotswood Hotel fire and those affected by the flood were more diverse in terms of race and socioeconomic status. The Capitol collapse occurred suddenly, without warning, and was more or less unprecedented in the history

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<sup>1</sup> “Burning of the Spotswood Hotel, Richmond, Va.,” *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 January 1871.

of the city. The James River rose each year and flooding occurred fairly often, which made the 1870 flood less unexpected. Fires in urban locales were incredibly common in the mid-nineteenth century. The Capitol disaster received the most newspaper coverage in the local press and in newspapers published throughout America. This comparative newsworthiness can be attributed to the people who died—many well-known white men—and the relatively unique circumstances in which they lost their lives.

Newspapers published in Richmond and throughout the state provide insight into how Richmonders and Virginians understood and made sense of these events. Richmond papers like the Conservative *Daily Dispatch* reported on the disasters, as did the Republican *Richmond Daily Whig*. Readers in smaller locales throughout the commonwealth like the towns of Goodson and Fincastle read of the news in their local papers—*Bristol News* and *Virginia Herald*, respectively. These papers described the calamities, reported on the status of the wounded and printed obituaries for the dead, listed the total costs of damages to businesses and commercial centers, and their journalists wrote sometimes florid accounts of the scenes of disaster and the reactions of bystanders and affected families.

In the days and weeks immediately succeeding each calamity, Richmonders reacted to and processed the disasters in ways that were fairly typical of the era given the circumstances of the disasters, the number of fatalities, and the time period in which they occurred. Following the Capitol disaster, journalists and eyewitnesses reflected on the accomplishments of the important Virginians who died, while the victims of the fire—who did not have the same political or social cachet—had comparatively smaller and less



laudatory obituaries. The Capitol disaster specifically compelled Richmonders to reflect on the history of disasters in their city because of the unprecedented nature of the calamity and the number of people who died. Many recalled the Richmond theater fire of 1811 and the more recent memories of the Civil War when trying to contextualize the Capitol collapse. Local publications also made a concerted and potentially hyperbolic effort to describe Richmonders as setting aside their political and racial differences in the wake of the Capitol disaster. In order to make sense of the disasters, many people looked to religion. Some viewed the catastrophic events as providential judgement of a god displeased with the city's inhabitants. Others looked for more rational and scientific explanations of the disasters.

Between January 1870 and the first disaster of the year at the end of April, Richmond and its inhabitants were still grappling with the political and social changes of Reconstruction and the state's readmission to the Union. The Virginia General Assembly passed the Enabling Act in March 1870 that allowed Governor Gilbert Walker, a conservative New York Republican—which made him acceptable to Richmond Democrats—to fill vacant positions in local government and remove elected officials or appointees at will. Walker appointed a new city council, and members of the council then selected the Conservative Henry Ellyson to serve as mayor along with a new police chief. George Chahoon, the militarily-appointed Republican mayor, together with his Black and white supporters, refused to give up their positions. Chahoon's chief of police and the rest of the police force refused to surrender their guns and badges. After a series of violent skirmishes, in which a Chahoon supporter and an Ellyson supporter died, Chahoon and

Ellyson took their conflict to the courts. On 20 April, after both sides argued for or against the legality of the Enabling Act, the Virginia Court of Appeals began their deliberations.<sup>2</sup>

On 27 April 1870, a crowd gathered at the Capitol building to hear the verdict in the contested mayoral case between Chahoon and Ellyson. Approximately three hundred attorneys, journalists, and interested members of the public filled the courtroom. At eleven o'clock, the crowd waited for the judges to deliver their decision. Inside the courtroom, the inhabitants heard two loud explosions one after another, and almost instantaneously the floor of the courtroom collapsed and fell into the House of the Hall of Delegates, which was located on the floor beneath the courtroom. The gallery holding spectators gave way, as did the ceiling of the building. There had been no time for escape, and the occupants of the courtroom plunged twenty-five feet and were covered with debris. Those who survived the collapse cried out for help and bells in the city began ringing to summon assistance.<sup>3</sup>

Rescue efforts following the Capitol disaster began almost immediately, and firemen and volunteers worked to save the injured and dying. A few spectators were loitering near Capitol Square when the collapse occurred, and witnessed clouds of dust pouring out of the windows. They believed that one of the building's boilers had

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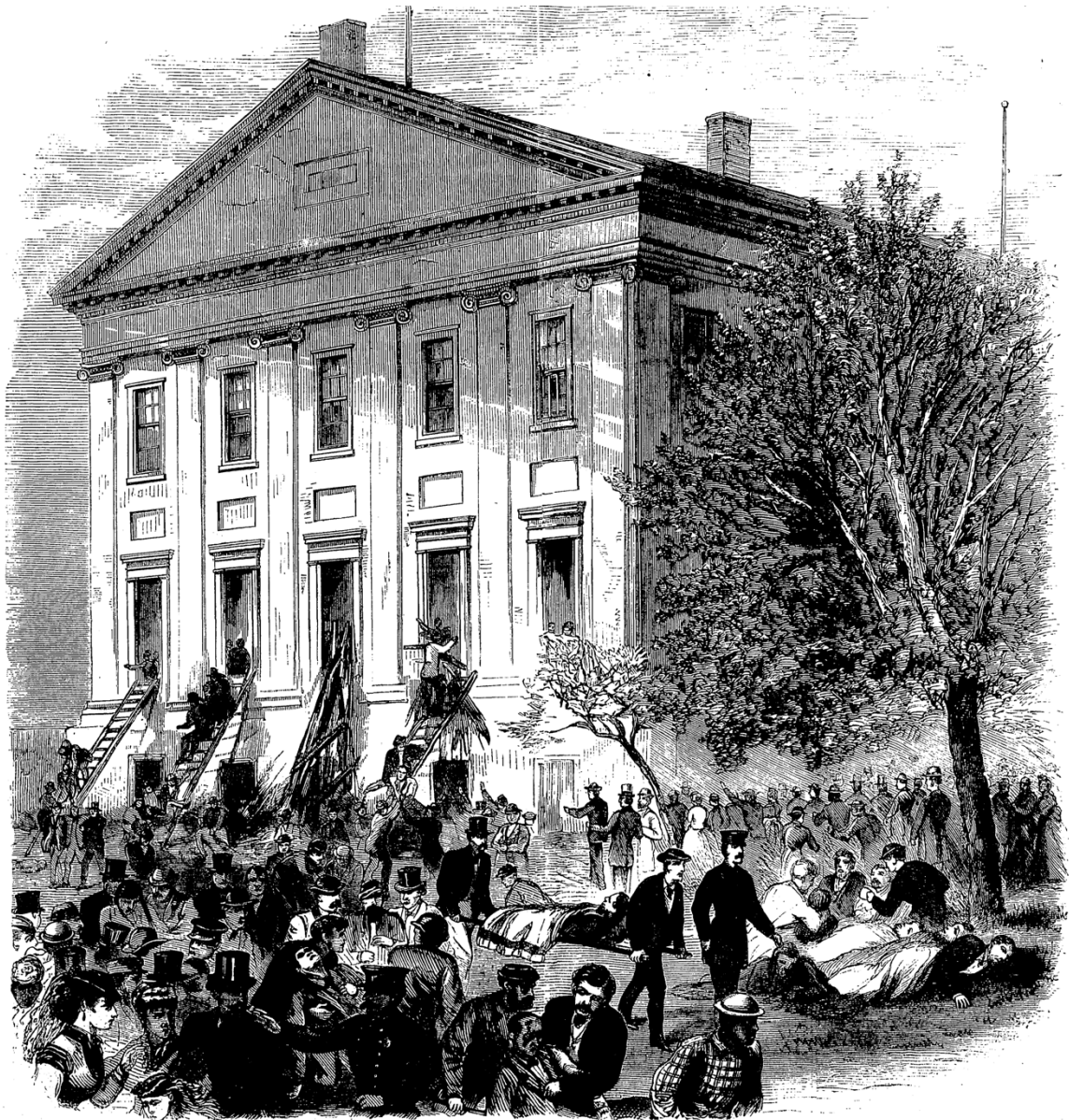
<sup>2</sup> Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 177-178. "The Municipal War," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 5 April 1870. George Chahoon, Mayor 1870, page 2, George Chahoon Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870. Accounts differ as to the exact course of events. Some publications stated that the gallery collapsed first, which then led to the floor of the courtroom collapsing. See: George L. Christian, *The Capitol Disaster: A Chapter of Reconstruction in Virginia* (Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., 1915), 28. "The Richmond Calamity," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 May 1870.

exploded. Bystander W. H. Grant went to the bell house on Ninth Street and sounded the alarm. The hook and ladder company arrived on the scene and began setting up their ladders in order to gain entry to the Hall of Delegates and render assistance. Firemen followed and helped the ladder company to extricate those stuck in the debris. Concerned Richmonders and members of the legislature joined the rescuers in their efforts. Together these men worked to remove the wounded and dead from inside the building. Policemen guarded the building entrances in order to ensure the rescue workers were not hindered in their work. Physicians and surgeons came to the scene, and they briefly turned the Senate chamber into a makeshift hospital. Rescuers took many of the bodies of the dead and wounded outside to the nearby Capitol Square. Once identified, the victims were transported to the Medical College or to their homes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “Richmond Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court Room in the Capitol Breaks Through. A Large Number of Citizens Killed or Wounded...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “The Calamity of Yesterday,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870.



VIRGINIA.—THE TERRIBLE CALAMITY AT THE STATE CAPITOL, CITY OF RICHMOND, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 1870.—EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE BUILDING—BRINGING OUT THE WOUNDED, THE DYING AND THE DEAD.—FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY E. S. LUMPKIN.—SEE PAGE 134.

**Figure 1. Chaos outside the Capitol**

This sketch shows the ongoing work to rescue men trapped inside the Capitol and spectators attending to wounded and dying men. This sketch includes a well-dressed, presumably upper-class, white woman watching the spectacle (lower left), and a Black man assisting a white man in removing an injured victim away from the scene (bottom center), demonstrating that the collapse attracted a variety of Richmonders to the scene of the calamity, and that white and Black communities potentially worked together in the immediate aftermath. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870.

Of the sixty-two fatalities of the Capitol disaster, four were Black and the

remainder were white. The deceased included state legislators, lawyers, merchants, pharmacists, journalists, clerks, millers, teachers, carpenters, policemen, ministers, and bankers. The majority of the men's death certificates vaguely listed cause of death as "injuries received at the Capitol." Most of the casualties died from suffocation, as they were trapped under rubble and inhaled vast amounts of dust, but others died from contusions or bodily injuries. In addition to the sixty-two dead, at least 125 were wounded. There was only one woman in the building at the time of the disaster, Miss Frothingham from Brooklyn. Walker Oliver, a Black porter, was leading Frothingham and her escort on a tour of the building when the collapse occurred, which destroyed the stairway they had used to access an upper floor. Governor Walker, who was at the Capitol to hear the verdict in the mayoral case and escaped the scene of the disaster, managed to save the trio.<sup>5</sup>

Several well-known Virginians were among those who lost their lives when the Capitol collapsed. Patrick Henry Aylett, a great grandson of Patrick Henry, was a lawyer in Richmond. During the Civil War he served the Confederacy as Assistant Attorney General, and during Reconstruction he edited the Richmond-based newspapers the *Times* and the *Enquirer*. Joseph Brock was a physician who had spent Reconstruction reporting for the *Enquirer*, and when the paper changed titles, the *Examiner*. The Chief of the Richmond fire department, William Charters, was counted among the dead, as was former Richmond city assessor Edward Schofield. James Bland, a Black senator for

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<sup>5</sup> Richmond (City) Department of Health Death Certificates, 1870-1902, microfilm, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond. "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870.

Charlotte and Prince Edward counties, who served in the Virginia Constitutional Convention, died during the collapse.<sup>6</sup>

In the days immediately following the disaster, Richmond ceased its typical operations. Businesses closed and placed mourning crape on their doors, and funeral processions crowded the city streets. Families and friends of the dead, together with many grieving Richmonders, filled Richmond's houses of worship. On 28 April, a meeting attended by many Richmonders took place in Capitol Square and attendees adopted resolutions to honor the memory of the dead. Governor Walker designated 4 May as a day of prayer and religious services, and cities and towns throughout the commonwealth followed suit. Inhabitants in nearby cities such as Petersburg and Fredericksburg closed their businesses and spent part of the day in church. In the months afterwards, Richmonders established a local relief committee and sought charitable donations of Americans throughout the country to support the widowed and needy and rebuild the Capitol.<sup>7</sup>

Five months later, Richmonders experienced a second disaster. Heavy rain began falling in Richmond on 30 September, as a large storm moved east from the Shenandoah Valley. Richmonders had received warning via telegram on 29 September of the rising James River and reports of great destruction of property in Lynchburg. Some residents

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<sup>6</sup> "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870. "The Richmond Calamity," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 May 1870.

<sup>7</sup> "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870. "Richmond Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court Room in the Capitol Breaks Through. A Large Number of Citizens Killed or Wounded..." *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. "The News," *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. "Humiliation and Prayer. Memorial Exercises Wednesday. Solemn Observance of the Day In Petersburg..." *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870. "Home Department. To the Citizens of Harrisonburg," *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870.

prepared for the oncoming deluge by moving their belongings out of harm's way. Forty-two incarcerated men removed a portion of the tobacco from Mayo's warehouse, lumber merchants took precautions, and some residents living in Rocketts—the lowest part of the city and therefore the neighborhood most at risk of flooding—were prepared to move when necessary. The rain continued unabated for three days in the city and caused significant but short-lived damage to property, goods, and local businesses.<sup>8</sup>

On 1 October, a great wave of water—measuring twenty-three feet above the standard level of the river—surged from the James and destroyed trees, lumber, flour barrels, haystacks, animals, and homes. One portion of the city, Rocketts, was flooding significantly, and residents of that part of Richmond attempted to remove their families and possessions from their homes before the floodwaters completely overtook the area. On Main Street, the water was so high that it was entering street cars passing through the downtown area. The water finally crested by ten o'clock in the evening of 1 October. Twelve hours later, the floodwaters had fallen by four feet and continued to recede throughout the afternoon of 2 October. By the evening of 2 October, the previously flooded portions of Main and Franklin streets were passable by pedestrians and vehicles.<sup>9</sup>

The residents of Rocketts, one of Richmond's poorest neighborhoods and home to

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<sup>8</sup> "The Rising James. The Fresh Reaches Richmond—Rapid Rise of the Water...", *Daily Dispatch*, 1 October 1870. "The Great Flood at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 22 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded...", *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The Flood," *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The Great Flood. Fearful Freshet in James River. Immense Destruction of Property," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 3 October 1870.

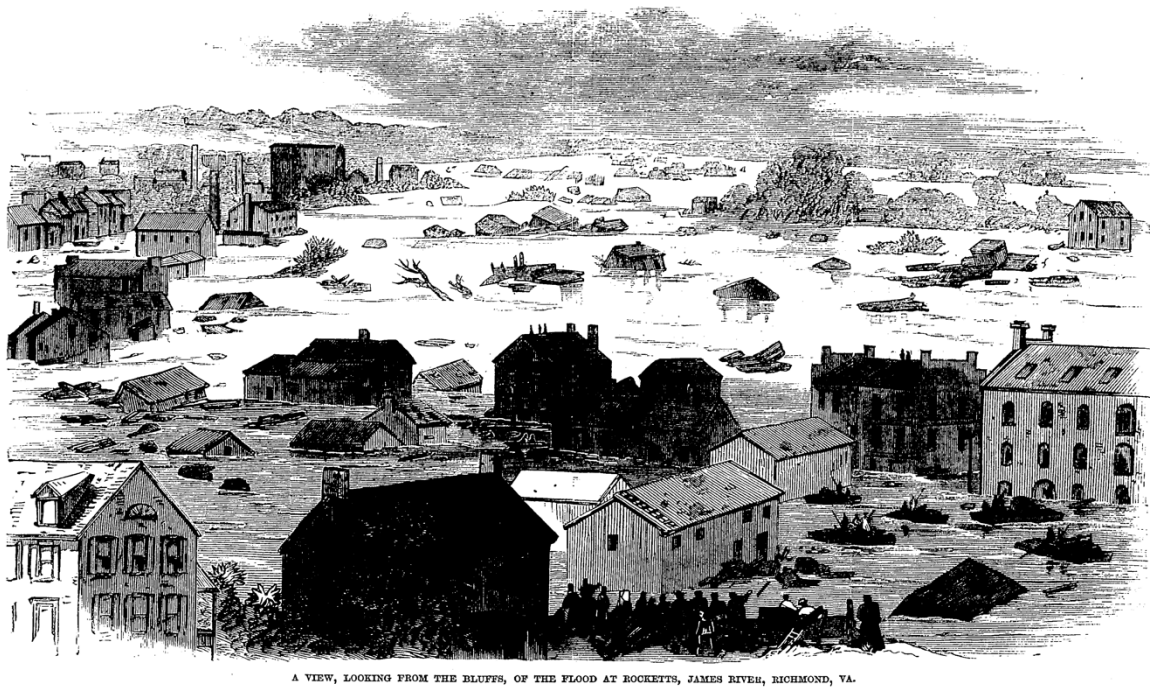
<sup>9</sup> "The Great Flood at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 22 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded...", *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The Flood," *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The Great Flood. Fearful Freshet in James River. Immense Destruction of Property," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 3 October 1870. Paula F. Green, *The Great Virginia Flood of 1870* (Charleston: The History Press, 2020), 121.

sizeable Black and immigrant communities, sustained the most damage from the deluge. While some stayed in their homes, other inhabitants evacuated to higher land before the water overtook their neighborhood. For those who remained, they became trapped in their dwellings by the rising waters. Eventually they moved to the highest floors of their homes, and some were forced to escape out of their attics. Many houses were torn apart or totally destroyed, while the floodwaters encroached on the second floor of other dwellings in the area. In certain parts of the neighborhood, only the roofs of steamboat sheds were visible because of the significant heights the James River reached. Piles of driftwood and debris were everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The Great Flood at Richmond, Va.,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 22 October 1870. “Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. “The Great Flood. Fearful Freshet in James River. Immense Destruction of Property,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 3 October 1870.





**Figure 2. Devastation in Rocketts**

This sketch reveals the extent of the damage the deluge caused to the Rocketts neighborhood. Debris are floating in the high floodwaters, and many homes are partially or almost completely submerged. People crowded into boats (lower right) in attempts to reach dry land. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 22 October 1870.

While no one in Richmond died as a result of the 1870 flood, the disaster damaged property and briefly disrupted Richmond's commercial activity. The deluge destroyed Mayo's bridge, which connected Manchester—a small commercial city to the immediate south of Richmond—to the capital. Sailors anchored a schooner in front of the St. Charles Hotel in the center of the city, where the water was four or five feet deep. Docks, sheds, and storehouses—including some belonging to the York River Railroad—on the banks of the river were either damaged or completely submerged. Floodwaters damaged various businesses throughout the city, including H.W. Tyler's feed store, Frederick Miller's toy and confectionary store, grocery stores, a pharmacy, a harness

shop, Southern Fertilizing Company's warehouse, Gill's mechanic shop, Morriss's sugar refinery, a barrel factory, and portions of the Virginia Steamship and Packet Company's work sheds.<sup>11</sup>

The flood disrupted Richmond's supplies of gas and water for a few days. Because no previous flood had ever affected the gas works, the superintendent did not expect the rain to cause serious damage; however, workers had to abandon the gas works when floodwaters began encroaching on the property. The majority of Richmonders could not use gas to light their homes on the evenings of 1 or 2 October. By the evening of 5 October, the gas works was fully functional. Similarly, the city's water supply sustained damage but recovered quickly. In the pump house of Richmond's water works, floodwaters rose four and a half feet above the pump floor, which was unprecedented. Newspaper writers warned residents to conserve water, as the reservoir only had a five-day supply. According to the *Daily Dispatch*, the initial estimate for repairs was not likely to exceed \$5,000. That estimate was grossly exaggerated, because by ten o'clock in the morning on 3 October, the water works had resumed working. By nightfall that same day, the entirety of the works was functioning as it had prior to the flood.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "The Great Flood at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 22 October 1870. "The Flood in Virginia," *Harper's Weekly*, 22 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded..." *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The Great Flood. Fearful Freshet in James River. Immense Destruction of Property," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 3 October 1870. Green, *The Great Virginia Flood of 1870*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> "Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded..." *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "The City Gas—Extent of the Damage—Light To-Morrow Night," *Daily Dispatch*, 4 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded..." *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Flood Fallen. Damages Sustained by Business Houses..." *Daily Dispatch*, 4 October 1870. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Inflation calculator, \$5,000 in January 1913 (the earliest date available) equals \$137,344.39 in May 2021. See: [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).

Just as with the water works, new reports overestimated the damage the flood caused throughout the city. On 4 October, the *Daily Dispatch* estimated that total losses from the flood were \$500,000. Luckily, the deluge did not harm the majority of the agricultural staples, and although the corn crop was the only staple seriously affected, most of that grain was still fit for use. At Tredegar Iron Works, most of the damage consisted of rusted tools. Workers at the iron works cleared away the mud and, as soon as water power was restored, resumed work. Haxall, Crenshaw, and Company's mills were hardly affected. Work at the steam forge and rolling mill, where the deluge caused about \$1,000 in damages, was set to resume on or before 11 October. Floodwaters barely damaged machinery at Morriss's sugar refinery, and employees removed almost all of the bags of salt stored in Myers's warehouse prior to the deluge. Businessman S.C. Tardy had \$50,000 worth of goods in his warehouse, but as soon as he heard of the storm coming from Lynchburg, secured his wares and did not lose anything. The owners of Mayo's bridge lost \$30,000 when floodwaters destroyed the bridge, but planned on erecting another bridge for the cost of \$60,000.<sup>13</sup>

Richmond's third and final disaster of 1870 occurred just before the start of the new year. On 25 December at two o'clock in the morning, the night porter noticed smoke coming out of the pantry of the Spotswood Hotel. Once occupants of the five-floor hotel became aware of the fire, they attempted to exit the building, crowding the passageways and exits. The doors opened inwards, so the throng of people could not escape until they

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<sup>13</sup> "Damage to Crops," *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. "Local Matters. The Flood Fallen. Damages Sustained by Business Houses....," *Daily Dispatch*, 4 October 1870. Newspaper accounts did not detail whether the people or businesses affected by the flood had insurance.

made room to accommodate the doors. Some residents attempted to save their baggage and belongings, and others fled into the streets in their nightclothes. Firefighters soon appeared on the scene, but because the water inside their steam engines was frozen—it was a frigid night—it took several minutes for the rescue apparatus to function.<sup>14</sup>

Twenty minutes after the night watchman discovered the fire, the flames had spread so far that no one could escape via the staircase. Many of those trapped inside resorted to jumping out of windows to escape the conflagration. Emily Cornelius, the hotel's housekeeper, and two other women screamed for help from a fifth-floor window. Firefighters attempted to rescue them, but their ladders were too short. By the time the firefighters had extended their ladders, the women had died. The hotel steward, P. P. Clark, died after jumping from his third-floor window. Onlookers noticed another occupant of the hotel in an upper floor who, immobilized with fear, perished in the flames. For those who managed to escape, male spectators offered women and children their coats and shoes. Before firefighters could contain the conflagration, flames had consumed the entire block with the exception of the corner store.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately the fire claimed the lives of eight people. Samuel Hines, originally from North Carolina, had lived in Richmond for several years prior to his death, and was a well-known dry goods merchant. E.W. Ross was a thirty-year-old clerk living in

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<sup>14</sup> "Burning of the Spotswood Hotel, Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 January 1871. "Burning of the Spottswood House," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 January 1871. While the fire occurred on Christmas day, the vast majority of newspaper reports did not reflect upon this coincidence. This is fairly surprising given the importance of the holiday by the 1870s, but the frequency of fires in winter months might, at least partially, account for this oversight.

<sup>15</sup> "Burning of the Spotswood Hotel, Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 January 1871. "Burning of the Spottswood House," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 January 1871. "Local Matters. Our Last Disaster. Among the Ruins..." *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870.

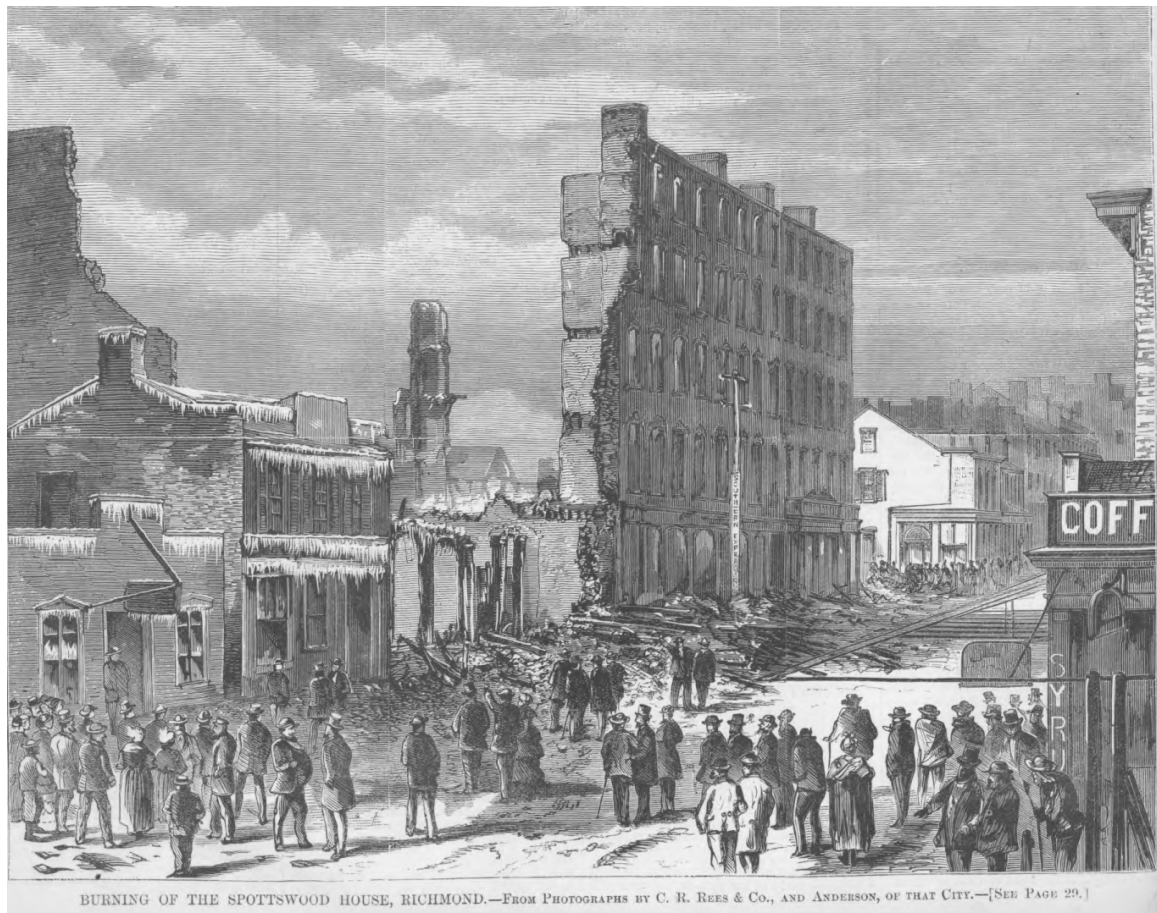
Richmond. Samuel M. Robinson was a cigar salesman in the city. Emily Kennealy, the Spotswood's housekeeper, was originally from Baltimore but had lived in Richmond for five years before her death. John H. Holman from Jackson, Tennessee, a twenty-eight-year-old businessman, was in Richmond to spend the holidays with his sister. H. A. Thomas arrived in the city about a week before the fire as part of his job as a travelling agent for Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress's panorama. For the survivors who lost money in the fire, some merchants in Richmond told the sufferers they would supply necessary staples at their stores free of charge. There was one dry goods merchant who reportedly refused to allow one sufferer to purchase any items on credit.<sup>16</sup>

Policemen stood guard at the smoldering ruins for at least three days following the fire to keep order and stop any curious onlookers from going through the detritus. On 31 December the ruins were hosed down again, and a group of incarcerated laborers, under the supervision of members of the Masons and Knights of Pythias fraternal organizations and Captain W. C. Wilkinson, began the process of sifting through the ruins and searching for the bodies of the dead. The group of men found the bodies of Samuel Hines and W. H. Pace. On 1 January the walls of the hotel that were still standing were pulled down. By 16 January there were thirty-five laborers working to clear the remains of the Spotswood Hotel.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Local Matters. Our Last Disaster. Among the Ruins...", *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870. "Disastrous Fire in the Heart of the City. The Spotswood Hotel in Ashes. At Least Seven Lives Lost..." *Daily Dispatch*, 26 December 1870. I have not found a complete published list of the dead. The remaining two victims were either A. Leib, from Tampa; E. George and E. H. Andrews, from Syracuse; and Henry Kroth, from New York.

<sup>17</sup> "Local Matters. Our Last Disaster. Among the Ruins...", *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870. "Recovery of the Remains of Captain Hines," *Daily Dispatch*, 3 January 1871. "Police Court, Monday," *Daily*



**Figure 3. Spottwood Hotel ruins**

Even after the fire was extinguished, spectators continued to visit the ruins of the hotel. *Harper's Weekly*, 14 January 1871.

The fire proved to be a fairly costly disaster for the city, but some businesses were able to recover quickly, especially if they sustained relatively little damage or if they were insured. The insurance industry was both a product and component of capitalism in the nineteenth century. In Richmond, fire insurance was first available in the mid-1790s

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*Dispatch*, 10 January 1871. "Recovery of the Remains of W.H. Pace," *Daily Dispatch*, 6 January 1871. "Brief Locals," *Daily Dispatch*, 16 January 1871.

and by the early nineteenth century was a popular option for those who were wealthy enough to afford it. The Spotswood Hotel was valued at \$140,000, and was insured for \$54,800. James H. Grant owned the two buildings adjoining the hotel, which were insured for \$27,200. Other businesses destroyed or damaged in the fire included a crockery-store, machine store, music dealership, stoves and tinware store, cigar dealership, sewing machine company, Adams Express office, and the offices of the Southern Express Company. The music dealer, cigar shop owner, and the Southern Express Company did not have insurance, but the stoves and tinware store was insured for \$3,000, and the sewing machine store was insured for \$1,500. Local publications estimated the total loss to be approximately \$300,000. Some of the businesses affected by the fire were able to resume business by 4 January, including the music dealership and the sewing machine store.<sup>18</sup>

At the time of the Spotswood Hotel fire, Richmond's fire department was well-equipped, though the freezing temperatures slowed down their progress in containing the conflagration. The department consisted of a chief engineer, four captains, and seventy-five men. These men had two steam fire engines, two side-break engines, a hook and ladder truck, seven hose-reels, and fifteen hundred feet of hose at their disposal.

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<sup>18</sup> "Burning of the Spotswood Hotel, Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 January 1871. "Resumption by Spotswood Sufferers," *Daily Dispatch*, 4 January 1871. For a complete breakdown of losses, see: "Local Matters. Our Last Disaster. Among the Ruins...", *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870. Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4. Cynthia A. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster: The Culture of Calamity From the Jamestown Colony to the Johnstown Flood* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 163. Uwe Lübken and Christof Mauch, "Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk, and Insurance in Historical Perspective," *Environment and History* 17 (2011): 1-11. See also: Christine Meisner Rosen, *The Limits of Power: Great Fires and the Process of City Growth in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

According to the *Daily Dispatch*, the department required only an assistant engineer, another steam engine, and a further thousand feet of hose to be fully functional. From May 1870 to the end of December 1870, the city had sustained over \$314,000 of fire damages, but the Spotswood Hotel accounted for \$300,000 of that total.<sup>19</sup>

Of the three disasters, the collapse of the Capitol received the most extensive press coverage, both because of its unusually high death toll and the prominence of many of those who perished as a result of it. Governor Walker, in the statement he gave following the disaster, stated that “many of our most eminent and valuable citizens, some of them in the service of the Commonwealth,” lost their lives on 27 April. Virginians in communities across the state crafted formal resolutions that echoed those sentiments, as did writers for publications based outside of the affected city. Citizens in Lynchburg created resolutions that lamented the loss of men “who have been so conspicuously identified with the public history of Virginia” and expressed hope that they might be “cherished with pride and admiration by the citizens of the State which they served with such eminent honor.” Similarly, the *Southern Churchman* mourned the death of “Virginia’s most distinguished sons,” as did the *Rockingham Register*.<sup>20</sup>

Because of their professional standing, social connections, and family history, a few men who died in the Capitol disaster received specific attention in Richmond and Petersburg-based publications. While there was not a large number of fatalities from Petersburg, the city was located only twenty-five miles south of the capital, so it was

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<sup>19</sup> “Fire Department,” *Daily Dispatch*, 2 January 1871.

<sup>20</sup> “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Nisi Dominus Frustra,” *Southern Churchman*, 5 May 1870. “Meeting of Citizens of Harrisonburg,” *Rockingham Register*, 12 May 1870.



common for the *Petersburg Index* to extensively discuss Richmond news. The *Petersburg Index* singled Patrick Henry Aylett out as “the brilliant journalist,” described lawyer Nathaniel P. Howard as a “scholar and jurist,” and contended that all other victims were devoted servants to their state. The Richmond Press Club approved resolutions for the deaths of Hugh Pleasants and Aylett. For Aylett, the Richmond Press Club resolution claimed he was “one of [Virginia’s] most eminent and rising citizens.” After Pleasants’ death, the *Petersburg Index* opined that the “press of the country loses a highly gifted and most distinguished member.” At a meeting of the Virginia Bar, Judge Crump read resolutions for Nathaniel Howard, Powhatan Roberts, and Aylett, stating that it was difficult to believe they would no longer be in their legal and social circles, and described them as “men on whose professional honor no stain rested; men we could always rely on with confidence.” These descriptions emphasized the loss to the various professional communities in which these well-known Virginians worked, and were most likely affecting to contemporary readers.<sup>21</sup>

Accounts of each of the three disasters led writers to reflect on the history of disasters in Richmond. Publications throughout Virginia contemplated well-known catastrophes in the history of the commonwealth as well as inhabitants’ recent experiences in the Civil War following the Capitol collapse and flood. The *Religious Herald* said that Richmond “has never known a sadder day” than the Capitol disaster, even though “pestilence, war, fire and want” plagued the city in years and decades past.

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<sup>21</sup> “The Richmond Calamity,” *Petersburg Index*, 28 April 1870. “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “Death of Hugh R. Pleasants,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. The Recent Calamity—Adjourned Meeting of the Bar...,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870.

The *Virginia Herald* hyperbolically proclaimed no other city in the country had dealt with more devastating disasters than Richmond, and the *Richmond Daily Whig* noted that it was not uncommon for calamities to strike the city. The *Religious Herald* contended that the flood was “the most disastrous flood that has occurred within the memory of man, and probably since its settlement.” While the flood of 1870 was, undoubtedly, a significant one in the state’s history—Paula Green notes that “at the time, the flood was considered the worst in memory to have affected the area in terms of destruction, casualties, and depth of water”—it does not rank in the National Weather Service’s ranking of the top twenty floods to hit Richmond.<sup>22</sup>

While some Virginians reflected on Richmond’s susceptibility to disasters, many recollected the Richmond Theater fire of 1811 because it was the deadliest catastrophe in the city’s history. On 26 December 1811 approximately seventy people lost their lives when the Richmond Theater caught fire, including the governor, elite members of Richmond society, and over fifty women and girls. Richmonders reflected on the theater fire only after the Capitol disaster and not after the Spotswood Hotel fire, which also occurred late in December, albeit fifty-nine years later. This was most likely due to the unusual loss of life after the Capitol collapse and the theater fire. While fires were relatively common occurrences throughout the nineteenth century, most calamities did not result in such a high number of fatalities. Columns in the *Petersburg Index* and

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<sup>22</sup> “A Fearful Catastrophe,” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. [Untitled], *Virginia Herald*, 5 May 1870. “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “The Flood,” *Religious Herald*, 6 October 1870. Green, *The Great Virginia Flood of 1870*, 8. National Weather Service, Top 10 Highest Historical Crests: James River near Richmond, VA, <https://www.weather.gov/media/marfc/Top20/JMS/Richmond.pdf>. The National Weather Service examined data as far back as 1816.

*Richmond Daily Whig* recounted the details of the theater fire tragedy, and one report erroneously claimed that the Capitol disaster fatality count was higher than that of the theater fire. Most Virginians described the Capitol disaster as the most horrific calamity to strike the city since the theater fire fifty-nine years previously. Residents of Rockingham County said that the Capitol collapse was “equalled only in its suddenness and terribly fatal results” by the theater fire.<sup>23</sup>

After the Capitol disaster, some Virginians compared their feelings of shock and grief to what residents must have felt following the theater fire. One writer stated “no event so sudden and so terrible has shocked the community since the burning of the theatre in 1811.” Another agreed that “this community has not been afflicted with any calamity so productive of overwhelming horror, desolation and grief” until the Capitol collapse. Moses Drury Hoge, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, preached during a sermon commemorating the Capitol disaster and proclaimed the day of the calamity as “the most memorable day of religious solemnity that Richmond has ever known,” although he noted that there had “been one calamity in [Richmond’s] history greater than the one we commemorate today.” But while the theater fire occurred when the capital was “in its vigor and prosperity,” he noted, the collapse struck the city while inhabitants were in states of “prostration and feebleness”—alluding to the city’s postwar

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<sup>23</sup> Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America’s First Great Disaster* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012). “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “Burning of the Richmond Theatre,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “History Repeats Itself,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “Awful Calamity,” *Central Presbyterian*, 4 May 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

struggles.<sup>24</sup>

Just as Virginians used the theater fire to better fathom the losses at the Capitol, coverage of the collapse also evoked memories of the Civil War. This is unsurprising given that the conflict had ended only five years previously and that ruined buildings throughout city served as visible reminders of the recent trauma. When news of the disaster spread among Richmond's occupants, it caused "panic and such a degree of painful anxiety and distress as were without a parallel during the war," according to the *Richmond Daily Whig*. While Richmonders might have grown accustomed to the trauma of seeing wounded and dying men throughout the bloody conflict, many residents found the collapse to be severely shocking. A reporter for the *Petersburg Index* found the aftermath of the Capitol calamity to be worse than living through wartime because it "was absent all the solace that war offers of its horrors," including the excitement of war and knowing that combat will, at some point, come to an end. Given the number of those who lost their lives in the collapse at the Capitol, and the suddenness with which the disaster happened, it is not surprising that reporters reflected on the wartime experiences and described the sensibilities of Richmonders. Because the flood and fire later in the year were not as deadly, nor as extraordinary, news of those disasters did not generate remembrances of Richmonders' wartime experiences.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "The Terrible Calamity," *Christian Examiner*, 1 May 1870. "Richmond Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court Room in the Capitol Breaks Through. A Large Number of Citizens Killed or Wounded....," *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. "Sermon by Rev. MD Hoge, D.D.," *Central Presbyterian*, 18 May 1870. "A Fearful Catastrophe," *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. See also: "The Accident at Richmond," *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870; "The Calamity of Yesterday," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870.

<sup>25</sup> "The Calamity of Yesterday," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. "The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings....," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. [Untitled], *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870.

It was common for those suffering in the aftermath of disasters to turn towards religion for succor and explanation. Since Europeans first began colonizing the Americas, colonists—and later, Americans—viewed disasters as judgments from God. Americans saw calamities as a manifestation of God’s will and God’s displeasure with the state of society. This attitude continued well into the nineteenth century, when Americans would attempt to derive moral lessons from disasters. According to Meredith Henne Baker, the Richmond theater fire in 1811 was the catalyst for a spiritual awakening among the city’s inhabitants, leading to a significant increase in the number of Christian houses of worship belonging to a growing diversity of denominations.<sup>26</sup>

Just as with the theater fire decades earlier and with their more recent wartime suffering, Richmonders once again looked to religion to explain why the Capitol disaster occurred and how inhabitants might avoid such a deadly calamity in the future. On 4 May, Reverend Moses Drury Hoge preached a sermon at the city’s Second Presbyterian Church in commemoration of the disaster. Hoge identified seven lessons that Richmonders should glean from the catastrophic event. He urged Richmonders to humble themselves before God; not take the present for granted; cherish domestic happiness; turn away from materialism; and consciously prepare for death. Ministers should urge parishioners to work towards salvation and the city’s churches should continue to serve Richmonders, Hoge proclaimed. Other Richmond residents and local publications echoed

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<sup>26</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiii. Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 33-64. Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire*, x.

many of these ideas.<sup>27</sup>

There was a general sentiment in the days after the Capitol disaster that Richmonders should revitalize their religiosity. Some believed God should be a source of comfort to the sufferers. In his remarks the day following the collapse, Judge John Underwood exhorted those assembled to go to their churches and pray for God to console the families of the dead and wounded. On the day of mourning appointed by Governor Walker, worshippers filled the city's churches and synagogues. The *Rockingham Register* said that "in such an hour, when grief, and anguish, and bitter sorrow have overwhelmed the mind, God only can give comfort," and the *Petersburg Index* said that the survivors should think only of God. Others, however, thought that Richmonders should be more disciplined in their religious practices. The *Christian Examiner* proposed that those most affected by the disaster had not been attending church regularly, and warned all readers to heed God's warning of the calamity.<sup>28</sup>

Richmonders from a variety of Protestant denominations thought the Capitol collapse was preordained by God, and some non-clergy who wrote in secular publications also supported this sentiment. Hoge, in his sermon at Richmond's Second Presbyterian Church, stated that the calamity came "by appointment of Him who orders all things according to the counsel of His own will, and in whose infinite empire there is no such thing as chance or accident." The *Christian Examiner*, published by the Disciples of

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<sup>27</sup> "Sermon by Rev. M.D. Hoge, D.D.," *Central Presbyterian*, 18 May 1870.

<sup>28</sup> "The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings....," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April. "Our Richmond Letter. The City—Services Yesterday....," *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870. "On the Right Hand and Left," *Christian Examiner*, 1 November 1870. "The Accident at Richmond," *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. "Cant," *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870.

Christ, exclaimed “it has pleased the Almighty Father to permit this heavy calamity to fall suddenly on our people,” and the Episcopal *Southern Churchman* said that “we cannot comprehend why [God] acts in one way rather than in another.” A writer for the *Petersburg Index* reminded readers that it was un-Christian to question why some men lived and others died, and that the calamity was a sign of God’s judgement on the people of Richmond. The members of the Corn and Flour Exchange Association, in the preamble to their resolutions for deceased member Ash Levy, stated that “it has pleased Almighty God to permit a most dire calamity to befall our city.”<sup>29</sup>

After the flood and fire later in 1870, Virginians once again sought a religious explanation for the disasters, although to a much less extent and with less fervor. This change in attitude can be attributed to the frequency of the James River flooding and the regularity of urban fires—Richmonders dealt with those occurrences more often. In the seventeenth century British Caribbean, for example, once colonists became used to the prevalence of hurricanes, they no longer viewed them purely as a sign of God’s wrath and instead as a combination of natural forces and providence. After the deluge in October, Reverend A.E. Dickinson of the Belvidere Baptist Church in Oregon Hill said his church was “crowded to its utmost capacity” and people seemed to be “deeply anxious about their spiritual interests.” After the Spotswood Hotel fire, a writer for the *Bristol News* wrote that the conflagration was an “awful chastisement” of providence—but did not

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<sup>29</sup> “Sermon by Rev. M.D. Hoge, D.D.,” *Central Presbyterian*, 18 May 1870. “The Terrible Calamity,” *Christian Examiner*, 1 May 1870. “Nisi Dominus Frustra,” *Southern Churchman*, 5 May 1870. “To-day,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870.

elucidate as to why God was choosing to punish Richmonders.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to seeking the comfort of religion and debating whether the disaster was an act of providence, Richmonders also speculated as to the physical cause of the collapse. Most of the city's inhabitants believed rightly that the building's structural integrity failed. While some blamed the architects of the Capitol for the collapse—Thomas Jefferson and Charles-Louis Clérissseau—others believed that the recent removal of the columns that supported the gallery's girders was the cause. One architect smartly hypothesized that the biggest mistake was making structural changes to the building without determining the capacity at which the girders would cease to function properly. A writer for the *Central Presbyterian* posited that the gallery collapse is what precipitated the ceiling collapse. A witness to the disaster wrote to the *Petersburg Index* speculating the opposite: that there was a failure with the construction of the floor, which caused the gallery to cave in. In addition to architects, journalists, and victims of the disaster, religious leaders throughout the city “denounced the carelessness of modern architecture,” according to the *Petersburg Index*. While many Richmond Protestants were willing to accept that the collapse was the result of failures in the building's structure, they also viewed religion as a source of consolation and saw the disasters as a reminder of the fragility of human life.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Revival of Religion,” *Religious Herald*, 13 October 1870. “Fires,” *Bristol News*, 30 December 1870. Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society*, 33-34.

<sup>31</sup> “Nisi Dominus Frustra,” *Southern Churchman*, 5 May 1870. [Untitled], *Rockingham Register*, 12 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Incidents, &c.,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “Awful Calamity,” *Central Presbyterian*, 4 May 1870. “Thrilling Description of the Accident at the Capitol,” *Petersburg Index*, 11 May 1870. “Latest from Richmond. Funerals of the Victims—Houses in Mourning...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870.



Along with investigating the physical causes of disasters, some Richmonders looked for ways to prevent future calamities. After the fire in December, one reporter discussed how such a conflagration and resulting loss of life might be averted in the future. A writer for the *Daily Dispatch* called for an inquest into hotel management and alleged that the only lesson to come from the disaster was the significant role of hotel-keepers in ensuring the protection of guests. The custom in 1870 was for a clerk and one or two employees to remain in the hotel from the hours of midnight until six in the morning. The *Daily Dispatch* writer asserted that there should be more employees on watch throughout the night to keep hotel residents and travelers safe. Other cities and states had implemented safety regulations in the aftermath of devastating fires. The *Dispatch* columnist reported that a bill was going to be introduced into the state legislature that would have required all hotels in Virginia to have an employee, or employees, visit every floor of a hotel once every ten or fifteen minutes overnight in order to ensure occupants' safety, but this bill did not pass, nor does it seem that it was even a topic of discussion amongst state legislators.<sup>32</sup>

Even as they debated the extent to which the Capitol disaster was the result of providential displeasure, Virginians also pondered the exact manner and circumstances of

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<sup>32</sup> "Local Matters. Our Last Disaster. Among the Ruins..." *Daily Dispatch*, 28 December 1870. This bill was not mentioned in either the Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia 1870-71 or the Journal of the Senate of Virginia 1870-71. In 1814 in New Hampshire, the state legislature passed an act banning the construction of wooden buildings over twelve feet in height following a series of damaging fires. Similarly, colonists in the British Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries adapted their building practices to minimize their vulnerability to hurricanes, a persistent threat in the region. See: Richard M. Candee, "Social Conflict and Urban Rebuilding: The Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Brick Act of 1814," *Winterthur Portfolio* 32, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1997): 120-121, 130. Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society*, 123-124, 127-128, 130.

the deaths of those who perished in that debacle. This was in accordance with the concept of good death, which had deep roots in the Christian tradition, and which held that the hour of death, or *hors mori*, should be witnessed and interpreted to determine whether the dying person was worthy of salvation. In antebellum America, death customs centered on the home, but during the Civil War—when men were dying on battlefields and in makeshift hospitals—the concept of good death underwent alterations to accommodate a new way of dying. Soldiers wrote letters to families of their deceased brothers in arms to assure them their kin died appropriately. The writers emphasized the deceased had been conscious of his fate, willing to die, and demonstrated his faith in God.<sup>33</sup>

Accounts of the Capitol disaster showed the enduring power of the concept of the good death, offering detailed and reassuring reports of the final moments of those who died. Several victims of the collapse had time to reflect on their Christian mores before they perished. While under the rubble, survivors and victims prayed and proclaimed their faith, understanding that death was imminent. An observer saw Patrick Henry Aylett “utter[ing] a fervent prayer before death forever sealed his lips” after rescuers removed him from the rubble of the Capitol building. Thomas Baldwin was seriously injured in the disaster and only lived for twenty-four hours after the calamity. “Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,” Baldwin said right before he died, which were the titular lines from a Charles Wesley hymn popular at the time. This final declaration caused one writer

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<sup>33</sup> Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981). Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 3-31. Diane Miller Sommerville, in *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), studies “how the Civil War psychologically and emotionally damaged Southerners, and how that psychological injury shaped the contours of the New South” (20).

for the *Petersburg Index* to remark that Baldwin died “as he had lived, a devout and humble Christian.”<sup>34</sup>

Other dying men used their last moments to beg for mercy and reflect on their piety—or lack thereof—throughout their lives. One survivor reported that he heard a dying man exclaim “Lord, have mercy upon me, I am gone!” Another man called out “Oh, death, where is thy sting; oh, grave, where is thy victory?” in his last seconds. One survivor, trapped amid rubbish and wounded and dying men, heard the man underneath him cry out “Oh, me, but if I could only fear God always as I do now! How wicked have I been all my days; oh, God, forgive me, spare me, and I will be a true follower of Jesus.” By calling on God in their last moments, and in some cases, asking for forgiveness, the dying hoped to ensure their place in heaven. While the press reported most men as dying a good death, it is notable that the more prominent Virginians, like Patrick Henry Aylett, were described as being more virtuous in their final moments than unnamed victims, who spent their last breaths begging for divine mercy. It is likely that many Virginia publications, and a majority of their readers, viewed those prominent men as paragons of their professions and of elite society.<sup>35</sup>

In the wake of the Capitol disaster, the accounts of injured and dying men reveal the components of a good death. The dying person must first accept that death is

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<sup>34</sup> Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond. “Richmond Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court Room in the Capitol Breaks Through. A Large Number of Citizens Killed or Wounded...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “Summary. The Great Catastrophe in Richmond!” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Incidents, &c.,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870.

<sup>35</sup> “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “Some Incidents of the Richmond Calamity—Affecting Incidents,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 14 May 1870.

imminent, which for victims of disasters is not always possible given the suddenness with which calamity can strike. Several men who later died of injuries sustained during the Capitol disaster had time to contemplate their fate, while others immediately understood the severity of the situation and the unlikelihood that they would survive. When the floor of the courtroom collapsed, Rush Burgess fell on top of another man who was unable to move and simply stated, “Well...I must die. Good-bye.” Another victim, who could not move because he was caught between bodies of the dead and wounded, accepted that he “must die,” according to the *Petersburg Index*.<sup>36</sup>

During the nineteenth century, and especially after the massive loss of life during the Civil War, Americans understood that death was an inescapable and ever-present force. Accounts of the Capitol disaster discussed the idea that death could come at any time. Publications including the *Rockingham Register* and *Richmond Daily Whig* noted Patrick Henry Aylett said, “we are all passing away,” to a friend while entering the Capitol building prior to the calamity. When members of fraternal organizations died, the organizations would pass resolutions describing the late member’s character, organizational involvement, and how they would honor the late member’s life. It was common for these resolutions to reflect upon death and remind members of its inevitability. The Richmond Press Club’s resolution for Joseph Brock read: “...while we

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<sup>36</sup> Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond. “Thrilling Description of the Accident at the Capitol,” *Petersburg Index*, 11 May 1870.

deeply deplore his untimely end, we consider it as an admonition to us to be prepared at all times to meet that summons which sooner or later must reach us all.”<sup>37</sup>

In order to die a good death, the dying men had to name their living family members to the survivors around them. Contemporaries viewed the identification of family members as a sign that the victim’s “heart was in the right place, and that care for himself had no part in his thoughts, even when his life was ebbing out.” But given that the Capitol disaster affected only men, their dying exclamations for their wives and children also might have been a way for them to identify their dependents who might be doomed without them. Additionally, some of the dead bodies were initially unrecognizable because they were covered in dust and debris, so this was another way for the dying to ensure that their living family members learned their fates. Multiple accounts of the calamity included descriptions of the dying crying out for their wives and children. One survivor felt the body of a man near him growing cold, and the dying man begged the survivor “to go to [his] wife...and tell her how her husband loved her, and thought of her, and spoke of her to the last.” Another badly wounded man reportedly spoke of his wife “until his spirit took its flight.” A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* exposted: “There is nothing in history or romance, in prose or poetry, more pathetic,” than the cries of a dying man within the rubble “who, with his last gasp, sent a message of his love to the wife he had left at home.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Incidents of the Richmond Disaster,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870.

<sup>38</sup> “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “Some Incidents of the Richmond Calamity—Affecting Incidents,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1870. “Summary. The Great Catastrophe in Richmond!” *Religious Herald*, 5 May



**Figure 4. A Capitol disaster victim dying a good death**

This dramatic sketch depicts a few elements of the nineteenth century notion of a good death: the family and friends—including a young girl—of the dying man surround him in his last moments, and the woman prays over his body. These three people would have been able to hear him utter his last words and prayed for his immediate entry to heaven. *Days' Doings*, 21 May 1870.

Another element of the good death that was concerning to the families of the Capitol disaster fatalities was the proper treatment of the body after death and having a Christian burial, which was not always an option for victims from impoverished families. It was important for the family and friends of the deceased to view the body and reflect upon their life. Given the nature of the calamity, many bodies were in poor condition, but

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1870. "The Calamity at Richmond," *The Independent*, 5 May 1870. "The Richmond Disaster," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1870.

that did not stop rescuers from “reverently and decently” covering them with blankets, according to a reporter for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. Robert Burkholder, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, had the body of victim S.M. Burnham placed in a metallic case and deposited in a vault at Hollywood Cemetery until Burnham’s friends could retrieve it. The Civil War precipitated many changes in mortuary techniques, including the practice of embalming bodies—which led to the professionalization of morticians—and using metallic coffins rather than wooden coffins—which prevented any odors from escaping the sealed casket—among others. Neighbors and friends of Thomas Baldwin gathered “in large numbers to take the last gaze at one whom in life they had learned to love and esteem” after his family placed his body in the parlor of their home. In contrast, the family of William H. Thompson was “forced to secretly bury him in the garden, by candle light” because they could not afford a proper burial.<sup>39</sup>

Another option for families of Capitol disaster casualties was acquiring death portraits or death masks, an antebellum innovation that became more widespread during and after the Civil War. Death portraits helped families remember and reflect on the life of their dead loved ones. Just as a proper Christian burial was often out of reach for poorer members of society, this practice was typically accessible only to those who could afford to pay for such services. After the Capitol calamity, however, John Woodburn

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<sup>39</sup> “The Frightful Calamity at Richmond,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 May 1870. Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond. “Our Richmond Letter. The Recent Calamity—Adjourned Meeting of the Bar...,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. Remarkable Incident of the Late Calamity—Sketches of the Capitol Disaster...,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 91-101.

Davies, a Richmond-based lithographer and music publisher, made negatives of the dead and supplied relatives with unlimited duplicates for no charge. Organizations commissioned photographers and artists to create death portraits for prominent members. The Richmond Press Club requested Edward Valentine to make a cast of Patrick Henry Aylett, and John A. Elder agreed to paint a portrait of Joseph Brock, which the Press Club of Richmond presented to Brock's wife.<sup>40</sup>

The descriptions of death and dying following the Capitol disaster differed significantly from the accounts of those who died as a result of the James River flood in September of 1870. The cause of death differed between the Capitol collapse and the flood, which affected Richmonders' abilities to ensure their family members died a good death. Many of the victims of the Capitol disaster were prominent, upper-class men, and narratives of their deaths emphasized their heroism. In contrast, Virginians affected by the flood were of the lower and middling classes, and so their deaths did not inspire such grandiose reports. Unlike the Capitol calamity that claimed the lives of men, women and children were victims of the flood. Writers created sensationalized stories of their fatal ends, as was common in nineteenth-century disaster reporting.

While the bodies of those who perished in the Capitol calamity were crushed or injured from falling debris, Virginians caught in the deluge drowned. Reporters noted that it took several days for bodies washed away in the flood to appear. John Burke of Highland County, Virginia, drowned after attempting to cross high water. Rescuers found

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<sup>40</sup> "The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meeting...", *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870.



his body three days later, five miles from where he fell into the water. In Alexandria, John B. Lewis and his family were also casualties of the flood. Their house was “swept off” and a “wave came which carried all away.” Lewis’s body was not recovered until 8 October. Many elements of the flood fatalities are anathema to the concept of a good death, including not immediately recovering, identifying, and placing the bodies of the dead with family members, and more importantly, there was not an audience of bystanders witnessing the spectacle. Readers and family members who were not present at the Capitol could witness the deaths of victims remotely through reading newspaper accounts of the tragedy. The same was not possible for the James River flood.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from describing the horrific conditions in which some Virginians died from the freshet, some reports focused on men’s failed attempts to save their wives and children from death. Throughout the nineteenth century, one of the characteristics underlying contemporary Americans’ ideas of masculinity was the notion that white men were willing and able to protect women from danger and harm. This mark of gender and power was accompanied by the biased idea that women and children should be prioritized in disaster situations—a myth commonly referred to as “women and children first”—which began in the early nineteenth century and came to prominence during the era of steamboat explosions that began in the 1830s.<sup>42</sup>

In areas to the north and west of Richmond, where the flood had resulted in death and more destruction than in the capital, some men were unable to save their families

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<sup>41</sup> “Drowned,” *Rockingham Register*, 13 October 1870. “A Victim of the Flood,” *Virginia Herald*, 13 October 1870.

<sup>42</sup> Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*, 190-191.

from the raging waters. The Hoskins family of Front Royal remained in their house for too long after receiving news of the impending flood. The family attempted to escape by creating a makeshift raft and steering it towards dry land. The floodwater's strong currents destroyed the raft and Hoskins could only save himself before "the poor man saw the dark and fearful element close over his beloved ones forever," according to the *Rockingham Register*. Hoskin's wife's body was found with their child in her arms, and "this scene was witnessed by many who will never forget it." In Albemarle County, Henry Wiltse was unable to help his wife and two children, and as the water carried them away, "their hands were stretched out imploringly for assistance." Several days later, Wiltse was "wandering, listlessly" around Harrisonburg and a reporter questioned whether "his reason" was "totter[ing] on its throne." It was the duty of these men to protect and save their families in times of crisis, and when they were unable to do so, they were seen as less masculine than their male contemporaries.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to saving women and children, nineteenth-century men were presumed to be able to demonstrate their usefulness and resourcefulness by aiding in rescue efforts. Journalists portrayed those who took part in recovery efforts after the Capitol calamity as heroic, particularly the men who were injured in the collapse and continued to assist their wounded and dying counterparts. The *Rockingham Register* praised Elizabeth City resident D.B. White for his heroic conduct the day of the Capitol disaster. He fell through the floor but, miraculously, was uninjured, and throughout the remainder of the day

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<sup>43</sup> [Untitled], *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870. "A Sad Case," *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870.

continued working to rescue the injured and dying. A writer for the *Richmond Daily Whig*, when describing White's conduct, declared: "It is on such trying occasions that true manhood is shown." Governor Walker, who narrowly escaped death himself, helped by reportedly preventing a mob from forming at the entrance to the Capitol and stopping onlookers from entering the building. After Walker and other rescuers secured the scene, Walker continued to render assistance. The *Religious Herald* described the rescuers as self-sacrificing "strong men". The "noble men" who survived the collapse and immediately went to work trying to save those who were more grievously injured displayed "cool courage and admirable conduct."<sup>44</sup>

The wives and daughters of the Capitol disaster fatalities were left vulnerable following the death of their male protectors and heads of households. As is common in the descriptions of the aftermath of calamities in the nineteenth century, hyperbolic accounts of these women and girls detailed their grief and speculated as to the future of their well-being given that the disaster killed many families' primary income-earner. Women's financial dependence on men was the result of both custom and law—it was not until 1877 that the Virginia General Assembly passed a married women's property law that allowed women to hold and dispose of property. *Harper's Weekly* described the wives, sisters, and mothers who rushed to the scene of the Capitol as "broken-hearted," and the park surrounding Capitol Square was "filled with anxious weeping women and

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<sup>44</sup> Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond. See also: "The Richmond Calamity," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 May 1870. "Heroism," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. "The Frightful Calamity at Richmond, Va.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 24 May 1870. "The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full particulars of the Sad Occurrence..." *Rockingham Register* 5 May 1870. "A Fearful Catastrophe," *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. "Heroism," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870.

men” until rescuers removed all the corpses from the building. The wife and daughters of Joseph Cox “filled the air with the deep lamentations” when they heard of Cox’s death, according to the *Richmond Daily Whig*. While published accounts focused on women’s bereaved emotional state, resolutions from towns and cities across the commonwealth recognized that the wives and children of the dead might end up destitute, and that it was the responsibility and moral obligation of community members to assist the needy widows and children.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to such emotional claims, journalists also reported that some widows suffered from adverse mental health after learning about the death of their spouses following the accident at the Capitol. The *Rockingham Register* reported that one woman who came across her husband’s dead body was “so shocked that it is scarcely hoped she can live through the day,” while another woman supposedly became “insane, with but little hope of recovery.” The wife of Joseph Blamire, who had not yet heard news that he had died in the collapse, was “rendered almost insane” when Blamire’s remains were brought to her at their house. The *Richmond Daily Whig* and *Petersburg Index* falsely reported that the wife of deceased T.A. Brewis died “from excessive grief at the news of the death of her husband.” The reports of these widows’ reactions to the death of their husbands are undoubtedly elaborately embellished. It could be that these accounts were

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<sup>45</sup> Suzanne D. Lebsack, “Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women,” *Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 2 (May 1977): 195-216. “The Richmond Calamity,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 14 May 1870. “Appalling Calamity in Richmond! Falling In of the Supreme Court Room Floor. Names of Some of the Killed and Wounded...,” *Petersburg Index*, 28 April 1870. “The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond. For a discussion of how the death of women and children on exploding steamboats such as the *Lexington* (1840) and *Arctic* (1854) contributed to the passage of the Steamboat Act of 1852, see: Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*, 166-199.

so exaggerated in order to generate more sympathy for the women and children who would be in economic straits following the death of an income-earner for their household.<sup>46</sup>

In the same way that journalists painted a sobering portrait of women and children who might be in need of emotional and economic support after the Capitol disaster, the local press also portrayed Richmonders as united in their grief. The disaster “touched that chord of sympathy among us which makes all mankind kin,” according to the *Richmond Daily Whig*. There was a sense that the disaster touched the lives of every person living in Richmond, and the *Religious Herald* noted that the sound of church bells and the continual funeral processions through the city streets “struck a sympathetic chord in every heart.” One writer optimistically believed that the calamity forced Richmonders to forget superficial differences and embrace their similarities.<sup>47</sup>

Because Richmonders were supposedly united in their grief, local publications described inhabitants as no longer concerning themselves with differences of race, religion, and class. Rescuers placed the body of James Bland, a Black senator for Charlotte and Prince Edward counties, next to the bodies of two white men after removing them from the rubble, and a reporter for the *Richmond Daily Whig* used that as evidence that “all distinctions of color were levelled.” The victims of the Capitol disaster

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<sup>46</sup> “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “The Result of the Richmond Catastrophe—A Lady Dies from Grief for the Loss of Her Husband,” *Petersburg Index*, April 29 1870.

<sup>47</sup> “The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “A Fearful Catastrophe,” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. “Can We Learn?” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870.

included men from a variety of occupations, including lawyers, politicians, doctors, merchants, mechanics, and a minister. Similarly, those mourning the dead occupied all positions of the city's socioeconomic classes, according to local reports.<sup>48</sup>

Local accounts also contended that differences of political opinion were set aside in the days after the Capitol disaster. The victims of the Capitol disaster included both Conservatives and Republicans, and white and Black Virginians. While funerals were ongoing, political differences were “buried in the graves of the unfortunate dead,” according to a *Petersburg Index* reporter. Police under both Chahoon and Ellyson's command joined the funeral processions and escorted the coffins of the deceased, and the two opposing forces worked together to adopt resolutions of respect for the dead. This apparently signified that “all the late political feeling seems to have been forgotten,” according to the *Rockingham Register*. “Death is a leveler, that knows no rank or condition,” contended the *Petersburg Index*. The local press was successful in portraying Richmonders as having, however briefly, overcome their political and social differences.<sup>49</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of each catastrophic event, Richmonders—and the journalists who described the disasters—used a variety of techniques to make sense of what happened to them, their loved ones, and neighbors. The collapse at the Capitol

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<sup>48</sup> “The City. Terrible Calamity! Floor of the Supreme Court in the Capitol Breaks Through...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28 April 1870. “A Fearful Catastrophe,” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870. Capitol Square Data, box 1 folder 5, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

<sup>49</sup> “Can We Learn?” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “Political Differences Buried,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “Political Differences Buried,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870.

generated far more news stories than did the flood or the fire due to the nature of the calamity, the great loss of life, and the victims themselves—who were mostly white men, some with significant political and social standing in their communities. Inhabitants of the capital city eulogized the reputation of these men, and also reflected on the history of disasters in Richmond and contemplated the religious significance of these events. Many recalled the Richmond theater fire of 1811, while the more recent events of the Civil War were a touchstone for others. Despite everything inhabitants of Richmond went through in 1870, some still retained hope for the city’s future. In the early days of 1871, a journalist at the *Daily Dispatch* believed that the disasters “have never cast down our people” and that Richmonders “still look hopefully for prosperity to Him of who the Psalmist has said: ‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.’”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “The Many Disasters in Richmond,” *Daily Dispatch*, 2 January 1871.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**“VIRGINIANS HAVE FRIENDS WHERE ONCE THEY HAD ENEMIES”:**  
**SYMPATHY FOR RICHMOND**

Two days after the Capitol disaster, the *New York Herald*—a Democratic newspaper published in New York City with thousands of readers—reported that inhabitants of Virginia’s capital had “forgotten the bitter partisan excitement which brought most of the victims to the place where they met their death, and all—black and white, rebel and radical—are mingling their sorrows together.” Apparently, “grief has succeeded political strife, and the harrowing calamity seems to have levelled with the earthly hopes of the dead all the political differences of the living.” The writer described Richmond as a city coming together in the wake of a devastating calamity, and it seemed as though the deaths of over sixty Richmonders enabled those still living to set aside their political and racial differences. This kind of description of Richmond and its inhabitants was common in some American newspapers following the Capitol disaster, flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire, and such stories were imperative in generating the sympathy and financial aid of Richmonders’ contemporaries throughout the country. Particularly in northern metropolises such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, Americans contributed money to their city’s informal, ad-hoc relief fund, and those contributions were then sent to Richmond. In many ways, the external response to Richmond was typical of the time despite the fact that sufferers were in the former capital of the



Confederacy and that northerners had ample reason to be hostile to southerners—both in Virginia and elsewhere—who were still recovering from a ruinous civil war.<sup>1</sup>

The press played a significant role in describing the disasters and it was due to their coverage that some Americans felt compelled to provide aid. Newspaper reports like the one from the *New York Herald* were the primary way residents of northern cities became aware of Richmonders' suffering and financial needs following the 1870 disasters. Residents of major cities throughout the North read about the Capitol collapse, flood, and fire in widely-circulating publications such as the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. News of these disasters spread rapidly to smaller cities and towns via local papers. While readers of the *New York Times* first heard news of the Capitol disaster on 28 April, the day after the collapse, readers of Arkansas's *Morning Republican* and the Indiana-based *Evansville Journal* received word only one day later. There was also coverage of the calamities in the Black press, such as the *New Era*, a national newspaper based in Washington and edited by Frederick Douglass.<sup>2</sup>

Local papers in Virginia also proved vital to the dissemination of information throughout the commonwealth regarding the plight of imperiled Richmonders in the wake of the 1870 disasters. Descriptions of the suffering, as well as the needs of the wounded and the families of the dead, found their way into publications in Virginia cities including Harrisonburg and Petersburg via the *Rockingham Register* and *Petersburg*

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<sup>1</sup> "The Disaster in Richmond," *New York Herald*, 29 April 1870.

<sup>2</sup> "The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce..." *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. See "About *New Era* (Washington, DC) 1870-1870," and "About *New National Era*. (Washington, DC) 1870-1874," on the *Chronicling America*, Library of Congress website: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024437/> and <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026753/>.

*Index*, respectively, while smaller and more remote locales like Fincastle read about the disasters in the *Virginia Herald*. In the northern regions of the state, the *Alexandria Gazette* kept its readers apprised of the situation in the capital. Meanwhile, Richmonders read about the woes of their neighbors in local papers such as the Conservative *Daily Dispatch*, Republican *Richmond Daily Whig*, and the religiously oriented *Southern Churchman*. Throughout the year, these papers provided accounts of the ways in which Virginians were expressing sympathy for Richmond in the days and weeks following the Capitol disaster, and the establishment of a local relief fund for the families of the dead and wounded. This chapter examines how contemporary newspapers covered the disasters in Richmond in 1870—particularly the Capitol calamity—and how they inspired and then reported Americans’ outpourings of sympathy and relief.

By 1870, newspapers had been spreading news about disasters and disaster relief efforts throughout the country for decades. In December 1802, after a deadly fire in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a handful of newspapers printed an appeal of the relief committee, and by early January news of the fire had spread to several states and reached as far west as Ohio. In the Reconstruction era, newspapers continued to be similarly instrumental in generating relief by transmitting news of the calamities in Richmond to readers throughout the country. While the *Daily Dispatch* was the most popular of the local Richmond papers in 1870, major national publications like the *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* also covered the disasters. Additionally, readers of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated* and *Harper’s Weekly*—both of which circulated 160,000 copies per week in 1860—read of the occurrences in the Virginia capital and took in the illustrations of the

rescue efforts at the Capitol and the burning of the Spotswood Hotel. Both the written word and images that made spectacles of the disaster likely motivated many readers to donate to relief efforts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia A. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster: The Culture of Calamity from the Jamestown Colony to the Johnstown Flood* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 146. Fiona Deans Halloran, *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 4. *Richmond Dispatch*, Virginia Chronicle: <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=RD&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.



**Figure 5. Fire fighters removing the dead and wounded from the Capitol**  
 This sketch, published in the widely circulating *Harper's Weekly*, would have viewed by Americans across the country. Such arresting images—this particular sketch shows the destruction inside the Capitol and many men trapped under rubble as fire fighters attempt to free them—might have enticed some readers to donate to relief funds. *Harper's Weekly*, 14 May 1870.

The narratives created by these publications and the actions of readers in their locales in the wake of the three disasters demonstrate that these calamities provided the impetus for at least some northerners to demonstrate feelings of goodwill and sympathy for defeated southerners a mere five years following the end of the Civil War. The disasters created opportunities for white Americans outside of the South to sympathize with defeated Confederates and financially contribute to the rebuilding of the former capital of the Confederacy and provide aid to its residents. In the case of the Richmond calamities, disasters and disaster relief became a part of the process of postwar reconstruction and reunification. Publications frequently described mourning rituals, collective grief, and funerals as evidence that the disasters facilitated unity among Richmonders themselves—particularly in regard to political affiliation and race—despite their years of political and social conflict during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The sad stories of Richmonders’ suffering helped to initiate the process of re-establishing friendly relations between white northerners and southerners. In part because of the city's postwar poverty and desolation, sympathy and aid from the North was imperative in getting Richmonders the relief they desperately needed following each calamity.

The federal government was not typically involved in disaster relief in the nineteenth century, though the federal government was undoubtedly becoming somewhat more involved in some disaster relief efforts during Reconstruction. For example, between 1866 and 1867, southerners were faced with crop failure, heavy flooding, droughts, infestations of caterpillars and cutworms, and yellow fever. In March 1867 Congress authorized the appropriation of \$500,000 to the Freedmen’s Bureau to provide

aid to impoverished southerners. Notably, the relief money was not only for the freedpeople and refugees under the purview of the Bureau; it was to be distributed to all those in need, including former Confederates. The Freedmen's Bureau used the money to provide food for four months to almost sixty thousand southerners. Such actions of the federal government were still not commonplace, and so Richmonders did not anticipate or expect aid from the federal sources following the disasters.<sup>4</sup>

The reaction of Congress to news of the Capitol collapse was therefore predictable. On the afternoon of 27 April in the House of Representatives, James Platt, a Republican representing Virginia, had a telegram read aloud with news of a "most deplorable occurrence." Legislators learned that nearly forty people had died following the collapse at the Capitol, among them Patrick Henry Aylett; the *Enquirer* reporter James Brock; George Chahoon's clerk, Samuel Eaton; Virginia state senator James Bland; attorney Nathaniel Howard; fire department chief William Charters; and E. M. Schofield, the brother of General Schofield. Former Virginia governor Henry Wells was falsely reported as a casualty. Samuel Cox, a Democrat from New York, suggested that the committee stand to honor the dead, and said that he did not think the House was "in a fit condition to go on with business." Robert Schenck, an Ohio Republican—despite agreeing that the announcement was incredibly distressing—thought it best to go on with

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<sup>4</sup> Gareth Davies, "The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster, 1865-1900," *Journal of Policy History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 307-308. Davies argues that during the postwar period a "*national* politics of disaster" emerges, "with Washington far more to the fore than had been the case in the earlier nineteenth century" but this period of disaster relief "cannot reasonably be seen as having clearly anticipated the modern world of federal disaster politics" (306).

public business because “we are not in a position to be of any service whatever.” Cox withdrew his suggestion, and the House went on to consider the next order of business.<sup>5</sup>

One federal official did proffer aid to Richmond after the collapse at the Capitol, despite the federal government’s established practice of abstaining from providing disaster relief during this period. Edward Canby, who served as a Union general during the Civil War and commanded the federal occupation in several southern states throughout Reconstruction, was in charge of the First Military District—which comprised the commonwealth of Virginia—from April 1869 through June 1870. After the collapse, Canby sent surgeons to the city to assist Richmond doctors in tending to the wounded. “Your action was worthy of a man of heart and a soldier of the Republic. It will ever be gratefully remembered by an afflicted people,” Governor Walker wrote to Canby. In response to Walker’s letter, Canby said he regretted he could not do more and believed that through prayer, God “will deal tenderly with sufferers from a calamity that must touch every heart throughout the country with sorrow for the dead and sympathy for the bereaved.” It is not surprising that Walker and Canby would seem to have a friendly and courteous relationship given that Walker had been a moderate Republican until he was elected as a Democrat to the governorship in January 1870. It is fairly surprising, however, that Canby asserted his authority as a federal official in the commonwealth and provided much-needed aid, given that the government often did not intervene in times of

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<sup>5</sup> “The Richmond Calamity in Washington,” *Petersburg Index*, 28 April 1870. *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 41<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 3040-3041, Library of Congress: <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=092/llcg092.db&recNum=211> and <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=092/llcg092.db&recNum=212>. The Senate’s *Congressional Globe* does not state whether news of the Capitol disaster was a topic of discussion.

crisis following disasters. Canby might have intervened because he witnessed the suffering firsthand, but he might also have viewed relief as a mechanism to maintain social order.<sup>6</sup>

In 1870, disaster relief efforts in the United States were typically ad hoc, private, and often local—and, frequently, not without specific challenges. As Cynthia Kierner notes, “relief committees scrambled to bury the dead and collect donations of money, provisions, and expertise to aid the injured, hungry, and homeless.” Just like the federal government, state governments typically abstained from providing aid after disasters. Fiscal or material assistance after calamities was not yet the remit of organizations like the Red Cross, which became a private organization focused on disaster relief in 1881. After the Johnstown flood in 1889—at which time individual donations and local fundraising efforts were still the default method for providing relief—the Red Cross and generous donors raised \$4,000,000 in cash to help recover Pennsylvanians’ losses.<sup>7</sup>

Local relief committees in the nineteenth century lobbied for aid following calamities, and it was down to the generosity of both neighbors and strangers whether the people and locales affected by disaster would fully recover. After a fire in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1802, the city’s occupants leveraged their own social and economic connections and the power of newspapers to publicize their need and organized a successful relief effort that raised \$45,000, with donations from more than thirty-six localities. Five years after the Portsmouth fire, a conflagration destroyed almost half of

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<sup>6</sup> “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Later from Richmond,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 April 1870. “The Richmond Calamity—Correspondence,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1870.

<sup>7</sup> Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*, 201, 206-207.



the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia. In order to generate aid, prominent members of the town launched a letter writing campaign. While receiving one donation of \$100 from New York businesses with ties to their counterparts in Fredericksburg, the Fredericksburg relief effort collected slightly more than \$7,000, much of which came from fellow Virginians. This sum was not enough to curtail the estimated losses of \$200,000. Clearly, not all local relief efforts were fully successful in raising the amounts needed to fully mitigate the damages caused by disasters in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

This trend of homegrown relief continued after 1870. Following the Chicago fire in 1871, the mayor wrested control of the relief fund out of the hands of elected officials and decreed that the Relief and Aid Society—a private charity run by elites—was in charge of receiving and distributing material and fiscal assistance to Chicagoans. The society provided over \$4,000,000 to help more than one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, and paid particular attention to widows, deserted women with families, the elderly, and the ill. The elites in charge of the committee believed in the idea of scientific charity—that aid should be given to those who were made destitute through no fault of their own—and assistance was meted out without regard to the difficulties faced by the immigrants and non-whites in the city. In 1886, when a powerful earthquake rocked the city of Charleston, locals formed the Executive Relief Committee to repair houses, dispense money, and provide material assistance to those affected by the earthquake, just as in Chicago the decade prior. Homeowners in need of aid were required to fill out an application form, and an inspector would assess the damage done to the structure and

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<sup>8</sup> Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*, 145-150.

verify how much money the homeowner would need. Similar to the organization in Chicago, the committee in Charleston fast-tracked the applications of single women and widows.<sup>9</sup>

In 1870, Virginians throughout the commonwealth reached out to Richmonders in the days following the collapse at the Capitol to show their sympathy and proffer aid. The volume of telegrams coming in to Richmond telegraph offices from across the state—as well as from elsewhere in the country—led one reporter for the *Rockingham Register* to report that telegraph operators in the capital were “taxed to their utmost capacity.” Journalists took an active part in encouraging Virginians to aid their distressed contemporaries in the capital. A writer for the *Southern Churchman* said “every one who has a heart in his body will sympathize with the suffering survivors and do all that in him lies to soothe their sorrows, relieve their pains, and provide for their wants and to comfort those that mourn.” A *Virginia Herald* journalist took a similar position, and reminded those “who have mercifully escaped” the collapse that “none liveth for himself alone,” calling upon their good fortune and benevolence to donate what they were able to the dead or wounded.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 81, 87, 90-91. Susan Millar Williams and Stephen G. Hoffius, *Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 133-135. See also: Caroline Grego, “Black Autonomy, Red Cross Recovery, and White Backlash after the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893,” *Journal of Southern History* LXXXV, no. 4 (Nov. 2019): 803-840.

<sup>10</sup> “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full Particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “The Catastrophe at Richmond,” *Southern Churchman*, 5 May 1870. “Contributions,” *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870.

Inhabitants of Harrisonburg and Fredericksburg passed resolutions, participated in the day of humiliation, and collected funds for the sufferers. In Harrisonburg, the local paper, the *Rockingham Register*, urged residents to close their businesses on 4 May so as to observe the day of humiliation and prayer appointed by Governor Walker. That same evening inhabitants gathered at the courthouse to compose resolutions for their compatriots in the capital. The community created these resolutions “to give some expression to the sorrow we feel, and to the sympathy we, in common with the people of the whole State, entertain for the bereaved and suffering.” Inhabitants in Fredericksburg undertook similar actions. Businesses in Fredericksburg closed on 28 April, “town bells were tolled all day,” and churches held religious services. Citizens also gathered to adopt resolutions of sympathy which described their “sincere and heart felt sorrow,” stating that the disaster “enlists our warmest sympathies, and evokes a grief too deep for expression in words.” In addition to offering their “warmest prayers,” they requested that Fredericksburg Mayor Lawrence Rose “open correspondence with the authorities of the City of Richmond, and to tender to them any assistance in the way of help or means in providing for the sufferers.”<sup>11</sup>

Virginians in other cities throughout the commonwealth gathered to enact resolutions as a symbol of their commiseration with the families of the wounded and dying in Richmond. The mayor of Lynchburg requested a meeting of the city’s residents

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<sup>11</sup> “Meeting of Citizens of Harrisonburg,” *Rockingham Register*, 12 May 1870. “Home Department. To the Citizens of Harrisonburg,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “Latest from Richmond. Funerals of the Victims—Houses in Mourning...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “By Telegraph. Condolence from [undecipherable]—Action of the State Convention,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “Latest from Richmond. Funerals of the Victims—Houses in Mourning...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “Citizens’ Meeting,” *Virginia Herald*, 2 May 1870.

on 29 April in which he called for businesses to close and presided over the drafting of resolutions. Lynchburg's resolutions characterized the Capitol collapse as a "great public calamity which has been visited, in the accident at Richmond, upon the country, and in particular on the people of the Commonwealth of Virginia." Inhabitants of Lynchburg believed the disaster to be the result of "the hand of a Divine Providence which held the destinies of men and States, and whose dealings...are directed by unfailing goodness and infinite knowledge." The citizens of Rockbridge met on 2 May and drafted resolutions, as did the Portsmouth city council. Portsmouth residents' resolutions expressed "the heartfelt sympathy of the entire community...in this form for the families and relations of those who have been so suddenly snatched from time to eternity, in the very midst of life." In Alexandria, members of the Corn and Produce Exchange met to pass resolutions of respect for T.A. Brewis, a merchant of that city.<sup>12</sup>

Residents of Petersburg were deeply moved by the Capitol disaster. Approximately twenty-five miles to the south of Richmond, Petersburg was home to many Virginians with familial, business, economic, and social ties to the capital. News of the collapse at the Capitol "came as a clap of thunder" to Petersburg, and a local journalist described the community as "shrouded...in gloom." Only three days after the collapse, a Petersburg journalist complained that there had been no "public expression" of their city's grief, despite the claim that "no community in the State has felt a purer or deeper sympathy for the sufferings and afflictions...or a profounder sense of that

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<sup>12</sup> "The Richmond Calamity. Incidents, &c.," *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. "The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce..." *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

calamity.” The journalist attributed this to “personal feeling and sorrow,” which overwhelmed Petersburg residents’ “public duty.” To rectify this, the local newspaper published a call for Petersburg inhabitants to assemble in the courthouse square on 30 April in order to decide how best to mourn publicly for Richmonders.<sup>13</sup>

Just as in other cities throughout the state, Petersburg residents wrote resolutions, joined with Richmond in their day of prayer and humiliation, and sought to provide financial aid to those affected by the calamity. Residents of Petersburg extended their “heartiest sympathy” to “the people of our sister city, Richmond, the chief sufferer.” On 4 May—which they deemed a “day of fasting and prayer”—local businesses closed and houses of worship were open for religious services. A group of Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian ministers invited people to gather in the Tabb Street Presbyterian Church on 4 May to “humble ourselves before God in view of His providential dealings, acknowledge His wonderful favor in the escape of our own citizens, entreat consolation for the bereaved, and commend to His fatherly care those still suffering or in danger as victims of the calamity.” Services were also held at St. Paul’s Church, Grace Church, St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, and at the Jewish synagogue. A *Petersburg Index* reporter suggested churches take up offerings to go to the Richmond relief fund.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “The Richmond Accident—Great Excitement in This City,” *Petersburg Index*, 28 April 1870. “Public Meeting,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “Fourth Ward Peoples’ Club,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “The Richmond Calamity—Meeting of Citizens—Resolutions of Sympathy,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870.

<sup>14</sup> “The Richmond Calamity—Meeting of Citizens—Resolutions of Sympathy,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. “Religious Services To-Morrow—Pastoral Letter from the Ministers of the City,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “Services To-Day,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “The Day,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May

Expressions of sympathy also came from outside Virginia, including from northern states, despite the recent war. Most scholars date reconciliation between the North and South in the 1880s and 1890s, although the yellow fever epidemic that struck the South in 1878 was another earlier example of white northerners who were weary of war and Reconstruction showing sympathy for defeated southerners. The epidemic began in New Orleans, and moved quickly to Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Ohio, and Missouri. While the disease primarily claimed the lives of southerners, it caused economic and emotional damage to Americans throughout the country. Northerners came to the aid of needy southerners, as southern relief associations were poorly funded and could not cope with the strain on their resources. They sent money, goods, and medical professionals to the southern states, demonstrating collective feelings of reunion. In Ohio, Governor Richard Bishop called for Ohioans to pray that God end the epidemic, while in New York the *Times* reported that church-goers were praying for God to be merciful. One scholar contends that northern whites were optimistic that shared experiences of trauma would erase previous memories of division. Historian Edward Blum argues that the epidemic “stood at a pivotal moment in postwar national reconciliation and the marginalization of African Americans.” The disasters in Richmond—eight years before the epidemic—led to an even earlier outpouring of assistance from northerners to southerners.<sup>15</sup>

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1870. “Humiliation and Prayer. Memorial Exercises Wednesday. Solemn Observance of the Day in Petersburg...,” *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870.

<sup>15</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). Blight argues that race was “the central problem in how Americans made choices to remember and forget their Civil War” and posits reconciliation between the North and South did not begin until the mid-1870s (98). Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and*

Even outside of Virginia, many newspapers published sympathetic descriptions of suffering Richmonders in the wake of the 1870 calamities. After the flood, a Vermont-based *Burlington Weekly Free Press* journalist noted that “all the desolation” Richmond experienced during the Civil War “has been exceeded by...many days of destructive storm.” The suffering of the region “not yet fully recovered from the desolations of war, is dreadful to contemplate.” A writer for the Baltimore *Sun* said that Richmond had been “scourged by water as well as by fire”—referencing the fire retreating Richmonders set themselves during the evacuation of the city in 1865. The *New York Herald* referenced Richmond’s history as capital of the Confederacy when describing the Spotswood Hotel as a building that “saw the brunt of our civil war and heard within its walls the secret consultations of the rebel chiefs in their days of glory and their days of disaster.” While noting that leaders opposed to the Union held those conferences—the “rebel chiefs”—the *Herald* reporter managed to evoke the history of the city and of the building itself in a relatively ambivalent and ambiguous way. These papers did not depict Richmond as deserving of these disasters, which suggests that many of their northern readers were at least potentially sympathetic to the plight of the city’s residents.<sup>16</sup>

Other publications described the sympathy Americans outside Virginia felt for Richmonders who were suffering in the wake of the disasters. Such sympathy foreshadowed the eventual rapprochement that would take place between white

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*American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 147. Edward Blum, “The Crucible of Disease: Trauma, Memory, and National Reconciliation during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 4 (Nov. 2003), 797-798, 801, 806, 809.

<sup>16</sup> [Untitled], *Burlington Weekly Free Press*, 14 October 1870. “Flood and Drought,” *Sun*, 5 October 1870. “The Richmond Disaster,” *New York Herald*, 26 December 1870.

northerners and southerners. The *New York Times* reflected that their city's residents felt “deep and sorrowful sympathy” for those affected by the Capitol collapse which was shared “in every part of the Union.” Similarly, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* noted that disasters “may happen any where and at any time,” and as such, Richmond “will have the sympathy of the whole country.” The Capitol disaster seemed to annihilate “time and space...the sad affair seems to be at our own doorsteps.” From Washington, D.C., even some Republican newspapers with both white and Black readers also declared their sympathy for Richmonders. Frederick Douglass's *New Era* reported, “every heart has been moved with sorrow, sympathy and condolence over the Richmond calamity,” while the *Daily National Republican* stated “the sad news fell with great force in this community and cast a deep gloom over all classes.”<sup>17</sup>

Marylanders in particular seemed to feel a particular compassion for suffering Richmonders following the Capitol disaster. In addition to the geographic and economic ties between the two states, Maryland had plenty of Confederate sympathizers, which might account for much of the sympathy expressed by the state's leaders and residents. Government officials in Maryland reached out to their counterparts in Virginia once they received news of the Capitol disaster. That state's government designated 4 May as a day of mourning to allow Marylanders to join Virginians in their “mournings and sorrows” as a symbol of the close connection between the two states. Democrat Oden Bowie, governor of Maryland, wrote to Virginia governor Gilbert Walker that news of the

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<sup>17</sup> “Killed by Careless Architects,” *New York Times*, 30 April 1870. [Untitled], *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 30 April 1870. “The Richmond Calamity,” *New Era*, 5 May 1870. “Death – Stroke! Heartrending Accident in Richmond. The City of Terrible Calamities...,” *Daily National Republican*, 28 April 1870.



disaster struck “sympathetic chords” in “every home,” and that no other state had more sorrowful inhabitants than Maryland. Bowie also said that he asked God to aid the wounded and the grieving. Members of the Republican State Central Committee of Maryland unanimously adopted a resolution of sympathy and stated their hopes that Marylanders would open subscriptions lists throughout Baltimore to aid suffering families in the Virginia capital.<sup>18</sup>

Residents of cities large and small throughout Maryland gathered to mourn the loss of Richmonders on 4 May. Inhabitants of Frederick demonstrated their solidarity with the victims of the Capitol disaster and expressed their desire to establish a means of providing the needy with financial support. In their resolutions, the people of Frederick described the Capitol disaster as a “terrible visitation” that killed “so great a number of the cherished sons of our sister State.” Maryland was “the Sister who has always heretofore rejoiced with [Virginia] in her gladness and mourned with her in her sorrows, in this her latest grief, stands close at her side, with all the tenderness of old,” according to the sympathetic residents of Frederick. Citizens of Baltimore likewise participated in Richmond’s day of mourning, and churches held services, the custom house limited their hours, flags were flown at half-mast, and state and municipal offices closed, as did many businesses. These actions were meant to demonstrate how “large-hearted” Baltimore residents were, and their “sorrow for the dead...sympathy for the distressed, and...charity for the suffering.” Just as their counterparts in Frederick had been, Baltimoreans were

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<sup>18</sup> “The Richmond Calamity. Facts, Incidents, &c,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “Richmond Calamity! Maryland Joins Virginia in Humiliation and Prayer. Sympathy and Liberality of Baltimore,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. Executive Papers of Governor Walker, box 1, folder 2, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

motivated to participate in the day of mourning by “impulses of a sympathy as strong as the ties of births and kindred.”<sup>19</sup>

Not all Americans who lived outside the former Confederacy showed sympathy and support for distressed Richmonders. For instance, one publication that was extremely critical of Richmond was the Republican *Chicago Tribune*, a publication that advocated for the abolition of slavery prior to the Civil War, supported Abraham Lincoln in his bid for the presidency in 1860, and continued to push a Radical Republican agenda during and after the war. After the Capitol disaster, one writer for the paper observed that “from the battle of Bull Run...until the present accident, there has been one long succession of horrors enacted in [Richmond’s] streets.” Referencing Richmond’s ties to slavery, the journalist noted that the Capitol was the site at which “the whole collective genius of slavery met by choice, to make bondage, enforced labor, and the withholding of wages, righteous by statute...[in the] most Christian and most democratic century, they set the figures of the dial back.” The writer foresaw a bleak future for the city following the disaster, remarking, “The dusk of poverty lies over Richmond.” Despite the criticism, another writer reported that the Illinois Constitutional Convention “adopted resolutions of regret at the calamity,” which demonstrated that “Virginians have friends where once they had enemies.” The inhabitants of Illinois were “unite[d] with the people of Virginia in profound sorrow for a public loss so overwhelming” according to members of the Illinois Constitutional Convention. Coverage of the Richmond disasters in the *Chicago*

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<sup>19</sup> Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond. “Richmond Calamity! Maryland Joins Virginia in Humiliation and Prayer. Sympathy and Liberality of Baltimore,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870.

*Tribune* demonstrated that not all northerners felt equally sympathetic, particularly writers for and readers of a staunchly Republican paper.<sup>20</sup>

While some sympathetic northerners would eventually send aid to Richmond, words of sympathy took the place of monetary donations among southerners, who were mostly in dire financial circumstances due to the abolition of the slave economy and war-related destruction of much of the region's industry, agriculture, and infrastructure. Both houses of the Georgia legislatures adopted resolutions of sympathy for those affected by the Capitol disaster. Mississippi governor James Alcorn sent a letter and resolutions of sympathy to Governor Walker, which the Virginia General Assembly received with "deepest gratitude." In the state of North Carolina, "officials and all classes of Citizens" were sympathetic to the plight of Richmonders and were planning to create a committee of five to collect donations to "aid in the relief of the suffering needy, upon whom this calamity has fallen so heavily." Just as in Maryland, on 4 May in North Carolina's capital, businesses closed and churches opened in observance of Richmond's day of mourning. Despite their feelings of distress at the news of the Capitol disaster, southerners did not donate any significant amount of money to relieve the sufferers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Washington. The Great Accident at Richmond. Scenes and Reminiscences....," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 May 1870. "Evening Funerals," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April 1870. "Virginia. Condition of the Survivors of the Richmond Calamity – Testimonials from Abroad....," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1870. "By Telegraph. Condolence from [undecipherable]—Action of the State Convention," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870.

<sup>21</sup> "The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce....," *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond. Virginia Acts of Assembly 1869-1870, 168. "The Richmond Calamity," *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. "Georgia Legislature," *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. "Georgia Legislature," *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. There were no reports of whether North Carolinians donated to Richmond relief efforts.

Virginia-based journalists were quick to report to their readers news of relief efforts that were underway in various places in the wake of the Capitol collapse. Two days after the disaster, a writer for the *Petersburg Index* said that expressions of sympathy were “coming in from all quarters” while the *Richmond Daily Whig* reported that the disaster had created “a profound sensation in distant communities” that “excited a universal sympathy.” Richmonders perceived the sympathy to be a reminder of “a common brotherhood that rises superior to all geographical barriers and all distinctions of class and color,” and were comforted knowing that news of the calamity had “touched the hearts of tens of thousands of good people.” When Richmonders read news of northerners passing resolutions of sympathy, they felt gratified in their “hour of gloom, to receive such tokens of fraternal feeling.” These responses demonstrate that some Richmonders were receptive to reconciliation and grateful for the sympathy and support of northerners.<sup>22</sup>

According to much of the coverage in the northern press, the Capitol disaster also precipitated a re-establishment of peace and order in the city. While there is a chance that Richmonders did manage to overcome their significant differences—or at least set them aside for a short period following the calamities—that seems unlikely given the volatile state of local government, most clearly evidenced by the conflict over the mayor's election and the fact that the city had two competing police forces at the time of the disaster. War weariness likely colored reports from Richmond. Most white northerners,

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<sup>22</sup> “Latest from Richmond. Funerals of the Victims—Houses in Mourning...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “The General Gloom,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “Outside Sympathy,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Summary. The Great Catastrophe in Richmond!” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870.

including newspaper editors and writers, were less concerned with the postwar circumstances of Black southerners than they were with ensuring that the tumultuous Civil War years were over.

In their accounts of the Richmond disasters, sympathetic northerners characterized death as an equalizer that afflicted Richmonders regardless of class, race, or political affiliation. According to the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “the falling floor at Richmond, hurling black and white, rich and poor, those of both parties and of every rank, together into the jaws of death, has for a time obliterated the prejudices even of that proud city.” The calamity spared “neither Rebel nor Radical” and “beyond a general expression of disgust at local politics, nobody was brutal enough to rejoice over any partisan enemy’s affliction.” The day after the Capitol disaster, Governor Gilbert Walker gave a speech to a crowd of Richmonders assembled in front of the ruined Capitol. Those in attendance came from “all classes of the community and every shade of public opinion” and included white and Black members of both houses of Virginia’s legislature. Both police forces of Chahoon and Ellyson, the candidates vying for the mayoralty, met and adopted resolutions in memory of those who died, and both forces agreed to participate in the funeral ceremonies. “All late political feeling is forgotten,” proclaimed the Arkansas-based *Morning Republican*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [Untitled], *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 30 April 1870. “Washington. The Great Accident at Richmond. Scenes and Reminiscences...,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Expression of Grief and Sympathy with the Sufferers. A Vast Meeting in Front of the Fatal Edifice...,” *New York Times*, 29 April 1870. “Latest by Telegraph! Midnight Dispatch. The Richmond Disaster!...,” *Morning Republican*, 29 April 1870.

Another way in which the press depicted Richmonders as coming together was over the death of James Bland, a Black state senator for Charlotte and Prince Edward counties, who died at the Capitol. Bland was an accomplished politician: he participated in all Republican conventions since 1867; was a member of the Constitutional Convention, where he served on the Committee on the Elective Franchise; and a large majority elected him to serve in the state Senate. In 1869, Bland worked as Assistant Assessor of Internal Revenue for the counties of Charlotte and Appomattox—the first Black person appointed to such a position. He was popular among his constituents, who valued his “integrity, ability, liberality, patriotism, and rising statesmanship,” as well as his friendship.<sup>24</sup>

Bland’s friends unsurprisingly penned laudatory obituaries that depicted him as a competent and successful politician, but their references to his goals for Black equality were surprising given his comparatively moderate views, which included support for the reenfranchisement of former Confederates, and the fact that prior to his death he considered switching to the Democratic Party. In Frederick Douglass’s *New Era*, J. Wesley Cromwell reported that Bland’s death was untimely for the Black community, as Bland worked toward elevating “his race to a possession of all the privileges and immunities enjoyed by other citizens.” He predicted Bland’s death would have detrimental effects on the “just, peaceable, and permanent reconstruction” of Virginia. Cromwell believed Bland was destined for even higher office due to his popularity,

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<sup>24</sup> Ervin L. Jordan Jr., “J.W.D. Bland,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, last modified 2 November 2015, [http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Bland\\_James\\_William\\_D\\_1844-1870#start\\_entry](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Bland_James_William_D_1844-1870#start_entry). J. Wesley Cromwell, “The Late Senator Bland,” *New Era*, 12 May 1870.

talents, and integrity. P.J. Mintor, another friend, appreciated Bland's "noble traits of character," which included his "pure motives" and earnestness. Noting his relative youth and potential for future political success, Mintor reported, "With the broad field of life before him, I could almost see the very paths of glory and fame which fortune had laid out for his feet to tread in." Mintor opined that "Virginia has lost a good citizen and the race a promising son." Given that readers of *New Era* were primarily Black, it is to be expected that obituaries written by friends of Bland highlighted his significant accomplishments.<sup>25</sup>

Because of his relative conservatism, white publications' coverage of Bland ranged from fleeting mentions of his death to praising his accomplishments and characterizing him as a model Black American. In Arkansas and Indiana, respectively, the *Morning Republican* and *Evansville Journal* perfunctorily reported that both Black and white members of the legislature mourned Bland's death, including Conservatives, and that white and Black senators followed his hearse at his funeral. The Baltimore *Sun* noted that Bland "is spoken of as the ablest of the colored delegation in the Virginia Legislature...He was withal of a liberal and conciliatory temper." The *Wisconsin State Register* believed Bland to be "a leading man among his race."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> J. Wesley Cromwell, "The Late Senator Bland," *New Era*, 12 May 1870. P.J. Mintor, "The Late Senator Bland," *New Era*, 12 May 1870.

<sup>26</sup> Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 238. Bland promoted reconciliation and economic recovery, and did not seek to disenfranchise former Confederates. Conservatives endorsed this agenda (238). "Latest by Telegraph! Midnight Dispatch. The Richmond Disaster!...", *Morning Republican*, 29 April 1870. "The Richmond Disaster—Greatest Calamity Since Burning of Theatre in 1811—Richmond in Mourning...", *Evansville Journal*, 29 April 1870. "The Calamity at Richmond, VA," *Sun*, 28 April 1870. "The Richmond Calamity," *Wisconsin State Register*, 7 May 1870.

A tribute to Bland printed in the Richmond *Enquirer*, a Conservative-leaning local publication, surprisingly echoed sentiments found in moderate and Republican publications. A columnist reported that Bland's death resulted in "universal regret"—further cementing the idea that both Black and white people mourned him—and condescendingly opined, "no one of pure African blood on this continent has gained so enviable a reputation." The reporter for the *Enquirer* believed Bland to be a "superior" member of the Black race because he was smart, displayed fine manners, and had a promising future—in all likelihood due to his conciliatory attitude towards white people. The Republican *Chicago Tribune* and the Vermont-based *Manchester Journal* reprinted the *Enquirer's* tribute to Bland. By reprinting the tribute—which was originally published in a Richmond-based newspaper—it is evident that northern editors held the same beliefs as their southern counterparts as to what made Black men "respectable" in the eyes of whites, and also supported the northern belief that Richmonders came together in the wake of the calamity.<sup>27</sup>

Undoubtedly many of these reports of Bland's political success and the alleged racial unification that occurred in the wake of the Capitol disaster stemmed from stories originally printed in Virginia newspapers. Supposedly, both white and Black members of the Senate followed Bland's hearse to Burkeville—a town approximately sixty miles south-west of Richmond—and from there a group of Black Virginians traveled with Bland's hearse to Farmville, Bland's hometown, for the funeral. The *Petersburg Index* argued that "the colored race of the State have lost their strongest man in the

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<sup>27</sup> "Personal," *Chicago Tribune*, 6 May 1870. [Untitled], *Manchester Journal*, 10 May 1870.



Legislature,” and, unsurprisingly, the Republican *Richmond Daily Whig* praised Bland’s “good sense, good principles, and sound and elevated views of public duty.” The columnist contended that white Richmonders were mourning Bland’s death just as much as the Black community.<sup>28</sup>

There is some evidence—apart from newspaper reports and obituaries—suggesting that some white Richmonders were, to a degree, truly grieving the death of Bland. The lieutenant governor of the commonwealth and president of the state Senate, John Lawrence Marye, was in charge of a committee of five charged with writing resolutions to honor Bland. Marye had fought for the Confederacy during the war, and advocated for the reenfranchisement of former Confederates while serving as a delegate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention. Because Marye was a Conservative, it is not surprising that in his address to the Senate he referenced Bland’s comparatively moderate political beliefs and willingness to work with his white colleagues. Marye noted that Bland had been “considerate of and respectful towards the views and interests of the white race” and said he and other white senators had been “impressed with the conviction that [Bland had] faithfully endeavored to promote the true and permanent welfare of both [races].” Marye praised Bland’s “earnest efforts to draw the two races into relations of mental benefit and good will.” Despite their differing political agendas, Marye described Bland as an “honest and true man” who fought for what he believed was right. During the

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<sup>28</sup> “Telegraphic. Later from Richmond. All Business Suspended...,” *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. “Prince Edward. Funeral of (Colored) Senator Bland,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full Particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “Senator Bland,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “The Late Senator Bland,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870.

years they worked together, Marye grew to admire his professionalism and courage, and thought of him as a friend. On 29 April, three days before the resolutions were passed, Conservative senator Edgar Snowden gave a tribute to Bland in the Senate. Similar to Marye, Snowden also characterized Bland as a man of high character who was devoted to his work. The sentiments expressed in the resolutions to honor Bland were not unique—members of the Richmond Bar passed resolutions honoring their colleagues Patrick Henry Aylett, Nathaniel Howard, and Powhatan Roberts, and in their remarks praised their “professional excellence” and their “cordial relations of friendship.”<sup>29</sup>

The Capitol disaster, James River flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire devastated Richmond in 1870. Virginians and Americans throughout the country, particularly those living in northern cities, were instrumental in helping Richmonders recover from these calamities. Newspapers facilitated and reported outpourings of sympathy and feelings of goodwill toward their counterparts in the Virginia capital. Ultimately, the feelings of sympathy and goodwill as well as the provision of fiscal relief demonstrate that these disasters were a contributing factor to the full-fledged reconciliation between northern and southern whites that would take place in the decade to come. White Americans erased their former sectional divisions, embracing white supremacy and annihilating the political, legal, social, and economic advances Black Americans made during Reconstruction.

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<sup>29</sup> “Tributes of Respect to the Memory of Senator Bland,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “General Assembly,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “From Richmond. Proceedings of the Legislature,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. “The Calamity. More Donations and Sympathy. Additional Casualties...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 2 May 1870.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: “RICHMOND...RISES FROM HER ASHES”: RELIEF AND REBUILDING**

On the last Saturday in April, members of the Richmond relief committee were busy seeking donations to remedy the suffering caused by the Capitol collapse that occurred only four days prior. Committee members found that there was a greater amount of need than originally believed, with one writer describing the families of the dead and wounded as “distressed for the necessities of life,” according to the *Alexandria Gazette*. They appealed “to the humane and charitable at home and abroad to contribute to the relief” of their neighbors, and relied on their political, commercial, and personal networks in targeted attempts to raise money. Richmonders, Virginians, and eventually other Americans outside the commonwealth answered the call to help, and by October the committee had received over \$80,000 in donations and assisted hundreds of families, widows, and the wounded. In addition to providing aid to those affected by the devastating events of 1870, Richmonders also spent the months following the collapse, flood, and fire rebuilding the Capitol and considering how best to avoid similar disasters in the future.<sup>1</sup>

The Capitol disaster, James River flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire affected the capital in different ways. The collapse at the Capitol received the most attention in Virginia publications because of the number of fatalities, the political and social

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<sup>1</sup> [Untitled], *Alexandria Gazette*, 2 May 1870. The title quote is taken from: “Work Cut Out for This Year,” *Daily State Journal*, 4 January 1871. “Richmond, Phoenix-like, rises from her ashes, and after its baptism of fire, comes forth like gold from the refiner’s hands.”

prominence of some of the victims, and the sudden and unexpected nature of the calamity itself. This was the only disaster in 1870 for which Richmonders created a local and ad-hoc relief committee, and in which Richmonders were the recipients of state and local governmental support. The flood, while damaging for Richmond's business sector and to the Black inhabitants of the Rocketts neighborhood, received far less attention—both in the local press and in terms of relief efforts—for several reasons: the flood caused significantly less destruction to Richmond than to other portions of the state; Richmonders had some warning of the coming deluge so could carry out some preparations; no lives were lost in the capital; and the majority of those who lost their homes and belongings were Black. The Spotswood Hotel fire captured the attention of the local and national press for a short time, but despite eight people losing their lives in the conflagration, no relief committee was established to assist the families of the dead. This absence of post-fire relief can be attributed to the relative frequency of urban fires in the nineteenth century and it is possible that Richmonders were feeling ambivalent about relief efforts following a third disaster in one year, and some may have already contributed what they were able to the Capitol disaster relief fund.

The Capitol collapse and the Spotswood hotel fire also spurred short-lived discussions in the press about the safety of public buildings and various measures to protect oneself from fires. In the nineteenth century, people distinguished between natural disasters—calamities arising from occurrences in the natural world that caused great loss of life, such as a flood—and those disasters which were seemingly caused by human action or inaction. Those that fell into the latter category seemed to be, to some degree,

preventable, and people proposed and considered new regulations, conducted research, and performed other tasks in the hopes of averting disaster in the future, or at least mitigating the number of casualties.<sup>2</sup>

In 1870, Richmonders desperately needed the monetary donations of other Virginians and Americans more generally, as the Capitol disaster revealed the financial precarity of many families. The family of victim William Thompson, who were already living in distressing economic circumstances, had to bury his body “in the garden, by candle light” because they were unsure of where and to whom they could apply for aid following his death. A writer for the *Petersburg Index* noted that many families who lost their primary breadwinner at the Capitol “will fold the mantle of silence over their situations, and henceforce try to buffet the storm without assistance.” Despite their unwillingness to seek charity, however, the writer hypothesized that many might have to seek aid because their “necessities are so pressing.” While newspapers published obituaries of prominent Virginians who died—including Patrick Henry Aylett and Nathaniel Howard, both of whom were lawyers—the majority of the dead were from the middling to lower classes. Prior to their untimely deaths, victims worked in a variety of occupations, including as merchants, reporters, policemen, and carpenters. The families of the less than well-to-do would undoubtedly be struggling in the aftermath of the calamity, especially since the disasters hit a community already reeling from war-time

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xx-xxii. Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture,” in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, eds. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 23-47. Steven Biel, *American Disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4-6.

losses. The circumstances were even more dire for Black families. Even the wife of the late Senator James Bland was in great need of aid, as Bland died in debt and his small estate would not provide much for his family.<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to remedy the financial hardships of the needy, the Virginia General Assembly and the Richmond City Council both allocated money for the sufferers of the disaster, but neither body oversaw how or to whom those funds would be disbursed. While state governments were becoming more active in disaster relief in the post-Civil War era, allocating public money to assist disaster survivors was still a fairly rare occurrence, and it would have been especially unusual only five years after the war's end when both the city and the state were in dire financial straits. Two days after the Capitol collapse rumors began circulating in local newspapers that several state legislators hoped to designate money from the Virginia treasury to provide relief to those who needed it. The House of Delegates agreed to appropriate \$5,000 from the state treasury, despite some legislators' "doubt[ing] the constitutional right of the General Assembly to make the appropriation." The federal government did not provide any economic assistance after the calamity, which was typical for the time period.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Our Richmond Letter. Remarkable Incident of the Late Calamity—Sketches of the Capitol Disaster...", *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. "The Day," *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. "Letter from Gov. Walker," *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870. "The Late Senator Bland," *Rockingham Register*, 19 May 1870.

<sup>4</sup> "The Great Calamity. Large Meeting of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings...", *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. "From Richmond. Proceedings of the Legislature. [Reported for the Index,]" *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870. "The General Assembly of Virginia," *Rockingham Register*, 12 May 1870. "General Assembly of Virginia," *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870. "The Late Calamity in Richmond," *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. "From Richmond. Proceedings of the Legislature," *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, 2 May 1870, 396 and 5 May 1870, 405. See: Gareth Davies, "The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster, 1865-1900," *Journal of Policy History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 307-308. Davies argues that during the postwar period a "national politics of disaster" emerges, "with Washington far more to the fore

It was not unprecedented for Richmond's city government to intervene in the wake of a calamity that caused a great loss of life, including well-known members of the city's political and social elite. When a fire destroyed the Richmond Theater in 1811 and killed seventy-two people, the city government created an assortment of committees charged with a variety of responsibilities, including raising money—although those funds were to go towards the creation of a monument rather than assist those directly affected by the disaster. The Common Council, the city's governing board in 1811, established a burial committee that supervised the collection of remains, internment of ashes, and organized funeral processions. The Common Council charged another committee with visiting every home in the capital and Manchester—a small city that lies directly south of Richmond on the James River—to determine the number of dead. The Common Council created two more committees to collect donations for a monument memorializing the fire victims and another to investigate and determine the causes of the fire. While newspapers throughout the commonwealth and the country described some victims of the Capitol disaster as “Virginia's sons,” the sitting governor of Virginia and a United States senator were counted among the dead after the theater fire, along with many other well-known contemporaries.<sup>5</sup>

In 1870, Richmond's local and ad-hoc relief committee was similar to those established in disaster-afflicted communities in the antebellum era as well as those that would be organized in Chicago following the 1871 fire and in Charleston after the 1886

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than had been the case in the earlier nineteenth century” but this period of disaster relief “cannot reasonably be seen as having clearly anticipated the modern world of federal disaster politics” (306).

<sup>5</sup> Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America's First Great Disaster* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 57.

earthquake. The Richmond Chamber of Commerce acted quickly and formed a relief committee charged with soliciting and disbursing financial aid for the families of the dead and wounded. At a meeting of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce on 29 April, president David Burr stated that he believed it was necessary to provide support to those facing financial difficulties after the catastrophe. Burr described the families of the wounded and dead as “in deep distress, bodily and mentally,” and that it was “proper that the Chamber of Commerce, as an organized body, should take measures to render relief to the afflicted.” Members of the organization unanimously agreed that a committee of twenty-five men would “receive, collect and distribute donations.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to divvy up the responsibilities of relief, members organized the committee into several subcommittees. As he was president of the Chamber of Commerce, David Burr was chairman of the committee, and appointed Isaac Davenport Jr. treasurer. Five members composed a sub-committee in charge of distributing all funds. Committee members met every day at the First National Bank to receive applications for relief. A subcommittee of ten members reviewed applications and were in charge of ascertaining “the condition of such persons and families as are in need.” If the subcommittee approved the applicant’s request for assistance, then “prompt arrangements” would be made “to afford immediate relief.” Each ward in Richmond—

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<sup>6</sup> “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870.



Marshall, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Clay—had a designated subcommittee of five members charged with “obtaining subscriptions.”<sup>7</sup>

On 2 May, committee members began canvassing the city seeking donations. The *Richmond Daily Whig* described the committee as working to “relieve the widow and the orphan and those who are lying on a bed of suffering and pain.” This focus on the “widow and orphan” was one way to create a striking and sympathetic picture of those in need, particularly because seemingly weak and dependent women and children were often seen as the most deserving of assistance in the wake of calamities. The *Richmond Daily Whig* journalist was certain that Richmonders would liberally contribute to the relief fund because they were “deeply impressed with the awful solemnity of the occasion.” Accepting bank notes or checks, members of the relief committee visited every house in their designated ward between the hours of nine in the morning and six in the evening. If a household failed to donate money at the first visit, the committee members would come to their home a second time. On 14 May, the *Petersburg Index* reported that the committee was making daily visits and supporting at least one hundred and fifty-one families of the sufferers of the disasters.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Our Richmond Letter,” *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. “Our Calamity. Manifestation of Sympathy and Condolence Everywhere. Additional Facts and Incidents,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 2 May 1870.

<sup>8</sup> “Our Calamity. Manifestation of Sympathy and Condolence Everywhere. Additional Facts and Incidents,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 2 May 1870. “State News,” *Petersburg Index*, 14 May 1870. As Cynthia Kierner notes in *Inventing Disaster*, following a damaging fire in Portsmouth, “Donors most commonly instructed relief committees to use their contributions to help those who were most in need. While some generically cited widows and orphans as the most innocent and helpless—and therefore the most deserving—recipients, others specified that their donations go to ‘those who are Rendered destitute of Property or are Real Objects of Charity’ as a result of the fire” (150).

By early May, it was apparent that the Richmond relief committee was not receiving enough donations to provide adequate aid to the suffering. In addition to visiting every home in the city, the Committee on Visitation and Relief also appealed to Richmonders and Virginians elsewhere via newspapers. The *Petersburg Index*, which chronicled the activities of the committee and described in great detail the aftermath of the Capitol disaster, reprinted a notice in the *Richmond Dispatch* which said that committee members “found that there was an amount of distress of which they had no previous conception.” The committee sought donations from “the humane and charitable” in order to remedy the distressing situations of the needy, particularly the wounded.<sup>9</sup>

Virginians throughout the commonwealth—not just in the capital—moved quickly in the days after the collapse to attempt to provide financial help to the families of the dead and wounded. Residents of Petersburg formed their own committee to receive contributions and provided over \$200 to the Richmond Committee on Visitation and Relief. A collection of Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist congregations in Petersburg raised \$214 in support of the sufferers. In Staunton, inhabitants collected over \$600 to aid Richmonders, and in Shenandoah County, residents were “in favor of measures of relief,” but it is not known whether they were able to provide material assistance. The mayor of Harrisonburg served as chair of a committee established in the city to provide “relief [for] those needing assistance in consequence of the Richmond disaster.” Lewis McKenzie, a Conservative member of the U.S. House of Representatives, donated \$50 to assist the

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<sup>9</sup> “The Late Calamity in Richmond,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870.

most impoverished victims of the Capitol disaster, and also sent \$50 to the wife of the late Black Republican Senator James Bland.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the generosity of Richmonders, other Virginians, and Americans generally, the Committee on Visitation and Relief eventually proved to be fairly successful in raising money for the sufferers. Inhabitants of northern cities played a crucial role in helping Richmonders after the Capitol disaster, and by 5 May the committee had already received \$5,000 from benevolent northerners. By October, the committee received over \$80,000 in donations from Richmonders and Virginians, and they disbursed over \$77,000 of that amount, leaving treasurer Isaac Davenport Jr. with \$3,400. Reportedly, the Committee on Visitation and Relief visited 199 injured people. The number of “beneficiaries, families, or dependent connections of the injured” was 652, and they assisted thirty-one widows. The committee also noted that seventeen men survived the collapse but were living with permanent injuries. In Chicago a year later, the Relief and Aid Society spent \$4,000,000 to assist over one hundred and fifty thousand individuals after the fire. In comparison to Richmond, however, Chicago was a much larger city with a far greater number of inhabitants, the fire affected the lives of exponentially more people than the Capitol disaster, and, as a result of the enormous area

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<sup>10</sup> “Correspondence,” *Petersburg Index*, 16 May 1870. “State News,” *Petersburg Index*, 12 May 1870. “Relief Meeting,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. “Meeting of Citizens of Harrisonburg,” *Rockingham Register*, 12 May 1870. “Relief for the Richmond Sufferers,” *Petersburg Index*, 12 May 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. “Letter from Gov. Walker,” *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870. “The Late Senator Bland,” *Rockingham Register*, 19 May 1870.

destroyed by the fire, Chicago's Relief and Aid Society had to operate for a longer time period.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to reporting the news from Richmond, the northern press also played a crucial role in inspiring disaster relief efforts. As news of the disasters and affecting stories about their suffering victims spread across the country, monetary support from places outside of Richmond—particularly northern cities—arrived to the capital and this external aid was imperative to recovery efforts. Newspapers throughout the United States reported the disasters, which led people to organize fund drives and other relief projects, and then press reports detailed their efforts.

Although some of these northern efforts were orchestrated locally, sometimes Richmond residents appealed directly to northerners for help. Elizabeth Van Lew, a Richmonder famous for spying for the Union during the Civil War, was perhaps uniquely well-positioned to apply to northerners for financial aid after the Capitol disaster, given her social and political networks. The *Chicago Tribune* published one of her calls for donations, in which she noted that such aid would “[invoke] the spirit of charity in its broadest sense, without any reference to political or social diversities.” She made a similar request to Daniel Fox, the mayor of Philadelphia. Van Lew pledged “the money shall be used only for the needy and destitute sufferers.” While the *Chicago Tribune* never published information as to whether Chicagoans sent Van Lew money directly, Fox

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<sup>11</sup> “From Richmond. Circular from the Distributing Committee,” *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870. “The Richmond Capitol Sufferers,” *Southern Churchman*, 20 October 1870. “In its eighteen months of fire relief operations, the Society by its own count spent over \$4,000,000 as it in some fashion attended to the needs of 157,000 individuals.” Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 87. See also: Committee of Visitation and Relief for Victims of the Capitol Disaster Contribution Reports, 1870, miscellaneous reel 5362, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

sent her a \$1,000 check. Van Lew presented the check to the Committee on Visitation and Relief, and said that if the members accepted the money, they must also allow her to serve alongside them on the committee. The *Petersburg Index* reported that the “gentlemen of the Board told her they would accept the money, but could not agree to the other part of the proposition, as it would not be proper to place a lady on the committee.” Instead of capitulating to their demands, Van Lew created her own committee that included “gentlemen of both political parties” who would “distribute under her supervision such funds as she may receive” from her appeals to northerners. She continued to circulate appeals to describe to “people of the United States...the condition and circumstances of the sufferers by the recent calamity at the Capitol of our State.” Van Lew stated that at least 350 people were suffering as a result of the disaster, and asked to “invoke the spirit of harmony and charities...and in our sympathies ignore all political and social distinctions in this hour of common suffering and sorrow.” While this episode not only demonstrates the generosity of one local northern political leader, it is also an example of how one woman used her own fundraising efforts to wield power and how residents of Richmond, as in other American communities, formed committees to dispense aid locally in the aftermath of disasters.<sup>12</sup>

The local press was instrumental in orchestrating organized disaster relief efforts for Richmond in other cities. In Boston, journalists and newspaper editors urged residents

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). “Virginia. An Appeal for Aid to the Sufferers by the Late Richmond Calamity,” *Chicago Tribune*, 14 May 1870. “The Late Calamity in Richmond,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. The Approaching Election—Dismissal of Wrenn for Shooting Ben Scott..,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “An Appeal,” *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870.

to turn their sympathy into “a material form which will indicate [their] sincerity and result in providing the means for relieving much of the distress” following the Capitol collapse. They expressed their hopes that Bostonians of all classes would assist in raising a significant sum so as to reflect well on the city. Residents formed a relief committee, and on 28 May the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported that the fund had already raised approximately \$20,000. Ultimately, Bostonians contributed much to the relief of the Richmond sufferers, and by August had contributed about \$78,000 to the relief fund for the Capitol disaster.<sup>13</sup>

In other northern cities, individuals led efforts to solicit and receive monetary donations for the victims of the Capitol disaster. In Chicago, W.A. Butters—a former resident of Richmond—sent a check to assist suffering families in the former Confederate capital. The editor of the *Richmond Dispatch* thanked Butters and said that while the suffering was worse than anticipated, Richmonders were “much consoled by the kind feeling of our Northern friends.” The editor’s words demonstrated that Richmonders gratefully acknowledged and needed the help of northern benefactors to fully recover from the disaster and likely inspired Butters to appeal to Chicagoans and residents of the Midwest for contributions. On 9 May, the paper reported that the amount Chicagoans contributed was “thus far under \$4,000,” indicating that the amount of funds collected, while substantial, was lower than anticipated.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Untitled], *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 17 May 1870. “In General,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 28 May 1870. [Untitled], *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 1 August 1870.

<sup>14</sup> “Railroad Election – Sympathy for the Richmond Sufferers,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1870. “The Richmond Disaster,” *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 1870. Wm A. Butters, “The Richmond Disaster,” *Chicago Tribune*, 4 May 1870. “Aid for the Richmond Sufferers,” *Chicago Tribune*, 9 May 1870.

Perhaps because of the extensive business ties between Richmond and New York and the fact that Confederate sympathies had been widespread in this northern metropolis, New York-based businesses, individuals, and the local government were generous in their financial assistance to Virginians after the Capitol collapse and flood. A.W. Dunn sent a \$100 check from the Brooklyn Life Insurance Company to Virginia Governor Gilbert Walker, writing, "As a Virginian and a soldier in the late war, I am proud to represent a Northern Company whose officers have the sympathy to contribute to the relief" of those who were "rendered destitute" by the Capitol disaster. The bank of Glendenning, Davis, and Amory sent \$100 to Walker. An unnamed New York merchant authorized Richmond authorities to "draw on him for \$1,000," while James T. Soutter and Benjamin Hart sent \$1,000 each to the governor. On 2 May, the New York Chamber of Commerce met and appointed a committee of fifteen men to solicit funds for relief. By 8 May, the committee had raised \$8,000. New Yorkers continued to financially assist Virginians after the flood that affected the entire state in the fall of 1870. The New York Gold Exchange sent \$2,000; the Stock Exchange donated \$25,000; and the Gold Exchange raised \$10,000.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond. "The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce..." *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. "Latest from Richmond. Funerals of the Victims—Houses in Mourning..." *Petersburg Index*, 29 April 1870. "The Great Calamity. Large Meetings of Citizens on the Capitol Square. Proceedings of Other Meetings..." *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. "Our Richmond Letter," *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. "Relief for the Richmond Sufferers," *Petersburg Index*, 2 May 1870. "The News," *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. "Meeting in New York to Aid the Sufferers by the Richmond Calamity," *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. "New York Subscription for the Richmond Sufferers," *Petersburg Index*, 10 May 1870. Executive Papers of Governor Walker, box 1, folder 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond. "New York Subscriptions to the Virginia Sufferers," *Virginia Herald*, 13 October 1870.

In Philadelphia, ordinary Philadelphians, businesses, and the mayor provided material and fiscal assistance to Richmonders. After the Capitol disaster, a former Richmond resident who had since moved to Philadelphia sent crutches and “a quantity of excellent port wine” to the sufferers. Tobacco merchants Woodward, Bro. and Company contributed \$75 to the Richmond relief fund. On 30 April, the mayor of Philadelphia established a relief fund, and by 11 May Philadelphians had donated \$5,589.75. After the flood, Philadelphians again offered their assistance to Virginians. Jacob Semon donated \$50, Thomas A. Scott offered \$1,000, and the president of the Philadelphia Board of Bankers gave \$250 to Governor Walker.<sup>16</sup>

Baltimoreans’ efforts to raise money took several different forms. In Baltimore, former residents of Richmond banded together and created a committee of twelve who collected contributions—either monetary relief or supplies—and sent them to the mayor of Richmond. One columnist thought that Baltimoreans would respond “warmly and liberally, to the voice of suffering and distress” and “not be behind in the good work.” One committee member collected \$3,000, and residents seemed to be attuned to the great need of Richmonders. Churches took up collections; the Firemen’s Insurance Company appropriated \$1,000 for the relief fund; and the Right Worthy Grand Lodge of Maryland of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows collected \$100. Newspaper editors established

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<sup>16</sup> “Our Richmond Letter. The Approaching Election—Dismissal of Wrenn for Shooting Ben Scott...,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “Substantial Sympathy,” *Virginia Herald*, 5 May 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. The Approaching Election—Dismissal of Wrenn for Shooting Ben Scott...,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “The City. The Great Disaster. Action of the Chamber of Commerce...,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “[Second Dispatch] Funerals—Offers of Assistance from Abroad...,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “Relief for the Richmond Sufferers,” *Petersburg Index*, 11 May 1870. [Untitled], *Virginia Herald*, 16 May 1870. Executive Papers of Governor Walker, box 1, folder 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond.



subscription lists: the day the editor of the *American* opened their list he received \$1,000 in donations; the *Gazette* was similarly successful, raising \$1,157.50 in one day. Two men collected \$1,450 from merchants in Baltimore in the course of a morning. J. H. Adams and Wilson Brunslee both sent \$100 checks to Governor Walker. By 12 May, the *Religious Herald* reported that Baltimoreans had raised \$15,000 to aid the sufferers. After the flood in October, the mayor of Baltimore Robert Banks wrote to Governor Walker that the recent disasters “have greatly moved my sympathies,” and asked how he and his fellow Baltimoreans could help in the post-flood relief effort.<sup>17</sup>

In a few northern cities, theaters held benefit performances to raise money for the Richmond sufferers, but these were not always successful ventures. At the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, no one seemed to have attended the benefit performance, and the *Philadelphia Press* opined that it was “difficult to understand why our charitable public, which is usually so liberal, failed to respond.” In Baltimore, the Front Street Theater and the Holliday Street Theatre held benefit performances, with the latter raising \$3,470. On 7 May in Washington, Laura Keane reprised her starring role in the play “Our American Cousin”—the play in which Keane herself was performing when Booth assassinated Lincoln—in a benefit show, and proceeds went to the Richmond sufferers.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Richmond Calamity. Meeting of Native Virginians and other Citizens of Baltimore - Aid and Sympathy for the Sufferers...” *Sun*, 3 May 1870. “Meeting in Behalf of the Richmond Sufferers,” *Sun*, 2 May 1870. “Local Matters,” *Sun*, 5 May 1870. “Local Matters,” *Sun*, 4 May 1870. [Untitled], *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870. “Letter from Richmond,” *Sun*, 11 May 1870. “The Late Calamity in Richmond,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Facts, Incidents, &c.,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “Richmond Calamity! Maryland Joins Virginia in Humiliation and Prayer. Sympathy and Liberality of Baltimore,” *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. “Summary,” *Religious Herald*, 12 May 1870. Secretary of the Commonwealth Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond. Executive Papers of Governor Walker, box 1, folder 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

“Our American Cousin” was a popular play throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, but given its historical significance it might have been surprising to contemporary audiences that the theater company found that particular play to be an appropriate fundraiser for inhabitants of the former capital of the Confederacy. Additionally, the Choral Society of Washington held a benefit performance at Lincoln Hall. The musicians volunteered to perform, a large crowd attended, and the organizers were able to donate \$700 to Richmond.<sup>18</sup>

While the press played a significant role in enticing Americans to contribute to the relief of Richmonders, there was scant coverage on how those donations were disbursed, the extent to which such aid was helpful, or how the racialized politics of the period might have affected monetary distribution. Following the Capitol calamity, the *Petersburg Index* reported that the Richmond relief committee had received \$5,000 in donations from northerners, but gave no indication as to when or how that money would be distributed. Similarly, a writer for the *Religious Herald* wrote that Americans had raised \$6,400 for the sufferers, but did not state who gave money or how it would aid the needy. Based on reports from northern papers, the cities of Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington raised \$114,759.75 following the Capitol calamity, and the cities of New York and Philadelphia raised \$38,300 for sufferers in the commonwealth after the flood, though a relief committee was not established in

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<sup>18</sup> “Philadelphia and the Richmond Calamity,” *Virginia Herald*, 9 May 1870. “Local Matters,” *Sun*, 5 May 1870. “Local Matters,” *Sun*, 4 May 1870. [Untitled], *Virginia Herald*, 12 May 1870. [Untitled], *Daily National Republican*, 7 May 1870. “An Appeal for the Richmond Sufferers,” *Daily National Republican*, 2 May 1870. “The Choral Society’s Concert,” *Daily National Republican*, 5 May 1870. “The Choral Society’s Concert,” *Daily National Republican*, 9 May 1870.

Richmond to provide humanitarian aid to those who required it. As fires in urban areas were a common occurrence in the nineteenth century, coverage of the Spotswood Hotel fire in newspapers based outside Virginia was brief and relatively perfunctory in comparison to the Capitol disaster, and there was no report of a relief committee being formed to assist those sufferers.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the relief efforts following the Capitol disaster, which was overseen by a single relief committee to address the effects of a disaster in a localized area, multiple organizations were established within the state to help Virginians after the great freshet. For the Virginians who escaped the flood with their lives, many lost their homes, belongings, livelihoods, or families, and thus were in need of much assistance. In Rockingham County, many residents were in a “destitute condition” as a result of the disaster, including at least fifty families that lived along the Shenandoah River “who lost every rag of clothing and every mouthful of provision they had.” To mitigate these circumstances, state legislators formed a relief committee that solicited and distributed money throughout the commonwealth while smaller groups were formed in counties and cities, particularly those in areas most affected by the deluge. As Paula Green notes, “the affected areas in Virginia were geographically spread out and required massive aid distribution on a statewide scale.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “From Richmond. Circular From the Distributing Committee,” *Petersburg Index*, 6 May 1870.

“Summary. The Great Catastrophe in Richmond!” *Religious Herald*, 5 May 1870.

<sup>20</sup> “Relief Meeting,” *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870. “For the Register,” *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870. Paula F. Green, *The Great Virginia Flood of 1870* (Charleston: The History Press, 2020), 103. For more information about the various relief organizations established throughout the commonwealth, see Green, *The Great Virginia Flood*, 101-125. Green focuses on the state-sanctioned relief committee as well as local efforts—or the lack thereof, in the case of the capital—in Lynchburg, Page County, Harpers Ferry, and Richmond.

On 7 October, Governor Walker asked members of the General Assembly representing the areas most affected by the flood—localities on the Shenandoah and James rivers and their tributaries—to form a relief committee in order to collect and distribute funds “to those most needy and deserving.” Walker stated that he had already received “generous tenders of material aid, and expressions of heartfelt sympathy from different portions of the country, both north and south.” Legislators Keiley and Turner of Warren County and legislators Daniel, Bradley, and Jones of Albemarle were appointed to the committee, as were three senators. The official relief committee, however, moved slowly in comparison to local relief efforts.<sup>21</sup>

Many local relief committees were established in the parts of the state hit hardest by the deluge. In Harrisonburg, donors were directed to send contributions to a group of three men who distributed money and material aid to those in need in the upper Shenandoah Valley. In the town of Edom in Rockingham County, a committee of seven men were appointed to a newly-formed Committee of Solicitation to gather donations. Any funds they received would be passed on to the Distributing Committee to disburse. In Alexandria, after garnering donations of clothing, furniture, bedding, and money, the Corn Exchange sent three men to Front Royal in Warren County to provide immediate relief to the sufferers in that town. The men from the Corn Exchange worked with those in Front Royal to create a sub-committee in charge of distributing the donations from Alexandria. Those in Front Royal were grateful for their largesse, and a local paper said

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<sup>21</sup> *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, 7 October 1870, 672, 674. “The Recent Flood—Governor’s Message,” *Virginia Herald*, 10 October 1870. “General Assembly,” *Rockingham Register*, 13 October 1870. Green, *The Great Virginia Flood*, 107.

“the noble and charitable spirit of the good citizens...should never be forgotten by the people of Warren.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the men of the Alexandria Corn Exchange, other Virginians demonstrated their generosity by sending money to Governor Walker, which he was then to distribute. The Cigar Makers Protective Union of Norfolk Virginia sent Walker a check for \$25, while other inhabitants of the same city sent \$647. Members of College Church Hampden Sydney in Farmville collected \$36, and apologized for the small sum, stating that “it is the best than an impoverished people, as we are; with a disastrous crop year as the last was, could do.” James Murray from Greenville in Augusta County contributed \$5.<sup>23</sup>

After the flood, one anonymous writer attempted to appeal to the sensibilities of New Yorkers and sought help for Virginians in need. In a column in the New York *Herald*, the writer asked inhabitants of New York to assist “the thousands of poor people, white and black” who were unduly suffering in the wake of the deluge. Their suffering, particularly the poorest Virginians, was worse after the flood than during the “most disastrous period of the war.” Because floodwaters devastated crops, mills, and livestock, the writer alleged that thousands were facing starvation unless outsiders rendered aid. While the writer planned to render aid on “behalf of the women and children,” they urged others to send money to the needy. Other publications described poverty-stricken

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<sup>22</sup> “Relief for the Sufferers of the Flood,” *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870. “Sufferers by the Flood.—Relief From Our Generous Neighbors of Alexandria,” *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870. “Relief Meeting,” *Virginia Herald*, 27 October 1870. “The Good Old City,” *Rockingham Register*, 27 October 1870.

<sup>23</sup> Executive Papers of Governor Walker, box 1, folder 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Virginians in similar ways, which was common for nineteenth century disaster reporting, and proved to be a useful way to garner donations from generous donors outside the commonwealth.<sup>24</sup>

Richmonders did not create local relief committees for either the flood or the fire that occurred at the end of the year. Given the relative frequency of urban fires and the comparably small number of dead, Richmonders might not have felt such a relatively small disaster required the formation of a relief committee. Additionally, given that the site of the fire was a hotel, the business owner was the biggest loser. Fortunately, the hotel was insured, which partially remedied the need for monetary relief. While the *Richmond Whig* and *Daily Dispatch* reported on the losses sustained by businesses after the deluge, personal property losses were not widely described, and Richmonders did not actively work to provide relief for people and businesses who needed it. Paula Green attributes their disinclination for a local relief organization to a few factors: continuing adherence to Victorian ideals of the undeserving poor; that Richmonders had already provided aid to members of their community following the Capitol disaster and might not be able to willing to contribute to other relief efforts so soon after another major calamity; and that the effects of the flood were not long-lasting or visible enough to the majority of the city's residents.<sup>25</sup>

It is also likely, as Green points out, that race played a large role in disaster relief efforts—or the lack thereof in the case of the flood. The *Richmond Whig* painted a grim

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<sup>24</sup> “The Late Flood. Project of Aid for the Sufferers,” *Rockingham Register*, 13 October 1870.

<sup>25</sup> Green, *The Great Virginia Flood*, 119-124.

picture of the state of the Rocketts community, a predominantly Black Richmond neighborhood, after the deluge. Men, women, and children were wading through mud to find that the deluge had swept away their homes and belongings. “Unless the charitable give them immediate assistance there must be great suffering among them. It will not do to say that some of them are thriftless, and therefore, not deserving and on that account, withhold aid from all” reported the *Richmond Whig*. The *Daily Dispatch*, a Conservative publication, reported that “no houses of value in or around the town have been swept away.” It is highly likely that the white, upper-class Richmonders who had the means to provide relief to their Black neighbors decided not to do so because of racial prejudice.<sup>26</sup>

Even though they did not create relief committees following the flood and fire, the Richmond community attempted to provide financial support by holding benefit performances, much like their contemporaries in northern locales. Following the deluge, the proprietors of the Academy of Music offered their building to the mayor of Richmond for a benefit performance with all proceeds to go towards those suffering. The mayor agreed to hold the benefit at the Academy of Music on the evening of 7 October, but no further reports made it into the pages of local papers concerning the event, so it is unknown if the benefit even took place, or how much money was raised. On 3 January 1871, two survivors of the Spotswood Hotel fire held a benefit in Richmond together with their colleagues in the Martinetti-Ravel and De Lave Combination troupe. The *Daily State Journal* hoped for “a crowded house,” because the survivors “lost all their

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<sup>26</sup> “After the Flood,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 4 October 1870. “Local Matters. The Rise of the James. Richmond Flooded...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. See Green’s discussion of these contrasting reports: *The Great Virginia Flood*, 120-121.

wardrobe, besides a large amount of baggage, at the Spotswood fire.” Just as with the benefit performance in October, the local press did not report on the extent to which the event was successful.<sup>27</sup>

Just as disaster relief efforts in this era were uneven and mostly localized, attempts to prevent future disasters were similarly local and ad-hoc. The collapse at the Capitol led some Richmonders to request a review of the safety of public buildings in the city, many of which had been neglected as a result of financial hardships that had plagued the city since the start of the Civil War. A correspondent for the *Petersburg Index* reported that many Richmonders expressed concern about the issue—in particular, and not surprisingly, the integrity of the Capitol was the cause of great unease—and called for the City Council to create an Inspector of Public Buildings. Several years prior to the calamity, scaffolding had been installed in order to support the brick columns of the Capitol’s portico. The brick columns themselves were “marvels of bad workmanship” according to the *Petersburg Index*, and many believed the columns would collapse and the remainder of the building along with them. The correspondent noted: “The Capitol is not safe. It may fall in a week, and it may not fall in many years. But is the old shell as valuable as the lowliest man it might fall upon and kill?”<sup>28</sup>

One writer for the local *Richmond Daily Whig* attributed the lack of safety in public buildings to the economic strains the city—and the entirety of the South—was

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<sup>27</sup> “A Benefit for the Sufferers by the Flood,” *Daily Dispatch*, 3 October 1870. Green was also unable to locate any more information about this benefit. See: Green, *The Great Virginia Flood*, 121. “The Theatre—Lila and Zoe’s Benefit,” *Daily State Journal*, 2 January 1871. “The Theatre,” *Daily State Journal*, 3 January 1871.

<sup>28</sup> “Letter from Richmond. The Public Buildings—Their Insecurity...,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870.



suffering from since the start of the Civil War and inadequate building standards.

“Prostration and poverty” permeated the South, and many cities had been unable to gather the money needed to make necessary building repairs. The writer also found fault with contemporary building inspection standards, arguing that they “all seem to be a failure. However perfect they may be on paper, in execution they are always imperfect.” Richmond’s 1870 city charter allowed for the city council to designate spaces in the city in which no wood buildings were to be erected, and the council also had the power to prohibit the erection of buildings unless they were constructed with brick and mortar, stone and mortar, or any other non-flammable material. It was not until 1922 that the building codes were revised, and included regulations for fire escapes, among other imperative safety requirements.<sup>29</sup>

Richmonders turned a critical eye to the design flaws of churches throughout the city in the days and weeks after the collapse, probably because they were other public structures that served large groups of people. The foundation of a church on the corner of Third and Grace streets, despite having been built only two years prior, had sunk twelve inches and the interior gallery was built without girders or braces. St. Luke’s Church and Emanuel Church on Brook Road had similar failings, according to a report in the *Petersburg Index*. Architect and engineer Charles Dimmock wrote to the paper after reading the report and urged calm, stating that such news “endeavor[s] to awaken

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<sup>29</sup> “The Press on the Calamity,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. *An Act Providing a Charter for the City of Richmond, Approved May 24, 1870, as Amended by Acts Approved July 11, 1870, March 29, 1871, and March 29, 1873*, 35. *Building Code of the City of Richmond Virginia Approved January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1922* (Richmond: Old Dominion Press, Inc., 1922). See also: Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

apprehension where none should exist.” Dimmock proposed that the church on the corner of Third and Grace streets had larger timbers than other buildings that had roofs of comparable size, and that “of its security there can be no doubt.” Carpenters John and George Gibson echoed Dimmock’s sentiments. Richmonders continued to be wary despite such assurances. Prior to a Sunday school celebration on 8 May at St. Paul’s Church, architects, engineers, and mechanics tested the galleries to determine if supports were needed underneath them to ensure their safety. Patrick Henry Aylett’s funeral took place at St. Paul’s a few days prior, and the low number of attendants led one reporter to speculate that “people seem[ed] to have acquired a lively fear of a crowded house.”<sup>30</sup>

Inspired by the collapse in Richmond, people elsewhere in Virginia and in a few cities throughout the country called for public buildings to be inspected and renovated to ensure their safety. In Harrisonburg, Virginia, residents believed the courthouse to be “a dangerous place for a large crowd” and asked for the courthouse walls to be inspected and strengthened, if necessary. “Let the appalling accident at Richmond teach all a lesson...human life is more precious than money,” argued a *Rockingham Register* journalist. The Capitol at Vicksburg, Mississippi, was supposedly in a “dangerous condition,” according to the local paper. The roof was almost collapsing, and the estimated renovation cost was between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Mississippians were asking the state legislature to immediately appropriate funds. In Washington, the War Department building was declared unsafe and the number of clerks present at one time in

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<sup>30</sup> “Letter from Richmond. The Public Buildings—Their Insecurity...,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “[Communicated],” *Petersburg Index*, 7 May 1870. “Letter from Richmond. Political—Major Calvert Sinking...,” *Petersburg Index*, 7 May 1870. “The Richmond Calamity. Details of the Frightful Tragedy in the Virginia Capitol—Full Particulars of the Sad Occurrence...,” *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870.

the building's upper floors were to be monitored to prevent a possible collapse.

Additionally, the Navy Department building was thought to be structurally unsound. The public's concern for the structural integrity of public buildings had waned by mid-May, so many newspapers did not follow up on their initial reports.<sup>31</sup>

For many years prior to the collapse, Richmonders expressed concern about the structural integrity of the Capitol. The Capitol was the first neo-classical building erected in the United States when it was completed in 1798. Inspired by a Roman temple in France, Thomas Jefferson and Charles-Louis Cl  risseau designed the architectural plans for the Capitol. During the Civil War, Confederates used the courtroom to house the rebel government's Senate. Throughout the war, the floor of the courtroom began to sag and sway, so much so that Confederate senators refused to occupy the chamber until the courtroom was inspected. Carpenters declared the space safe after an examination, but had their inspection "been more thorough, the alarming insecurity of the floor would have been detected, and this recent heart-rending disaster have been avoided," wrote one reporter after the collapse.<sup>32</sup>

Following the calamity, many Richmonders hoped that the state would fund a complete rebuilding of the Capitol, as opposed to a renovation. A writer for the *Richmond Daily Whig* optimistically anticipated that the General Assembly would build a new

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<sup>31</sup> "Insecurity of Our Court-House," *Rockingham Register*, 5 May 1870. [Untitled], *Petersburg Index*, 7 May 1870. "Telegraphic Summary," *Petersburg Index*, 7 May 1870. [Untitled], *Virginia Herald*, 9 May 1870.

<sup>32</sup> "Virginia State Capitol," National Register of Historic Places, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=7bab415c-3640-40a4-8096-36eeee549096>. "The Richmond Calamity. Facts, Incidents, &c.," *Petersburg Index*, 4 May 1870. "The Richmond Calamity," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 May 1870.

Capitol and that the state “will bear the expense cheerfully, rather than see the lives of our most valuable public men and the public archives daily and hourly imperiled.” In order to mediate the cost of a new building, the writer suggested that the state could save thousands of dollars by relying on the labor of incarcerated individuals. A report in the *Petersburg Index* claimed that many residents advocated destroying “the old and ugly and now hateful house that has so long defaced Richmond.” Some Richmonders preferred a new building made out of “our native granite that shall be an ornament to the city and the State” rather than renovating the remaining structure. Just like the writer for the *Richmond Daily Whig*, the *Petersburg Index* journalist also proposed relying on the labor of incarcerated individuals to save costs. Perhaps many Richmonders at the time found the Capitol to be an eye-sore, which would at least partly explain their willingness to replace a structure that Thomas Jefferson had designed.<sup>33</sup>

The hopes of a brand-new structure were dashed, however, after a group of architects, engineers, and carpenters inspected the Capitol in the days immediately following the collapse. On 29 April the Superintendent of Public Buildings, W.C. Newberry, reported to the General Assembly that the disaster was caused by a break in one of the main girders supporting the floor joists. Additionally, the inspection committee declared the entire Capitol unsafe “from age and repeated alterations at various times...and is fast advancing to a dilapidated and ruinous condition.” Newberry recommended the removal or repair of the floor above the hall of the House of Delegates

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<sup>33</sup> “The Capitol Building,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 29 April 1870. “The Capitol,” *Petersburg Index*, 30 April 1870. “News Brevities,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 28 May 1870.

in order to make it sufficiently strengthened and supported. Ultimately, the building was made temporarily secure and more extensive renovations took place in the months following the disaster.<sup>34</sup>

While the renovations to the portions of the Capitol housing the Hall of Delegates took several months to complete, changes to the Senate chambers proved to be minor in comparison and the building was soon open again to the public. While architects and carpenters found the walls and roof of the Capitol secure, the state paid \$300 to put pillars underneath the girders supporting the floor of the Senate library on their recommendation. This labor took six days to perform and senators were back in their offices by 10 May. By that time, the old carpet—which had been covered in the blood of the dead and the wounded—was replaced, and the desks rearranged. There were still few visitors to the building. According to the *Petersburg Index*, “the usual crowd in the lobby is not now seen, the loud talking of loud-toned members in the house is not now heard, and save the visitors who come to view the place of accident, there is a terrible dullness and a solemn silence reigning in the Capitol.”<sup>35</sup>

The changes to the House of Delegates were much more time-consuming and costly. Members of the House of Delegates met in Sycamore Church while renovations were underway, and workers who had previously occupied third-floor offices moved to

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<sup>34</sup> “General Assembly,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Insecurity of the Capitol Building,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. The Approaching Election—Dismissal of Wrenn for Shooting Ben Scott...,” *Petersburg Index*, 3 May 1870. “General Assembly,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870.

<sup>35</sup> “General Assembly,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, 30 April 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. The Legislature—Registration...,” *Petersburg Index*, 14 May 1870. “Our Richmond Letter. Andrew Rutherglen Ordered to be Arrested—The Senate Back in its Old Chamber...,” *Petersburg Index*, 10 May 1870.

the Imboden Hotel. By mid-May visible progress had been made: workers cleared all of the debris, patched walls, and installed window sashes. The renovations to the Capitol required approximately \$12,000 and took until early October to complete. The ceiling of the House of Delegates was several feet higher, and other aesthetic and practical changes were made, including the rearrangement of the desks in order to allow legislators to move about freely without disturbing their neighbors.<sup>36</sup>

After the fire at the Spotswood Hotel, Richmonders came up with inventive ways to protect themselves from similar calamities in the future. Many advocated for the installation of fire escapes on public buildings, including hotels. Possibly the most practical of these innovations came when the Richmond City Council agreed to install twenty-nine additional alarm-boxes and ten more miles of telegraph wires. Richmonders hoped that such additions would enable a faster response from fire-engine companies and assist firemen in pinpointing the exact location at which the fire was occurring. In addition to decisions made by the city government, individuals encouraged each other to create makeshift fire escape ladders. A journalist for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* urged readers to take a length of rope with them whenever they traveled to provide a means of escape: "A rope...thirty feet long, which can easily be packed away in a trunk, is a cheap and ever-ready fire escape. One of these would have saved half a dozen lives in Richmond." After reading about the Spotswood hotel fire, a Baltimorean wrote to the *Scientific American* proposing a life preserver made out of an iron hook

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<sup>36</sup> "Our Richmond Letter. The Legislature—Registration...", *Petersburg Index*, 14 May 1870. "Our Richmond Letter. Andrew Rutherglen Ordered to be Arrested—The Senate Back in its Old Chamber...", *Petersburg Index*, 10 May 1870. [Untitled], *Rockingham Register*, 13 October 1870.

attached to a bag from a length of rope as a “simple and inexpensive means of escape in case of fire.” Such a makeshift life preserver was one way, the writer claimed, in which grown adults, children, or babies could escape from fire.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to inventing creative contraptions to escape a fiery death similar to Spotswood fatalities, some Richmonders advocated that an inquiry should take place to determine the cause of the conflagration. According to a Richmond coroner, an inquest was required only when “death is supposed to have been caused by violence and not by casualty.” However, a writer for the *Daily Dispatch* argued that an inquest should “be required by law when death may have been occasioned in any way, by neglect or malice.” The writer contended that when building collapses, train derailments, fires, or explosions occurred in northern states, a jury was immediately convened to investigate the circumstances of the disaster and decide who or what was to blame. “The fall of the floor of a room in the Capitol... [and] the late fire, call for some such law in Virginia,” the journalist contended. The *Daily State Journal* agreed with the need for an inquest, stating: “in no other place in the country is there such a disregard shown for human life...Of course, whenever a human being meets a sudden, violent, or accidental death, the cause ought to be investigated.” There was no inquest as to the cause of the fire at the Spotswood Hotel, most likely because the hotel owner had taken out fire insurance and because of the relatively small number of fatalities.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Home and Foreign Gossip,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 21 January 1870. “Fires and Fire-Alarms,” *Daily Dispatch*, 16 January 1871. [Untitled], *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 14 January 1871. “Life Preserver for Hotels and Other Lofty Buildings,” *Scientific American*, 14 January 1871.

<sup>38</sup> “Loss of Life Without Legal Inquiry as to the Cause,” *Daily Dispatch*, 10 January 1871. “Spirit of the Morning Press,” *Daily State Journal*, 24 January 1871. Kierner, *Inventing Disaster*, 163, 167, 179-180, 197. Kierner states: “...steamboat explosions garnered public attention that resulted in citizens’ meetings,

Similar to the discussion after the collapse at the Capitol, there was debate as to whether the Spotswood should be rebuilt or demolished. Early in January some publications reported that the Spotswood would be rebuilt, and would be constructed using “native granite, three or four stories high, with all the modern improvements, and when completed will be one of the handsomest in the country.” By mid-January, however, the lot of the land the Spotswood occupied on went up for sale or lease. A journalist for the *Daily Dispatch* advocated for the creation of a new hotel, stating that “a hotel is in a social and business sense the most important building in a city.” The writer believed that the best place for a new hotel in the city would be “the square opposite the post-office” because it was next to Capitol Square, a busy location, and the post office was an essential place for any city or town. Building a hotel in that area would also spur business and provide a place for the community to gather. Other Richmonders did not think another new hotel was necessary, as one was already slated to open in March 1871 on the corner of Twelfth and Main streets. Ultimately, the Spotswood was not rebuilt, nor was an entirely new hotel built on the lot on the corner of Eight and Main streets.<sup>39</sup>

In the months following the Capitol collapse, Richmonders worked to relieve the immediate needs of those in their community suffering as a result of the disaster, while families devastated by the James River flood or Spotswood Hotel fire were left to fend

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coroners’ inquests, and scientific investigations to assess blame and propose improvements, which eventually gave rise to modest but precedent-setting changes in public policy” (167). Additionally, Kierner writes: “Insurance...reinforced the cultural predisposition to see disaster-related losses as private tragedies rather than as public problems.” (163).

<sup>39</sup> “Work Cut Out for This Year,” *Daily State Journal*, 4 January 1871. “News Brevities,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 4 February 1871. “Proposed Sale of the Spotswood,” *Daily Dispatch*, 16 January 1871. “A Hotel for Richmond,” *Daily Dispatch*, 16 January 1871. “That Hotel,” *Daily Dispatch*, 24 January 1871.



for themselves. While Virginians throughout the commonwealth and Americans throughout the country were quick to show their sympathy and support, members of the local and ad-hoc relief committee formed in the days after the Capitol disaster collected money from benevolent Richmonders and received donations from their generous contemporaries located elsewhere. These actions reflected typical disaster relief practices in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to rebuilding the Capitol and debating the need for another hotel in the city, the structural failures and hazards of public buildings were a source of concern for many Richmonders in the weeks after the collapse and fire. The disasters and Richmonders' actions in their wake demonstrate the ways in which a southern city reacted to and attempted to mediate the fallout of three distinct calamities.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**“[THE] CAPITOL DISASTER STANDS PEERLESS AMONG DEATH-  
SCATTERING SMASH-UPS”: REMEMBERING THE 1870 DISASTERS**

In 1876, an article published in the *Daily Dispatch* described notable events in Richmond history, including disasters. Following the Richmond Theater fire of 1811, the author observed, “a continent shuddered with horror” but the 1870 Capitol disaster “stands peerless among death-scattering smash-ups and crash-downs” in Virginia's capital. Meanwhile, during the Civil War, Richmond’s “heroism and devotion made every foot of her soil hallowed ground...baptized in the blood of heroes and the tears of angels her every clod is consecrated.” The recollection of one of the 1870 disasters paired with the valorization of the former capital of the Confederacy was one way in which Richmonders remembered the Capitol disaster and Spotswood Hotel fire in the decades after they occurred. Beginning as early as 1871 and dropping off after the 1920s—although mentions of the Capitol disaster continued to appear in newspapers, tourism materials, and government publications throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—journalists, historians, and Richmonders kept memories of the details of the calamities alive.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way that newspaper reports communicated to Richmonders, Virginians, and Americans details of the Capitol disaster, flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire and their aftermath in 1870, journalists were primarily responsible for recalling and

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<sup>1</sup> “Storm in Richmond,” *Daily Dispatch*, 25 July 1876.

comparing contemporary events to those calamities in the decades after they occurred. Papers published in Richmond reminded inhabitants of the Virginia capital of the unfortunate circumstances of the 1870 disasters, while readers in major cities such as Washington, Baltimore, New York, and Atlanta were made aware of how contemporary disasters compared to those that occurred in Richmond in 1870.

Richmonders, Virginians, and Americans remembered and made sense of the three disasters that happened in 1870 differently in the decades after they occurred, and the memory of those disasters changed over time and were influenced by political and social circumstances. Unsurprisingly, given the number and social and political status of the casualties, the Capitol disaster was the calamity that was most widely remembered and continued to be referenced for more than a century afterwards. Perpetuators of the Lost Cause narrative used the memory of the Capitol disaster to promote the idea that the mayoral case that led to the overcrowding in the Capitol was the result of overbearing federal policies, championed by Republicans who sought to up-end the social order of the South and destabilize white supremacy. Lost Cause adherents were busy valorizing Confederate veterans and the Confederacy itself by building monuments in their memory in the decades after the Civil War. Nevertheless, while Richmonders created an organization to establish a memorial for the victims less than a year after the disaster, it was not until 1920 that an official tablet marking the event was unveiled in the Capitol.

The other disasters, which were less deadly and less unique, were less prominent in public memory. Of the three disasters that occurred in 1870, the flood was the calamity that was least discussed in the years after it happened, most likely because the James

River flooded frequently and because there was no major loss of life within the capital. The main way in which reporters and Richmonders invoked and remembered the James River flood of 1870 was by comparing it to other damaging floods. The Spotswood Hotel fire received more attention than the flood in newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly when other fires occurred, including the conflagration at Richmond's Jefferson Hotel in 1901. As they did for the Capitol disaster, Richmonders formed a committee in the months immediately following the disaster in order to organize and fundraise for a memorial tablet for one of the victims of the Spotswood Hotel fire, and a tablet memorializing all eight of the victims was erected in July 1871.<sup>2</sup>

The period between 1871 and 1920 was one of significant change in the Virginia capital. By the late nineteenth century, many of the city's Black residents lived in crowded rental housing in neighborhoods lacking city water and sewer connections, and with the growth of suburbs, housing grew increasingly segregated. While some Black Virginians from rural areas had moved to Richmond, many more Black Richmonders fled to the North during the Great Migration, and by 1920 whites made up seventy percent of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: "Spring Weather," *New York Tribune*, 9 May 1873. "High Water at Many Points, A Flood at Richmond—Gas Works Submerged and Travel Interrupted," *Sun*, 2 April 1886. "Lynchburg in Darkness. The James at Its Highest Since 1870—Electric Light Plants Flooded," *Sun*, 1 June 1889. "Threatened with a Flood. High Water at Richmond Makes Residents Anxious. Ice Against Manchester Bridge Dams the James River and May Wash it Away," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 February 1899. "A Disastrous Freshet. Immense Loss to Public and Private Property. The Flood at Richmond..." *Daily Dispatch*, 26 November 1877. "Another Terrible Calamity," *Sun*, 3 February 1871. "Fire Last Night," *Daily State Journal*, 17 January 1872. "Fire in Richmond. The Pace Block, on Main Street, Badly Damaged. Chesapeake and Ohio a Loser..." *Sun*, 3 January 1900. "A Steam-Boat in Flames. Nineteen Lives Lost By an Explosion. Destruction of the West Point at West Point, VA..." *New York Times*, 28 December 1881. "The Famous Jefferson Hotel Destroyed By Fire Last Night. Defective Flue on the Fourth Floor the Cause. Started in the Blanket Room..." *Richmond Dispatch*, 30 March 1901. Richmond City, Oakwood Cemetery Internment Records, 1855-1911, reel 858, microfilm, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

the population. Black workers earned half of what white workers did. Despite these challenges, a small Black middle class emerged in Richmond, made up of teachers, lawyers, businessmen, and ministers. Black Richmonders were divided in terms of how to gain back political power that Democrats had denied them since their return to power after Reconstruction. Black Richmonders who were politically active were often threatened or intimidated, or whites perpetuated political fraud in order to ensure their votes would not count. The 1902 Virginia Constitution established a poll tax and other restrictions on voting, and Jim Crow laws flourished.<sup>3</sup>

One of the ways in which whites throughout Richmond and the South were ensuring their supremacy in politics, society, and culture was through the creation and perpetuation of the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause is a myth and culture about the South and the Civil War that emerged in the South during Reconstruction and gained widespread acceptance among white southerners, and its hold on American culture and society continues into the twenty-first century. The Lost Cause looked back nostalgically on the era of white supremacy and slavery and valorized the soldiers of the Confederacy as valiant defenders of liberty and so-called state's rights. As David Blight demonstrates, the Lost Cause "came to represent a mood, or an attitude toward the past. It took hold in specific arguments, organizations, and rituals, and for many Southerners it became a natural extension of evangelical piety, a civil religion that helped them link their sense of loss to a Christian conception of history." Shaped by political circumstances, the Lost

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<sup>3</sup> Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 220-227.

Cause changed over time. In the late 1860s to the late 1880s, Lost Cause advocates painted Robert E. Lee as a god-like figure and helped to eradicate the gains Black Americans made during the period of Radical Reconstruction. Between the 1890s and World War I, organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Confederate veterans succeeded in a national reconciliation between white northerners and southerners. Although the Lost Cause mythology waned with the onset of the Spanish-American War of 1898, it resurged in the 1920s and continued to shape how Americans remembered the Civil War. Even in the twenty-first century, the Lost Cause affects how some Americans learn about the Civil War and the Confederacy.<sup>4</sup>

According to Blight, three main elements dominated Lost Cause mythology: “the movement’s effort to write and control the *history* of the war and its aftermath; its use of *white supremacy* as both a means and ends; and the place of *women* in its development.” The element of Lost Cause mythology that is most prominent in the memory of the Richmond disasters of 1870 is Richmonders’ revisionist history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Lost Cause advocates succeeded in perpetuating a narrative of the Civil War that defended secession and states’ rights, placed the blame for the Civil War on northerners and Lincoln, and described Reconstruction as a period of unprecedented federal power during which northerners abused their powers to ensure southern states’ docility and dependence on the North. Additionally, policies created by northern politicians and white southerners who cooperated with Republicans throughout the war

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<sup>4</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 258.

and Reconstruction—called scalawags—empowered Black Americans with social, political, and economic agency, which threatened the social order and fabric of southern society in the eyes of racist whites.<sup>5</sup>

Richmonders were not entirely unfamiliar with establishing monuments for those who died as a result of catastrophes. Following the fire that destroyed the Richmond Theater in 1811, Richmonders agreed to memorialize the seventy-two victims by erecting a monument which resulted in the establishment of Monumental Church. The Common Council appointed members to the Monument Committee following the fire, and chose Richmond resident and Chief Justice John Marshall to head the group. The Monument Committee did not raise enough funds to create a suitable monument, and so joined with the Association for Erecting a Church on Shockoe Hill in order that both organizations could work towards a common goal and resolve their financial difficulties. The joint committee sold subscriptions to the church starting at \$25 and received money from sources outside the commonwealth as well. Completed in 1818, Monumental Church included a marble monument inscribed with the names of the theater fire victims.<sup>6</sup>

One way in which Richmonders were reminded of the Capitol disaster was when journalists described the psychological distress some survivors experienced in the months and years after the event. Reporters speculated that the suicide of two men was directly tied to their living through the collapse. L. H. Chandler went missing in April 1871, and his family believed he might have committed suicide. Since the disaster, Chandler had

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<sup>5</sup> Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 259.

<sup>6</sup> Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America's First Great Disaster* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 159-161, 166-167.

“been subject to occasional periods of melancholy, and it is thought he has destroyed himself while laboring under one of these attacks.” While Chandler was eventually found alive, he did commit suicide five years later. After his death, Virginia newspapers described the suffering he had experienced since the Capitol disaster. The *Richmond Dispatch* stated Chandler “had been more or less flighty” since the calamity, and the *Bristol News* noted that he had been “severely injured in the head” in the disaster and was “much given to mental depression.” The *Alexandria Gazette* said that Chandler “committed suicide on account of insanity, caused by the blow he received at the Capitol disaster.” Chandler was not the only Capitol disaster survivor to commit suicide: in 1886, William Matthew shot himself in the head. During the collapse at the Capitol, he “received severe injuries from which he never fully recovered, at times suffering great pain from their effects” which might have contributed to his death, according to the *Staunton Spectator*.<sup>7</sup>

Other survivors experiencing psychological distress did not come to the same fatal end as Chandler and Matthew. Brown Lacy’s wife, when he “was taken suddenly ill while riding a street car” in Richmond in 1871, stated that since the Capitol disaster Lacy “has...been subject to such attacks.” Mr. Connally, who had been stuck under debris for

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<sup>7</sup> “Hon. L. H. Chandler Missing,” *Evening Star*, 8 April 1871. “General News of the Day. Hon. L. H. Chandler. It is Supposed That He Has Killed Himself...,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 8 April 1876. “Suicide of L. H. Chandler,” *Bristol News*, 11 April 1876. “L.H. Chandler’s Disappearance,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 13 April 1876. “An Ex-Legislator Commits Suicide,” *Staunton Spectator*, 19 May 1886. See also: “Supposed Suicide,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 8 April 1876. While Matthew’s obituary does not mention whether he was a Confederate veteran, Chandler moved North during the war, so it is unlikely that his suicide was a result of war-time challenges. As Diane Miller Sommerville demonstrates in *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), “veterans lucky enough to survive returned home, sometimes wounded or disabled, often carrying emotional baggage, and suffering...self-destruction represented a plausible alternative to living depressed and broken in a defeated nation” (3).



over an hour after the gallery collapse at the Capitol, said in 1874 he never entered the Capitol without fear “and the horrors of his situation had never left his mind, and never would.” There were no reports of negative psychological effects for the men and women who survived the 1870 flood and hotel fire, with the exception of James Ransom of Lynchburg. Ransom’s wife and daughter drowned in the flood, and, according to the *Daily State Journal*, “his mind became unsettled by the calamity.” In 1874 local authorities put him in jail and he was committed to the lunatic asylum.<sup>8</sup>

In the first decades after the Capitol disaster, anniversaries typically passed quietly and without fanfare, with newspapers marking the occasion by either short reminders or no discussion of the calamity at all. In 1871, the *Alexandria Gazette* simply remarked: “To-day is the anniversary of the Richmond Capitol calamity, an event so fraught with painful emotions as well here as in other parts of the State.” The following year, the Richmond *Daily State Journal* stated: “Next Saturday is the second anniversary of the dreadful Capitol disaster.” Newspapers throughout the commonwealth published similarly succinct reminders in 1873, 1893, 1897, and 1915. In 1887, a journalist for the *Daily Times* wrote that “the year 1870 was a fateful one for Richmond...but despite calamity by flood and fire and dread disaster from other causes, Richmond took no step backward, but raised her queenly head and rose up from the ashes of desolation and woe.” On the twentieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of the calamity in 1890 and 1895,

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<sup>8</sup> “Sudden Illness in a Street Car,” *Daily Dispatch*, 9 August 1871. “General Assembly of Virginia,” *Daily Dispatch*, 17 February 1874. “State News,” *Daily State Journal*, 10 January 1874.

respectively, local papers the *Richmond Dispatch* and the *Times* reprinted news stories published in the days after the 1870 disaster.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until 1920, when the state government erected a tablet in the Capitol commemorating the disaster, that newspapers devoted more attention to marking the anniversary. Some descriptions of the disaster were more detailed and sensationalized than the simple reminders seen in local newspapers in the previous decades. In 1920, the *Alexandria Gazette* claimed the Capitol disaster was “one of the most serious catastrophes which ever occurred in the Old Dominion” and, according to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, “Richmond was plunged into such grief as seldom falls to the fortune of any city” in the days after the collapse. In 1922, a journalist for the same paper detailed the events of the calamity, including the structural causes of the collapse, theories proposed in 1870 as to why the collapse occurred, a comparison of how journalists reported on the event, and how Richmonders experienced the disaster.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to more detailed reporting of the Capitol disaster, 1920 was also when the Lost Cause narrative began to appear in reports marking the anniversary of the disaster published in Democratic newspapers. While it is likely that Virginians were

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<sup>9</sup> [No title], *Alexandria Gazette*, 27 April 1871. “Local Notes,” *Daily State Journal*, 25 April 1872. “Local Notes,” *Daily State Journal*, 29 April 1873. [No title], *Richmond Dispatch*, 11 April 1893. “Historic Dates,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 10 April 1897. “Chats with Virginia Editors,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 April 1915. “Capitol Disaster. A Memorable Day and Year,” *Daily Times*, 23 March 1887. “Capitol Disaster. To-Day the Twentieth Anniversary of the Occurrence. Contemporaneous Account and a List of the Killed and Wounded...,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 27 April 1890. “The Capitol Disaster. Yesterday Was the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Calamity. For the Benefit of Its Younger Readers The Times Reproduces an Account as Published at That Time,” *Times*, 28 April 1895.

<sup>10</sup> “The Richmond Disaster,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 26 April 1920. “The Capitol Disaster,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 April 1920. T.D. Eaton, “56 Persons Died in the Capitol Disaster 52 Years Ago. Scores Also Injured in Big Catastrophe. Anticipation of Decision of Supreme Court in Celebrated Chahoon-Ellyson Case Brought Crowd Too Big for Senate Floor to Bear,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 30 April 1922.

generally reflecting on their histories, it is also probable that with the resurgence of the Lost Cause, more people were looking at the history of Reconstruction and seized upon the narrative of the Capitol disaster. A journalist for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* contended that at the time of the Capitol disaster, Richmonders were still emerging from the challenges of the Civil War “that had claimed thousands of its bravest and best” and that the mayoral case and calamity was “the culmination of Virginia’s struggle to maintain its State sovereignty. For four long years it had been the battle ground on which State’s rights had been defeated by force of arms.” This explanation for the disaster continued into the next decade, although with less forceful and condemning rhetoric. In 1934 the *Virginia Star* claimed that the Reconstruction era mayor George Chahoon was “appointed by the military commander under a reconstruction regime” while his rival Henry Ellyson was “duly elected by the citizenry under the new constitution under which Virginia had just been readmitted to the Union.”<sup>11</sup>

Descriptions of the Capitol disaster relying on a Lost Cause framing were not limited to newspapers. In 1915—the same year that D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* was released and screened in President Woodrow Wilson’s White House—George L. Christian published a short book describing Reconstruction and the Capitol disaster. Christian had fought in the Confederate Army, became a judge in Richmond, and was a survivor of the Capitol disaster. In his book, *The Capitol Disaster: A Chapter of Reconstruction in Virginia*, Christian argued that the collapse at the Capitol “was the

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<sup>11</sup> “The Capitol Disaster,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 April 1920. “Collapse of State Capital Floor Occurred 64 Years Ago. Culpeper Delegate Injured in Crash that Took Sixty-Four Lives,” *Virginia Star*, 3 May 1934.

climax and culmination of ‘Reconstruction,’ and a direct result of those illegal and infamous measures.” Christian also justified the establishment of the Ku Klux Klan, which, according to Christian, was necessary “to protect our women, and to preserve the integrity of our civilization and race.” In short, *The Capitol Disaster* inaccurately described Reconstruction in Richmond and merely reprinted newspaper articles published in the days after the Capitol disaster.<sup>12</sup>

It is likely that both scholars and non-academic Richmonders read *The Capitol Disaster: A Chapter of Reconstruction in Virginia*. The *William and Mary Quarterly* reviewed Christian’s book, and the review reads more as a tirade against Lincoln’s policies towards the South during the Civil War than a critical analysis of *The Capitol Disaster*. The Democratic *Richmond Times-Dispatch* urged its readers to purchase a copy of the book several times throughout 1915, which bookstores were selling for fifty cents. At one point, a *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reporter wrote that “a copy should be in the hands of every high school pupil and every college and university student in the State.”<sup>13</sup>

The process of erecting a tablet memorializing those who died on 27 April 1870 was a long and arduous one that took decades and was the result of the work of members of private organizations and state government legislators. Members of the Richmond Press Club were the first to propose a memorial tablet for those killed at the Capitol

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<sup>12</sup> “Makers of Richmond: Brief Sketches, With Portraits, of Men Who Have Helped to Make the City,” *Times-Dispatch*, 26 June 1904. George L. Christian, *The Capitol Disaster: A Chapter of Reconstruction in Virginia* (Richmond Press, Inc.: 1915), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Review of *The Capitol Disaster: A Chapter of Reconstruction in Virginia*, by George L. Christian, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (April 1915): 296-297. [No title], *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 16 April 1915. “Judge Christian Tells of Capitol Disaster. Valuable Data Preserved in Pamphlet Being Sold for Benefit of Associated Charities,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 28 February 1915. “The Capitol Disaster,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 3 March 1915.

disaster on the first anniversary of the calamity. The Richmond Press Club envisioned the memorial to be a marble tablet on which the names of the dead were inscribed. Governor Gilbert Walker approved of their idea and agreed to serve as president of the organization. Walker appointed a committee of five members commissioned to raise money for the tablet, and sought financial assistance from the general public as well as the Chamber of Commerce. At a public meeting of the committee on 12 May 1871 those assembled agreed to form a larger Capitol Memorial Association, which included a president, fifteen vice presidents, a board of eleven directors, a treasurer, and a secretary. Anyone who contributed \$1 or more would be considered a member of the association, and the group was to meet at least once a month. The organization planned to solicit funds from the public, and once they obtained enough funds would consider designs for a memorial tablet.<sup>14</sup>

The Capitol Memorial Association undertook a fairly robust outreach campaign to solicit donations. Walker wrote an emotional appeal that the *Daily Dispatch* and *Staunton Spectator* published. According to Walker, the Capitol disaster was unique because of where it took place and the number and status of those who died. He stated that because it was a “*public calamity*...it becomes us to mark it in a public way.” In June, the Capitol Memorial Association chose men in cities and towns throughout the commonwealth to collect donations for the fund. The Capitol Memorial Association reportedly raised between \$1,200 and \$1,500, but the bank in which they saved their money collapsed and

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<sup>14</sup> “Meeting of the Press Club—Memorial Tablet for the Victims of the Capitol Disaster,” *Daily Dispatch*, 27 April 1871. “The Proposed Memorial Tablet at the Capitol,” *Daily Dispatch*, 29 April 1871. “Capitol Memorial Association,” *Daily Dispatch*, 17 May 1871. [No title], *Sun*, 15 May 1871. “Capitol Memorial Association. Meeting and Permanent Organization,” *Daily Dispatch*, 13 May 1871.

the money was lost. By 1884, no other organization had emerged to attempt to raise money for a memorial.<sup>15</sup>

More than three decades later, and likely spurred by the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the disaster, members of the Virginia legislature renewed efforts to erect a memorial tablet. In January 1918, the House of Delegates approved a resolution to create a joint committee of members of the Senate and House of Delegates to “investigate and report upon the advisability, the probable cost and the proper design for a mural tablet...to commemorate the said Capitol disaster.” While the legislative records do not explicitly state members’ rationale as to why a memorial was needed, the Act of Assembly made clear that the work should be “done as soon as possible.” Two years later, on the fiftieth anniversary of the disaster, a tablet commemorating the lives of the men who died was unveiled in the Capitol. The tablet was twenty-two by forty inches, included a brief history of the disaster, the number of killed and injured, and the text of the act of assembly creating the memorial.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Capitol Memorial Address—An Appeal to the People of Virginia,” *Daily Dispatch*, 23 May 1871. “Capitol Memorial Address. An Appeal to the Citizens of Virginia,” *Staunton Spectator*, 30 May 1871. “Capitol Memorial Association,” *Daily Dispatch*, 8 June 1871. “Capitol Disaster Tablet,” *Daily Dispatch*, 27 April 1884.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia*, 31 January 1918, 281. See also: *Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia*, 21 August 1919, 52. Virginia – Regular Session 1918: 499. “Here and There in the Legislature,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 3 February 1918. “Budget Bill is Finally Adopted. Both Branches of General Assembly Agree to Conferees’ Report. Finish Work and Adjourn...,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 11 March 1918. “Tablet in Capitol Will Commemorate Disaster. Plan Unveiling Exercises on Fiftieth Anniversary of Tragedy of 1870,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 21 April 1920. “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 21 April 1920.

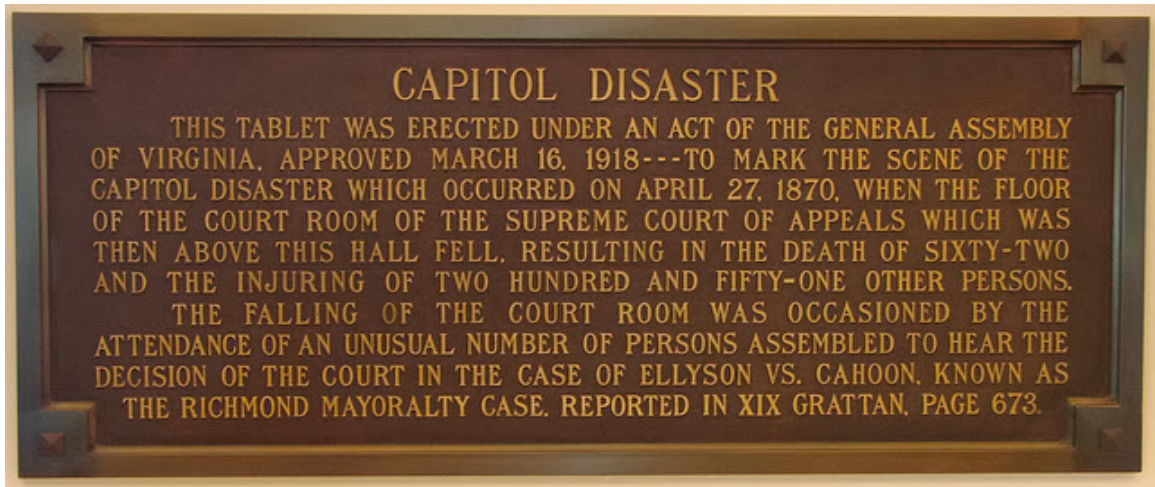


Figure 6. Plaque commemorating the Capitol disaster victims

This impressive tablet was unveiled in the Capitol building in 1920—fifty years after the disaster—with much fanfare. Carter McCants, UVA Disasters Wiki, [https://uvadisasters.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Virginia\\_Capitol\\_Disaster\\_of\\_1870?file=5588128223\\_59b0f4cae6\\_z.jpg#cite\\_note-65](https://uvadisasters.fandom.com/wiki/The_Virginia_Capitol_Disaster_of_1870?file=5588128223_59b0f4cae6_z.jpg#cite_note-65).

Many newspapers used the erection of the tablet to recount the details of the disaster, and some journalists writing for Democratic newspapers relied on the Lost Cause narrative to contextualize the contest over the mayoralty in 1870. In the days prior to the tablet unveiling, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* noted that the disaster occurred because too many people crowded into the courtroom to hear the mayoral case, with “Chahoon representing the carpet-bag forces.” The calamity at the Capitol brought “to a horrible climax the sufferings the people of Richmond had endured during the dark period of reconstruction and Federal domination of civil affairs in the rife years immediately after the War Between the States.” The *Farmville Herald* stated that the mayoral case was representative of a fight over “the sacredness of the doctrine of States Rights.” One of the attendees at the unveiling ceremony was Isaac Edmundson, a Black Virginian who survived the Capitol disaster. Edmundson had represented Halifax County

in the House of Delegates during Reconstruction and sustained injuries to his head and leg when the collapse occurred. At the ceremony in 1920, William Anderson—who served with Edmundson in the General Assembly, and later in his political career sought to disenfranchise Black Virginians—said that Edmundson “represented the best type of negro in reconstruction days—one who was found always on the side of the conservative group.” Edmundson had, indeed, been selected by a biracial meeting of Conservatives from Halifax County to serve in the legislature. Anderson’s comments in 1920 illustrate one way in which some Lost Cause advocates remembered Reconstruction: as a time when Black people seized political power to push a Republican agenda.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the 1870s, Richmonders also recalled the disaster at the Capitol—and particularly the sympathy and generosity of Americans who provided them relief—in the wake of other major disasters that affected cities throughout the country. These memories, and the words and actions themselves, were a major component in the process of reconciliation between North and South in the years after the Civil War. Following the

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<sup>17</sup> “Tablet in Capitol Will Commemorate Disaster. Plan Unveiling Exercises on Fiftieth Anniversary of Tragedy of 1870,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 21 April 1920. “Tablet Marks Place of Capitol Disaster. Will Unveil Memorial Tuesday Where Sixty-Two Lives Were Snuffed Out Fifty Years Ago When Supreme Court Roof Caved In,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 25 April 1920. “Our Richmond News Letter. Charles Thacker Shot and Seriously Wounded His Wife and Then Shot Himself Dying Instantly. Mrs. Thacker Not Expected to Recover...,” *Farmville Herald*, 30 April 1920. “Fitting Ceremonies Commemorate Horror. Tablet Marking Capitol Disaster Unveiled with Appropriate Exercises,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 28 April 1920. See also: “Tablet in State Capitol Will Commemorate Disaster,” *Peninsula Enterprise*, 24 April 1920. “Invite Public to Attend Unveiling of Memorial,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 April 1920. “Will Unveil Memorial with Simple Exercises. Ceremony Commemorating Capitol Disaster Fifty Years Ago This Morning at 11 O’clock,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 April 1920. “Tablet Marks Place of Capitol Disaster. Memorial Unveiled Tuesday Where Sixty-Two Lives Were Snuffed Out Fifty Years Ago When Supreme Court Room Caved In,” *Peninsula Enterprise*, 1 May 1920. “Richmond Unveils Memorial,” *Washington Post*, 28 April 1920. Brent Tarter, “Edmundson, Isaac (ca. 1840-1927),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 12 February 2021, <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/edmundson-isaac-ca-1840-1927/>. Brent Tarter, “Anderson, William A. (1842-1930),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 12 February 2021, <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/anderson-william-a-1842-1930/>.



Chicago fire of 1871 that killed over three hundred people and destroyed more than three square miles of the city, a journalist for the Richmond *Daily State Journal* stated: “Not many months ago the Capitol disaster in this city, stirred responsive chords in the hearts of many who knew Richmond only by name, and others who knew her better than they loved her.” Because Richmond had been the recipient of such liberality after the Capitol disaster, it was only appropriate for Richmonders to reciprocate and send aid to needy Chicagoans, according to the *Daily State Journal* reporter. Ultimately, Richmonders sent \$10,000 to Chicagoans after the devastating fire.<sup>18</sup>

While Richmonders provided ample support to Chicagoans after the conflagration in 1871, they did not send contributions to Charleston following the earthquake that resulted in the death of sixty people and almost \$6,000,000 worth of damages in 1886. Members of Richmond’s Common Council debated whether to appropriate \$5,000 for the relief of the sufferers, and, despite recalling how other Americans came to their aid in the wake of the Capitol disaster, decided not to send financial assistance to Charleston. A few days prior to the meeting of the Common Council, a reporter for the *Richmond Dispatch* appealed to sympathetic Richmonders to come to the aid of Charlestonians, writing that “the whole country sent money to Richmond when her women and children lost so many husbands and fathers in the Capitol disaster. Richmond will be as liberal.” However, it does not appear that Richmonders lived up to the expectations of the *Richmond Dispatch* reporter. It is possible that the highly publicized disaster relief efforts of the Red Cross in

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<sup>18</sup> [No title], *Daily State Journal*, 13 October 1871.

Charleston led some Richmonders to think their local government did not need to send aid.<sup>19</sup>

After a hurricane devastated Galveston, Texas, in 1900 and killed over eight thousand people, Richmonders were more organized in their approach to provide financial assistance to Texans. The Richmond Chamber of Commerce formed a relief committee, divided the business section of the Virginia capital into forty-seven districts, and sent more than one hundred committee members to each business to solicit relief funds. According to the *Richmond Times*, the Galveston hurricane elicited such a swift and efficient response because, apparently, “no event since the civil war, except the Capitol disaster, has touched this community so deeply.” The Galveston hurricane continues to be the deadliest disaster in American history, so the high death toll likely motivated many to be generous in their financial assistance. Richmond’s economy was in a less precarious position at the turn of the century than it was in the 1880s, which might also partially account for Richmonders’ aid.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Common Council. The Regular Monthly Meeting Held Yesterday Evening. Cars to the New City Hall...,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 7 September 1886. Susan Williams and Stephen Hoffius, in *Upheaval in Charleston*, assert that Richmonders initially proposed sending \$5,000 to Charleston but then upped that to \$10,000, as they had sent \$10,000 to Chicago following the 1871 fire. However, that claim is based on an article in the *Richmond Dispatch* dated 4 September 1886, three days prior to the Common Council meeting in which members declined to provide assistance to Charlestonians. See page 107 and its accompanying bibliographical note 25 on page 285, Susan Millar Williams and Stephen G. Hoffius, *Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011). The primary source is: “Local Matters. Meeting of Citizens With Reference to the Charleston Calamity. Resolutions of Sympathy Adopted, and the City Council Asked to Make an Appropriation, &c.,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 4 September 1886. “Help for Charleston,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 3 September 1886.

<sup>20</sup> “A Hearty Response. Chamber of Commerce Meeting for the Galveston Fund. Subscriptions from Many Sources...,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 16 September 1900. “Preparing for Systematic Work. Chamber of Commerce Committees Assigned to Districts and Will Begin To-Morrow,” *Times*, 16 September 1900.

In the decades after the Capitol disaster, some instances of building insecurities in the Capitol Square complex brought comparisons to the deadly calamity of 1870. In February of 1874, a piece of plaster fell down from the ceiling of the State Library with a loud crash, causing panic among the members of the Committee on General Laws, who were meeting in the room. Members reportedly thought “the day of Judgement had come, [and] fled like buffaloes before a prairie fire” and some legislators reportedly feared another Capitol disaster. A crack on the ceiling appeared in the State Library building in 1902, and the *Bedford Democrat* reassured readers that there was “no possible danger of another Capitol disaster” because the Library room rested on iron girders. In April 1903, on the anniversary of the Capitol disaster, a janitor heard a cracking sound and then noticed a fissure nearly an inch wide on the floor of the Capitol building. The *Times Dispatch* noted that “it is a curious coincidence that the weakening of the floor which resulted in this fissure occurred on the thirty-third anniversary of the memorable capitol disaster.”<sup>21</sup>

Just as building insecurities in the Capitol Square complex stoked anxieties and remembrances of the Capitol disaster, so too did the appearance of large crowds in public buildings throughout the country. In 1872 in Petersburg, when people “thronged and

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<sup>21</sup> “The Va. Legislature Alarmed,” *Bristol News*, 17 February 1874. The State Library was a structure within the Capitol Square complex. See the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Richmond from 1895 and 1905, respectively: [https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3884rm.g3884rm\\_g090641895/?sp=19&r=-0.168,0.673,1.052,0.593,0](https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3884rm.g3884rm_g090641895/?sp=19&r=-0.168,0.673,1.052,0.593,0) and <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3884rm.09064003/?sp=31&r=-0.559,-0.018,2.117,1.194,0>. “From Richmond,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 14 February 1874. “New Notes and Comment,” *Bedford Democrat*, 20 November 1902. “This Recalls a Great Disaster. A Large Crack Appears in the Upper Story of the Capitol,” *Times Dispatch*, 30 April 1903. “Crack in Virginia Capitol. Fissure Appears in Tile Flooring on Anniversary of Previous Disaster,” *Washington Post*, 30 April 1903. See also: “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 30 April 1903. “Crack in Capitol Floor. Discovered on the Anniversary of Richmond Capitol Disaster,” *Sun*, 30 April 1903.

packed” the courtroom to hear a case regarding the possession of the city’s Union Street Methodist Episcopal Church, many feared a repeat of the Capitol disaster because “it is apprehended that the building is by no means secure.” When a fight broke out between two reporters in 1880 in the Capitol at Richmond, legislators crowded into the Capitol rotunda so quickly to witness the scuffle that “many persons thought there was another Capitol disaster.” That same year, the Democratic National Party held the National Convention at the Cincinnati Music Hall. The Cincinnati *Commercial* newspaper stated that the hall was made of “massive walls of brick, it is secure, and gives the comfort, no matter how great the crowd, of a sense of perfect safety.” Reassured by this statement, a writer for the Richmond *Daily Dispatch* noted that Richmonders “haven’t forgotten our Capitol disaster.” After an investigation into the structural integrity of the Moody Tabernacle in 1894, experts declared it to be “unnecessarily strong” according to the *Richmond Dispatch*. The journalist noted that since the calamity in 1870, “the people of Richmond have been very particular in enquiring into the safety of their public buildings” but expressed hope that the investigation’s report would ease their anxieties.<sup>22</sup>

Because the 1870 debacle resulted in the death of several important political leaders, journalists also invoked the memory of the Capitol disaster following the assassinations of Presidents Garfield and McKinley, and during President Eisenhower’s visit to the Richmond Capitol during his presidency. After Charles Guiteau shot Garfield on 2 July 1881, Richmonders gathered at Capitol Square to pray and listen to speeches

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<sup>22</sup> “Virginia News. Letter from Petersburg,” *Daily Dispatch*, 4 January 1872. “A Capitol Collision. Personal Explanations in the House and Fight in the Rotunda. Mr. Chamberlayne, of Richmond, Rises to a Question of Privilege...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 10 February 1880. “The Democratic National Convention,” *Daily Dispatch*, 20 February 1880. “The Moody Meetings,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 22 March 1894.

made by local leaders. While leading a prayer, the Reverend Dr. Hoge noted that “we met in this very place to commemorate what was called ‘the Capitol disaster’...But that calamity affected a community only. The one which absorbs us to-night touches the heart of the world.” When Leon Czolgosz shot McKinley in 1901, Richmonders again met in Capitol Square to express their sympathy. A reporter for the Richmond *Times* stated: “there have been meetings of this character in this community when affliction and disaster have wrought havoc...Those who were present at the gathering for prayer subsequent to the Capitol disaster will never need to be reminded of another.” When Eisenhower was set to make a speech in Richmond’s Capitol in 1952, people made jokes about the collapse of the temporary stand erected for Eisenhower. But the “resounding crash of the makeshift structure cast a hush over the crowd...some later recalled the ‘Capitol Disaster’ of 1870 in Richmond.”<sup>23</sup>

Reporters also mentioned the Capitol disaster as an event of historic import in relation to renovations at the Capitol and as an element that qualified the building for landmark status. The General Assembly appropriated \$100,000 for the repair and enlargement of the Capitol in 1902, and in describing the history of the building, the *Richmond Dispatch* noted that the Capitol disaster was “one of the most memorable occurrences at the old building so dear to Virginian hearts.” It was not until two years later and the allocation of \$250,000 that construction began, as the amount appropriated in 1902 was not enough for the necessary improvements. Just as at the turn of the

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<sup>23</sup> “The Voice of Richmond Goes Out in Tender Sympathy for the President and His Family. A Large and Interesting Meeting of Citizens at the Capitol Last Night—Governor Holliday Presided...,” *Daily Dispatch*, 6 July 1881. “Earnest Prayer for President,” *Times*, 8 September 1901. Richard Morris, “Crowd Jokes as Ike Escapes Hurt in Fall,” *Washington Post*, 28 September 1952.

century, when the House of Delegates was slated for restoration in 1927, the Capitol disaster was again mentioned as a historic occurrence. In the application submitted in 1960 to designate the Capitol as a national historic landmark, the writers briefly mentioned “the 1870 Capitol disaster, in which sixty-two people were killed when the courtroom gallery collapsed” in the application’s statement of significance. Writers of the 2005 and 2016 applications to the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmark Program, respectively, made similar mentions of the 1870 calamity.<sup>24</sup>

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, writers used the Capitol disaster in materials to promote tourism to Virginia and the Capitol building, some of which promoted the Lost Cause narrative. An 1871 *Visitor’s Guide to Richmond* described the Richmond community as still recovering from the disaster the year before, which was “the greatest of the many calamities she has been called upon to suffer since the civil war.” In an 1896 *Illustrated Hand-Book and Guide* of the Commonwealth’s capital, the author described the mayoral contest as one “that would settle the question of carpet-bag

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<sup>24</sup> “Old Capitol Be Made New. How It is Proposed to Expend the Hundred Thousand Dollar Appropriation, Historic Sketch of the Building,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 30 March 1902. “To Enlarge Historic Capitol. Symmetry of Old Structure Preserved. Wings to Be Built to East and West,” *Times Dispatch*, 28 February 1904. “Restoring Historic Old Hall at Capitol,” *Virginia Star*, 18 August 1927. Capitol of Virginia/Virginia State Capitol, National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form, 1960: [https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002\\_VAStateCapitolBuilding\\_1969\\_Nomination\\_NHL.pdf](https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002_VAStateCapitolBuilding_1969_Nomination_NHL.pdf). Capitol of Virginia, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2005: [https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002\\_VirginiaStateCapitol\\_2005\\_NRHP\\_Updated\\_nomination.pdf](https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002_VirginiaStateCapitol_2005_NRHP_Updated_nomination.pdf). Virginia State Capitol, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 2016: [https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002\\_VA\\_State\\_Capitol\\_2016\\_NHL\\_nomination\\_Update\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/127-0002_VA_State_Capitol_2016_NHL_nomination_Update_FINAL.pdf). See also: “New Capitol. Historic Virginia Edifice To Be Remodeled. Famous Walls to Stay...,” *Courier-Journal*, 18 May 1902. “The State Capitol,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 6 April 1902.

rule in the city of Richmond. In those days of so-called reconstruction, the mayoralty had been usurped by a carpet-bagger.”<sup>25</sup>

In the twenty-first century, writers continue to use the Capitol disaster in materials promoting tourism to the Capitol, though without the inaccurate details concerning Reconstruction. A 2012 Visitor’s Guidebook to the Capitol used the Capitol disaster to evoke a sense of progress in the face of challenging circumstances throughout history: “The Capitol building has witnessed two wars, a cholera outbreak, and the collapse of its third floor, known as the ‘Capitol Disaster.’ Despite all of this, the Capitol continues to represent a symbol of democracy.” In the Virginia State Capitol brochure, revised in December 2017, the writer stripped the Capitol disaster of all political contextualization: “Sixty-two are killed and another 251 injured when the third floor court room, overcrowded with citizens wishing to hear the verdict in a contested election case, collapses into the empty House of Delegates chamber below.” The General Assembly website and a virtual tour of the Capitol described the calamity in ways similar to the brochure. A series of bookmarks created by the Virginia House of Delegates included one on the Capitol disaster.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Visitor’s Guide to Richmond and Vicinity* (Richmond: Gillis, Steam Printer, 1871), 13. C. Poindexter, *Richmond: An Illustrated Hand-Book and Guide With Notices of the Battle-Fields* (Richmond: J. L. Hill Printing Co., 1896), 27-28.

<sup>26</sup> *Virginia State Capitol Visitor’s Guide*, House of Delegates Virginia General Assembly, revised 3 October 2012: [http://hodcap.state.va.us/publications/Capitol\\_Visitor\\_Guide.pdf](http://hodcap.state.va.us/publications/Capitol_Visitor_Guide.pdf). The Virginia State Capitol, Virginia General Assembly, revised December 2017: [http://publications.virginiageneralassembly.gov/download\\_publication/108](http://publications.virginiageneralassembly.gov/download_publication/108). “Virtual Tours at the Virginia State Capitol,” Virginia State Capitol, 2006-2021: <https://virginiacapitol.gov/index.php/2016/03/30/new-capitol-virtual-tour-website/> and <https://virginiacapitol.gov/virtualtours/Virtualtours508/home508.htm>. “Capitol History,” Virginia General Assembly, 1995-2021, <https://virginiageneralassembly.gov/virginiaStateCapitol.php?secid=7&activesec=1-&lhb=1&mainContentTabs=0&content=0,includes/contentTemplate.php%3Ftid=5%26ctype=b%26cid=61>.

The Capitol disaster is still remembered as an event of historic import in Virginia in the twenty-first century. When streams of water began leaking through the ceiling of the House of Delegates in 2014, one delegate from Arlington remembered the Capitol disaster and said, “I’m not staying here too long...keeping in mind the history of the House chamber.” In 2019, online local news outlet *RVAHub* published an article on the mayoral contest between Chahoon and Ellyson and mentioned the Capitol disaster. The following year, another local Richmond publication *RichmondMag* compared 2020 to 1870, and concluded that while the former “is destined for the record books as one of Richmond’s most difficult,” the latter was equally, if not more so, challenging because of the end of Reconstruction, the Capitol disaster, the death of Robert E. Lee, and the Spotswood Hotel fire.<sup>27</sup>

Just as Democrats used the memory of the Capitol disaster to push their Lost Cause narrative in the twentieth century, conservatives in the twenty-first century continue to appropriate the memory of the calamity. In 2020—in the midst of protests for racial justice following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black men and women at the hands of police—the names of ten members of the Richmond Police Department who died in the Capitol disaster were engraved on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington. When a Richmond police memorial was vandalized in 2021, retired Richmond police officers and descendants of police killed in

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“Did You Know? A Series of Informational Bookmarks Brought to You By the Virginia House of Delegates,” Information & Communications Services (ICS) House of Delegates Clerk’s Office, no date: [https://publications.virginiageneralassembly.gov/download\\_publication/125](https://publications.virginiageneralassembly.gov/download_publication/125).

<sup>27</sup> Laura Vozzella, “Rain in the House Caps Wild Week in Virginia Capitol,” *Washington Post*, 1 February 2014. Rocket Werks, “RVA Legends – The Municipal War,” *RVAHub*, 16 April 2019. Harry Kollatz Jr., “1870: The Worst. Year. Ever,” *Richmondmag*, 21 August 2020.



the line of duty argued for the memorial to be relocated to the Capitol. One of two reasons for such a relocation—the other was for security purposes—was because members of the Richmond Police Department died as a result of the Capitol disaster. Such a move would require approval from the General Assembly, and the memorial remains in an undisclosed location.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the Capitol disaster, which had a rich and varied life in public memory over more than a century, the 1870 flood was most frequently discussed in relation to other devastating floods and disasters that occurred in Richmond and throughout the commonwealth. Recounting the 1870 deluge typically involved facts—such as how high the water was, the extent and location of property lost—and was not part of a larger political or cultural narrative. In 1873, heavy rain led some Richmonders to fear a flood that might “equal those of October, 1870.” Severe flooding of the James River in 1886 had some reporters hypothesizing that the water would exceed the high-water marks of the 1870 flood and a major deluge in 1877. Rising waters submerged the neighborhood of Rocketts—the same neighborhood that sustained the most damage after the 1870 deluge—and families again had to flee their homes. When a “tremendous flood” of the James River at Lynchburg occurred in 1889, one journalist said that the water was at “the highest...since the memorable flood of 1870.” In Richmond, the damage was reminiscent

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<sup>28</sup> Amelia Heymann, “Richmond Police Officer Sings ‘America the Beautiful’ for National Police Week,” *ABC 8*, 16 May 2020. The ten officers were: James Cox, James Carter, William Cray, John Kerr, Michael McCarthy, John Meagher, Joseph Seay, Julius Schultz, Daniel Tourgee, and James Walker. See the National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund website: <https://nleomf.org/memorial/fallen-heroes/remember/>. Karina Bolster, “Retired Officers Call for Richmond Police Memorial Statue Relocation to Va. Capitol Grounds,” *NBC 12*, 29 July 2021. “Possible New Home for Richmond Police Memorial?” *Richmond Free Press*, 29 July 2021.

of the aftermath of the 1870 flood: merchants had to remove their goods from warehouses and stores; Franklin, Main, and Cary streets were partially submerged; the majority of Rocketts was under water, and at least one hundred families in the neighborhood had to remove their personal effects from their homes. Torrential rain continued to pummel Rocketts: in 1899, the rising James River once again submerged the neighborhood, flooded sections of the city, and greatly damaged Mayo's bridge. The safety and security of those living in Rocketts—known to be home to many Black Richmonders, some of whom were impoverished—was clearly not of great concern to the local or state governments, as changes were not made nor policies enacted to ensure they would not have to deal with the aftermath of damaging deluges in the future.<sup>29</sup>

The flood that sparked the most comparison to the deluge of 1870 occurred in 1877, when the high-water mark of the 1870 flood was surpassed by eighteen inches. Richmonders feared that the flood would be “second only to that of September 1870” and they were correct. As in the prior flood—and in floods throughout the late nineteenth century—Rocketts was submerged in water and residents fled their homes. On Main and Seventeenth streets, the water was six to eight feet deep in some places. Just as seven

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<sup>29</sup> “Spring Weather,” *New York Tribune*, 9 May 1873. “High Water at Many Points, A Flood at Richmond—Gas Works Submerged and Travel Interrupted,” *Sun*, 2 April 1886. “Still Steadily Rising. The Loss By Floods Greater than First Reported. People Forced to Take to the Upper Parts of Their Houses to Escape the Raging Waters....” *Washington Post*, 2 April 1886. “Great Damage By Floods. Streets Submerged and Families Driven From Their Homes,” *New York Times*, 2 April 1886. “Lynchburg in Darkness. The James at Its Highest Since 1870—Electric Light Plants Flooded,” *Sun*, 1 June 1889. “The Effect in Virginia. A Destructive Rise in the Appomattox—Part of Petersburg Flooded,” *Sun*, 3 June 1889. “Threatened with a Flood. High Water at Richmond Makes Residents Anxious. Ice Against Manchester Bridge Dams the James River and May Wash it Away,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 February 1899. “Dynamite Used on Ice Gorge. Flood at Richmond, Va., is Rapidly Going Down Now,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 February 1899. See also: “Extensive Rain Storm—Great Destruction of Life and Property,” *Our Church Paper*, 19 June 1889.

years previously, however, the estimated damage caused by the freshet was less than initially believed. One civil engineer attributed this to the enlargement of the Dutch-Gap canal on the James River, which provided a better outlet for the floodwaters. While some railroad bridges and crops sustained damage, one writer believed that farmers' methods of labor and tillage were in "a better condition now than they were in '70" and that because of that, the loss of crops would be less than in 1870. Readers in other major metropolitan areas throughout the country, including Pittsburgh, Detroit, New York, San Francisco, and Minneapolis, read of the flood and its comparisons to the 1870 deluge.<sup>30</sup>

Just like with the Capitol disaster, journalists in the twenty-first century continue to invoke the memory of the 1870 flood, but they do so with much less frequency. In September 2004, a *Washington Post* reporter noted that a flood wall saved the neighborhood of Shockoe Bottom from a damaging deluge, which prevented the "James River from overflowing its banks as it had on Oct. 1, 1870, and Aug. 22, 1969." When Hurricane Camille made its way through the commonwealth in 2018 and killed 124 people in Nelson County alone, a journalist explicated on the history of floods in Virginia.

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<sup>30</sup> "A Disastrous Freshet. Immense Loss to Public and Private Property. The Flood at Richmond...", *Daily Dispatch*, 26 November 1877. "Deluge. The Great Flood. Intense Excitement at Richmond," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 November 1877. "The Great Flood," *Daily Dispatch*, 27 November 1877. "The Angry Waters. Disastrous Floods in the South Atlantic States. Cities Submerged, Bridges and Tracks Swept Away, etc...", *Daily Post*, 26 November 1877. "The Freshet. Accounts of the Flood From Various Points. The Rise of the Water Continues and Great Excitement Prevails...", *Detroit Free Press*, 27 November 1877. "Great Floods in Virginia," *New York Times*, 25 November 1877. "Floods in Virginia. Great Damages to Property—Further Devastation Feared," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 November 1877. "Terrible Floods in Virginia," *Tribune*, 24 November 1877. "The Recent Flood. Reports from Different Quarters as to the Damage Done," *Daily Post*, 27 November 1877. "The Flood in Richmond. The Water Higher Than During the Freshet of 1870—A City in Darkness...", *New York Times*, 26 November 1877. See also: "The Eastern Flood. Five Spans of the Cumberland Valley Railroad Bridge Over the Potomac Swept Away. Damage In and About Danville, Va., More Than a Hundred Thousand Dollars...", *Courier-Journal*, 26 November 1877. "The Late Freshet. The James at Richmond Within its Banks Again. About the Losses...", *Daily Dispatch*, 28 November 1877.

The journalist contended that the 1870 flood was “one of the earliest floods in the history of the Shenandoah Valley where written accounts are available.”<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, journalists recalled the events and aftermath of the Spotswood Hotel fire when reporting on other disasters, especially deadly fires, both in Richmond and throughout the nation, until 1900. Less than two months after the conflagration in Richmond, when a hotel in Kenosha, Wisconsin caught fire and seven people died, a reporter for the Baltimore *Sun* wrote that “it almost equals in horror that of the Spottswood Hotel in Richmond.” After the 1871 Chicago fire, one Richmonder who read an account of a man trapped inside an upper floor of a burning building drew parallels to those who died in the Spotswood because they could not escape the top floors of the hotel. When a fire broke out in a warehouse on Cary Street in Richmond in 1872, firefighters described the conflagration as “the most obstinate fire” they extinguished “since the Spotswood Hotel burned.” At the turn of the century, the building erected on the site of the former Spotswood Hotel that housed the offices of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company caught fire, which led to several recollections of the Spotswood Hotel fire thirty years previously. Remembrances of the Spotswood Hotel fire were not limited to other burning buildings. Following a steamboat explosion in West Point, Virginia on 27 December 1881 that killed nineteen people, a journalist described the event as “one of the most fearful disasters that has occurred in this State, with the exception of the burning of the Spottswood Hotel...and the Capitol disaster.” This

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<sup>31</sup> “A Wrecking Ball of a Storm. Torrent Ravages Richmond Area, Causes 5 Deaths,” *Washington Post*, 1 September 2004. Dale M. Brumfield, “Hurricane Camille Was Not the First Or the Worst: Valley Storm History,” *New Leader*, 11 September 2018.

reporter falsely said the fire at the Spotswood caused the death of forty to fifty people, when only eight people died.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most notable disasters in connection with which journalists described the 1870 fire was when the capital's Jefferson Hotel caught fire in 1901, likely because of the striking parallels between the two. The *Atlanta Constitution* informed its readers that Virginia's capital had "suffered her greatest disaster by fire since the burning of the Spottswood hotel on Christmas eve, 1870." Other newspapers in major cities throughout America echoed this sentiment, including the *Detroit Free Press* and *New York Tribune*. While initial reports from local newspapers did not mention the Spotswood Hotel fire, the *Richmond Dispatch* did note that "the hand of misfortune has fallen heavily upon Richmond." More than a year after the fire at the Jefferson Hotel, the captain of the fire department, George Watt Taylor, recollected his experience fighting the Spotswood Hotel fire over thirty years prior. Taylor described the Spotswood as "the Jefferson of Richmond at that time."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Another Terrible Calamity," *Sun*, 3 February 1871. "The Latest Holocaust," *Courier-Journal*, 3 February 1871. "Communicated," *Daily State Journal*, 8 November 1871. "Fire Last Night," *Daily State Journal*, 17 January 1872. "Fire in Richmond. The Pace Block, on Main Street, Badly Damaged. Chesapeake and Ohio a Loser...," *Sun*, 3 January 1900. "Firemen Work in Ice. Grit Tested by Cold-Weather Blaze at Richmond," *Washington Post*, 3 January 1900. "Two Fires—1870, 1900," *Richmond Dispatch*, 3 January 1900. "A Steam-Boat in Flames. Nineteen Lives Lost By an Explosion. Destruction of the West Point at West Point, VA...," *New York Times*, 28 December 1881.

<sup>33</sup> "Fire Devours Palace Hotel at Richmond. Famous Jefferson, Built by Ginter at Cost of Million, in Ashes. No Guests Cremated Far as Can Be Learned...," *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 March 1901. "Big Hotel Fire in Richmond. The Virginia Town Had a Blaze Costing \$1,000,000. Magnificent Jefferson Hotel Totally Destroyed...," *Detroit Free Press*, 30 March 1901. "The Richmond Hotel Fire. Almost Complete Loss of The Jefferson, Which Cost \$1,000,000—May Be Rebuilt," *New York Tribune*, 31 March 1901. "The Famous Jefferson Hotel Destroyed By Fire Last Night. Defective Flue on the Fourth Floor the Cause. Started in the Blanket Room...," *Richmond Dispatch*, 30 March 1901. "Thirty Years' Fires. An Old Truck that Has Seen Much Service. Spotswood to Jefferson...," *Richmond Dispatch*, 25 November 1902.

The land which the Spotswood Hotel had occupied underwent several changes of ownership in the decades after 1870, while the name Spotswood was eventually used for another hotel in the commonwealth after the turn of the century. In April 1873, J. L. Carrington of the Exchange Hotel purchased the lot on which the Spotswood Hotel stood, along with three adjoining lots, for a total of \$38,794. Eight years later, the Baltimore *Sun* reported that a new hotel was to be built on the site of the former Spotswood Hotel. Reports stated that J. B. Chace was going to purchase the lot and build and run a hotel at the estimated expense of \$250,000. Chace sought subscriptions for the new building, and on 22 June 1881 a meeting of members of the fundraising committee took place in which they reported on the success of their endeavors, but it is unlikely that Chace ever raised enough money. By 1900, the offices of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway occupied the site of the former Spotswood Hotel, and according to the *Lexington Gazette* had sustained damage from a fire that occurred on 9 January. John Murphy, who previously worked as the proprietor of Murphy's Hotel in the capital, was slated to manage a new Spotswood Hotel in Norfolk in 1902. The new hotel was to include 125 guest rooms, but by the following year work on the building still had not begun.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike for the Capitol disaster, a memorial tablet was erected less than a year after the Spotswood Hotel fire, but the efforts of the Knights of Pythias to create a monument for fire victim Samuel Hines took decades. A tablet was erected in Oakwood

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<sup>34</sup> "Local Notes," *Daily State Journal*, 16 April 1873. "Auction Sale of Spotswood Hotel Property," *Daily Dispatch*, 16 April 1873. "Virginia Items," *Sun*, 9 June 1881. "The Hotel Enterprise," *Daily Dispatch*, 22 June 1881. [No title], *Lexington Gazette*, 10 January 1900. "A Street-Car Victim. Mr. John T. Richards Killed in Norfolk Yesterday. The Spotswood Hotel..." *Richmond Dispatch*, 27 May 1902. "Seven Men Rescued. The Crew of the British Brig Bertha Gray. Lewis Sent to Prison..." *Times Dispatch*, 15 May 1903.

Cemetery on 25 July 1871 to little fanfare. Local newspapers did not cover the event, and by the early twenty-first century the stone was cracked and in disrepair. A memorial for Samuel Hines funded by the Knights of Pythias received much more news coverage than the Oakwood Cemetery tablet. Samuel Hines died in the fire while saving a fellow member of the Knights of Pythias, a fraternal organization and secret society. It is likely that the self-sacrificing nature of Hines' death motivated many people to memorialize him, despite the fact that seven other people died at the Spotswood the night of the deadly fire. In 1886, fifteen years after the fire, members of the Hines Memorial Association of Richmond and the Knights of Pythias agreed to work together to create a memorial for Hines. They believed that Hines displayed "self-sacrificing devotion" and was a "Pythian martyr," and that "no act or deed of ours in commemoration of his virtues can be sufficient to measure what we owe to his memory."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Richmond City, Oakwood Cemetery Internment Records, 1855-1911, reel 858, microfilm, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Despite scouring the Oakwood Cemetery records available at the Library of Virginia, I was unable to locate any information on who funded the creation and erection of the Spotswood Hotel stone. Oakwood Cemetery opened in the mid-1850s and was meant to serve a wider swath of the Richmond community than the more prestigious Hollywood Cemetery, and Oakwood included designated burial sites for Black Americans and paupers. Ryan K. Smith, *Death and Rebirth in a Southern City: Richmond's Historic Cemeteries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 158-159. See: "Spotswood Hotel Memorial," Find a Grave, [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24990918/spotswood\\_hotel-memorial](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24990918/spotswood_hotel-memorial). "The Hines Memorial. Important Action of the Supreme Lodge in the Matter," *Richmond Dispatch*, 24 July 1886.



**Figure 7. Gravestone memorializing the Spotswood Hotel fire victims**  
 Located in Oakwood Memorial Cemetery, this gravestone was erected in July 1871, with no local papers reporting on the event. Since then, it has fallen into disrepair. The gravestone reads: “To the memory of the Victims of the Spotswood Disaster, Dec. 26 1870.” Sassytazzy, Find a Grave, [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24990918/spotswood\\_hotel-memorial](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24990918/spotswood_hotel-memorial).

It took decades for members of the joint committee to raise enough funds to create a memorial for Hines, as they ran into many financial challenges throughout the process and debated over the form of the memorial. Fundraising began in 1887—if not earlier—and by 1894 members had raised nearly \$10,000. At a meeting of the Knights of Pythias of Richmond and Manchester in 1904, members agreed to continue to solicit contributions. Two years later, at the 1906 Pythians’ Convention, Hines’s memorial was one of three major agenda items up for discussion. By that time, some members “favor[ed] an orphan asylum and others a monument” for honoring Hines’ memory.



However, in 1909, the Richmond *Times Dispatch* reported that the Knights of Pythias were going to erect a temple in the city “dedicated to the memory of Samuel Holder Hines” at the estimated cost of \$30,000 to \$50,000. The Grand Lodge had purchased a site on Fifth Street for the purpose, and the Knights of Pythias planned to hold all of the state meetings in the temple. Apparently, members had received enough contributions to begin planning for the memorial but poor investments had set back their timeline.<sup>36</sup>

The debate over the form of the Hines memorial did not end with the proposed Hines Temple. In 1911 and in 1914, the memorial temple was a subject of discussion at a meeting of the Knights of Pythias from Staunton, Norfolk, and Richmond, and at the Knights’ annual convention in Virginia, respectively. By 1914, the memorial fund consisted of \$25,000, which was “a sum of sufficient size to put the work in operation.” However, the Knights of Pythias returned to the idea of whether to erect a memorial or build an orphanage, but according to the *World News* the “grand lodge [was] in no way committed to the orphanage plan.” Despite this, the Knights appointed three members to a sub-committee charged with investigating proposals and sites for a potential orphanage. No further reports of the Knights of Pythias mentioned a temple, memorial, or orphanage for Hines, and it seems unlikely they were ever successful in establishing a memorial.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Secret Societies,” *Courier-Journal*, 30 January 1887. “Died to Save Others. Pythians Who Exemplified the Truest Type of Courage. Roll of the Heroic Dead...,” *Washington Post*, 29 August 1894. “Pythian Memorial,” *Times Dispatch*, 16 March 1904. “Knights of Pythias. Annual Meeting of Grand Lodge in Staunton—Roanokers Present,” *Roanoke Times*, 22 May 1906. “Knights of Pythias Will Erect Temple. Grand Lodge of Virginia Purchases Site on North Fifth Street. Memorial to Samuel Hines...,” *Times Dispatch*, 26 March 1909.

<sup>37</sup> “Pythians Meet. Memorial to Captain Hines Discussed by Local Lodges,” *Times Dispatch*, 13 April 1911. “Norfolk Man Elected as Grand Chancellor. Knights of Pythias Choose William McK. Woodhouse to Head Order in Old Dominion. Semicentennial is Observed...,” *Times Dispatch*, 22 October 1914. “Knights of Pythias Meet Here This Week. Grand Lodge to Celebrate Fiftieth Anniversary of Founding of Order. Discuss Hines Memorial...,” *Times Dispatch*, 19 October 1914. “Pythians Celebrate. Members of

Some newspapers remembered the Spotswood Hotel as the temporary home of Jefferson Davis, and similarly to the memory of the Capitol disaster, used the hotel to valorize the Confederacy and the Davis family. In 1886, a writer for the Baltimore *Sun* noted that Davis lived at the Spotswood Hotel in “elegant apartments” after he was released from Fortress Monroe in 1867 while he was indicted for treason. When news broke in 1902 that a new Spotswood Hotel was under construction in Norfolk, a journalist for the *Richmond Dispatch* wrote an article on the history of the usage of the name Spotswood in Virginia. The journalist began with Alexander Spotswood, Virginia’s colonial governor from 1710 to 1722, and noted that the Spotswood Hotel opened in Richmond in 1860. While the building was “devoid of architectural beauty” the journalist contended that “the war brought it into prominence,” as Jefferson and Varina Davis lived in the hotel until they moved into the White House of the Confederacy. As for the Spotswood Hotel fire, the journalist argued that most of the eight people who died could have been saved had the building been equipped with fire escapes. In 1948, Harnett T. Kane wrote a novel about Varina Howell Davis’s life and included a section on Varina and Jefferson Davis’s reunion at the Spotswood after his imprisonment at Fortress Monroe. As late as 1961 a reporter remembered the Spotswood Hotel as the temporary home of the Davis family, with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* noting that one hundred years ago, when Richmonders welcomed Jefferson Davis, the Spotswood Hotel became his “temporary mansion.”<sup>38</sup>

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Ivanhoe Lodge, No. 74, Hold Banquet on Twenty-Ninth Anniversary,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 25 May 1920.

<sup>38</sup> “Mr. Davis and Jno. W. Garrett. How Mr. Garrett Secured the Release of Mr. Davis from Fortress Monroe,” *Sun*, 28 May 1886. “The Spotswood,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 20 April 1902. “In a Tragic American

Reporters and inhabitants of the commonwealth remembered the details of the 1870 Capitol disaster, flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire for decades—and in some cases, centuries—after they had occurred. While most frequently cited in comparison to other devastating catastrophes, these events were also recalled in times of collective grief and anxiety. The memory of the Capitol disaster was the most long-lived of the three calamities, while the flood was least discussed in the years after it occurred. Democrats used the Capitol disaster—and to a much less extent the Spotswood Hotel fire—to promote a Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction that denied Democrats any culpability for inciting and losing the former and painted the latter as a time in which Black Americans held all political, social, and economic power. Ultimately the 1870 disasters continued to be remembered throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

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Time,” *Courier-Journal*, 19 December 1948. Sergeant Dalzell, ““A People Enraptured,”” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 29 May 1961.

## CONCLUSION

Richmond was unfortunate to suffer from three different disasters in a single year. The collapse at the Capitol building killed over sixty men; the James River flood, while resulting in no deaths in the capital, ruined parts of the Black neighborhood of Rocketts and displaced its residents; and the Spotswood Hotel fire killed eight people four days before the end of the year. However, these calamities were not merely “acts of God” or the result of natural occurrences; rather, each disaster had a distinctly human element: the building collapse, flood, and fire were deadly and devastating because of people’s actions and/or inactions, and the consequences of these episodes unfolded in an equally human political and social context.

The Richmond disasters of 1870 exposed and exacerbated racial, political, and social tensions that had existed in the Virginia capital since the end of the Civil War five years previously. These disasters took place amidst extreme and unprecedented change for all Richmonders, regardless of political party, race, or class. The year 1870 began with Virginia’s readmittance to the Union, following a Constitutional Convention in which Black Virginians played a key role in shaping the new document that would govern the laws of the commonwealth. The year ended with Conservatives back in power, and with many families in the capital suffering from emotional distress or material losses as a result of the Capitol disaster, James River flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire.

Many actions that Richmonders took in the wake of the 1870 disasters were predictable and representative of how nineteenth-century Americans responded to

calamities. Like Americans before them who coped with catastrophes, Richmonders sought an explanation as to why each disaster occurred. Some people turned to religion, while others believed the cause of each disaster had a scientific and rational explanation. Richmonders—not expecting aid from the local, state, or federal governments—created an ad-hoc relief committee following the Capitol disaster and sought pecuniary donations from Richmonders and other Virginians. The obituaries of the dead upper-class white men who perished in the Capitol collapse lauded their political and social accomplishments, while the hardships that Black members of the Rocketts community endured as a result of the flood were largely ignored.

However, the political, social, economic, and racial contexts in which the disasters occurred shaped Richmonders' responses to them. Just as local and national newspapers did not see fit to report much on the ways in which the inhabitants of the Rocketts neighborhood suffered in the wake of the flood, neither did they print laudatory obituaries of those who perished in the flames of the Spotswood—likely because they were poorer and had less social and political cachet. Journalists for local and national newspapers also published hyperbolic accounts of the ways in which the white and Black communities of Richmond came together in the wake of the Capitol disaster, despite the years of political, racial, and social tensions that existed between them throughout Reconstruction, when Black Virginians gained an unprecedented level of political power. However, the political, social, and legal gains Black Virginians fought for and won during Radical Reconstruction were short-lived, and by the time of the Capitol disaster tensions were at an all-time high.

Richmonders surprisingly received sympathy and financial support from their charitable and commiserating contemporaries in the North. Journalists' visceral reporting of the disasters and the suffering left in their wake, as well as the arresting sketches that circulated with the stories, likely motivated some northerners to contribute money or goods to inhabitants of the Virginia capital. This was notable because five years previously, Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, and northerners and southerners had spent four years fighting in a bloody civil war. The benevolence and compassion northerners showed was a considerable turning point in North-South relations, and was one of the first steps toward eventual reconciliation between the two regions. External aid sent to Richmonders in 1870 also prefigured relief efforts for later southern disasters. Following the Charleston earthquake in 1886 and the Galveston hurricane in 1900, for instance, residents of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore sent generous funds to these destroyed southern communities.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably more important, the racial and political aspects of the disasters in Richmond were, in some ways, a precursor to how other calamity-stricken southern cities responded to calamities during the Jim Crow era. After a hurricane devastated the Sea Islands of South Carolina in 1893, the Red Cross assisted Black Sea Islanders and provided them with food, clothing, and shelter. Members of the Black community attempted to utilize that relief to protect their freedoms, but white supremacist South Carolinians seized upon the chaos the hurricane generated to strip Black South

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Millar Williams and Stephen G. Hoffius, *Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 107-109. Andy Horowitz, "The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900," *Historical Reflections* 41, no. 3 (Dec. 2015): 103-104.

Carolínians of their civil rights. After the Galveston hurricane in 1900, white politicians took advantage of rumors of social unrest to take control of the city government and deny Blacks political power. A year later, Galveston city commissioners enacted a poll tax, paving the way for other Jim Crow policies. Similarly, the disasters in Richmond in 1870 coincided with, and perhaps contributed to, the consolidation of white authority.<sup>2</sup>

While calls for reform and regulation were short-lived in Richmond after the 1870 disasters—many believed fire escapes should be installed in hotels, and others fought for local governments to inquire into the safety of public buildings—the memory of the disasters lived on for decades. While the flood was least discussed in the years after 1870, a grave marker was erected with little fanfare and no newspaper coverage in July 1871 which memorialized the victims of the Spotswood Hotel fire. The details surrounding the Capitol disaster were continuously remade and reshaped by the political and social circumstances in which contemporaries remembered the calamity. Because of the number of dead, the Capitol disaster has survived the longest in public memory, and continues to be remembered into the twenty-first century. Adherents of the Lost Cause—a movement which perpetuated lies about the cause of the Civil War and valorized the Confederacy and its principles—seized on the memory of the Capitol disaster and promoted the idea that the Capitol collapse was the result of overbearing federal policies throughout the period of Reconstruction. Just as political, social, and racial contexts shaped the

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Grego, “Black Autonomy, Red Cross Recovery, and White Backlash after the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893,” *Journal of Southern History* LXXXV, no. 4 (Nov. 2019): 805-806. Andy Horowitz, “The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900,” *Historical Reflections* 41, no. 3 (Dec. 2015): 103-104. See the discussion of the aftermath of the 1915 hurricane in New Orleans: Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2020), 1-16.

circumstances of and Richmonders' responses to the Capitol collapse, James River flood, and Spotswood Hotel fire, so too did those contexts shape the memories of the disasters.

Today, visitors to the Oakwood Memorial Cemetery can visit a crumbling and dilapidated grave marker inscribed with the words "To the victims of the Spotswood disaster." Legislators, staff, and visitors in the Virginia Capitol pass by an impressive plaque memorializing the sixty-two dead and over two hundred injured as a result of "the falling of the court room" in 1870. It is common for memorial text to be succinct and to the point. But these two objects do not describe the full picture: the context of the place and time in which these disasters occurred is not detailed, and neither are the ways in which Richmonders in 1870 and the decades after responded to and understood the calamities.



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*Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL)  
*Christian Examiner* (Richmond, VA)  
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*Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, VA)  
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