

Hysteria Without Rebellion :

**The Causes and Effects of Hysteria Around
Slave Insurrections in Confederate Mississippi**

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Funded by National Science Foundation as a part of the

Mapping Freedom REU Program

Summer 2025

I. INTRODUCTION

Background :

In the mid 1800's, the United States of America faced great civil unrest over many disagreements on how the country and its growing territory should be run, primarily based on the topic of whether or not slavery should still exist moving forward. This conflict eventually led to what we know now as the Civil War. During the Civil War, slavery was still prominent across the Confederate states. This would often cause problems for the South as men who were often in charge of forcing their Slaves to perform their roles were being conscripted into the war. This fact alongside the Union's plan to liberate slaves from the conquered states convinced some slaves at the time to rebel against the forces that kept them working.

However, the Civil War wasn't only inspiring slaves with ideas of being free from their chains, as it also spread hysteria among whites that their own and nearby slaves would pick up arms and revolt. Because of this hysteria, Southerners would often create militias adjacent to the actual war in order to try and maintain stability and quench their own fears about an insurrection occurring.¹ Even before Mississippi joined the Confederate States and subsequently the Civil War in 1861, Mississippians at the time would send letters to the Governors throughout the years stating fears of an insurrection occurring and asking for aid requests in quelling any that may have arisen in the future.

Problem Statement :

During the start of the Civil War in Mississippi, militias were commonly formed consisting of people who felt that their way of life was being threatened. Throughout the beginning years, these militias made-up of locals in counties usually with little to no combat

¹ Gleeson, David T. "The Rhetoric of Insurrection and Fear: The Politics of Slave Management in Confederate Georgia." *The Journal of Southern History* 89, no. 2 (2023): 237–66. doi:10.1353/soh.2023.0056.

experience would request help from the Governor of Mississippi for weapons, supplies, and men in order to defend from, usually in their own words, “Invaders and Insurrections”. These insurrections in question are usually aimed or outright stated to be about black people who are enslaved on plantations throughout the state and use the chaos of the oncoming war to free themselves from enslavement.

This research is made in an effort to analyze where Mississippians at the time were prominently concerned about insurrections occurring by compiling letters sent to the Governor of Mississippi that concern both worries about insurrections and requests from upstarting militias to protect against them in order to learn and map out these locations to gain insight on where people at the time were most worried about a rebellion occurring and where they actually had occurred.

Research Questions :

- How did slave rebellions affect the homefront of the Confederate armies in Mississippi?
- How did hysteria around slave rebellions affect the Mississippians during the Civil War?

Definitions :

The Miriam Webster Dictionary provides the following definitions for the accompanying words.

- Insurrection - *an act or instance of revolting against civil authority or an established government.*
- Militia - *a private group of armed individuals that operates as a paramilitary force and is typically motivated by a political or religious ideology*
- Conscription - *compulsory enlistment for state service, typically into the armed forces.*

Limitations :

- Those who were rebelling or were planning rebellions are not a primary source.

- Letters were only collected from the CWRGM archive. // Directors of mapping freedom subset.
- Only letters to and from Governor, and not any other government official ie. Mayor, General.
- Primary sources are only from people in a higher monetary and literary class at the time since they would have to both write and afford to send a letter.

Assumptions :

- Unless evidence proves otherwise, we are assuming that any rebellions that were alleged or theorized did not happen or were unsuccessful.
- The letters transcribed on the CWRGM archive have been transcribed accurately.
- Assuming statistics, dates, and requests found through letters are accurate.

Importance of the Study :

By comparing data from letters across Mississippi, specifically that of private militias founded by civilians out of fear of oncoming insurrections, we can construct a view of the Civil War from a unique perspective in order to gain new insights. By highlighting the fear white civilians and generals had of slave rebellions during the time, and showing how and where smaller private militias of men were being set-up, we can look at the volunteering men at the time and decipher where their intentions really laid and see if their efforts of enslavement enforcement was worth the manpower and how it might have affected the Civil War overall. Through this study, we will see if the threat of slave rebellions was justified, and furthermore will see if the enforcement deployed against them was worth the manpower.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers and scholars have often delved into both the psychology of Slaves and the inner workings of their insurrections throughout the years surrounding and during the Civil War. More interesting and more akin to my topic are researchers who also analyze the fear of Southerners during the time and how that affects a people's reactions and behavior in regards to insurrections. The following literature review aims to analyze the research and findings of previous studies to both aid my own research topic, as well as find gaps in the studies and how this research can support and fill said gaps.

The Rhetoric of Insurrection and Fear: The Politics of Slave Management in Confederate Georgia.

David T. Gleeson's writing offers the perfect mirror into my own research. Using similar methods of data collection and analysis to my own, Gleeson pulls information and statistics from the Governor of Georgia's personal letter collection during the period of the Civil War in order to draw conclusions on slave rebellions in Georgia. Despite my own research primarily focusing on the conflicts and alleged conflicts in Mississippi, I noticed Gleeson and I landed on similar conclusions regarding the motives of the southerners who were writing to the Governors at the time, and gained unique insight from some of the topics and ideas discussed by Gleeson in his own writing.

Where he and I differ however concerns that of how our research was tackled. While I in my own research spent time combing through the letters in order to categorize and subsequently map out to gain insight on how the location the letters were coming from can teach us about the fear at the time, Gleeson however spent the majority of their paper meticulously analyzing the

individual letters that concerned slave insurrections. In addition, as previously stated his research only concerned letters sent to the Governor of Georgia, and as such leaves a gap in the study concerning similar happenings in Mississippi.

Rebellious Talk and Conspiratorial Plots: The Making of a Slave Insurrection in Civil War Natchez

An article running through a detailed history about insurrections and more prominently paranoia about insurrections happening in Natchez Mississippi during the Civil War. Justin Behrend goes into personal detail on events occurring in Natchez and its surrounding areas after examining a variety of documents and cases during the time period. He discusses paranoia among whites and the time and talks about how militias were formed in order to strengthen their own homefront guard against their indentured servants. Behrend goes on to discuss as well how actual violence and threats were a more rare occurrence during the time period, but states that slaves at the time would anticipate and somewhat make preparations for union troops to arrive nearby in order to liberate themselves closer.

Behrends study is an interesting and personal look into the lives of Mississippians living in Natchez during the Civil War, and spends a lot of time examining both the slaves and their oppressors in order to construct a compelling story of the hysteria white southerners were going through. Where his study obviously lacks however is the broader scope to scale across Mississippi which is only made up by the fact he deep dived so heavily into the Natchez area. Behrend also lacks much in the way of statistics in order to get points of fear across, instead trying to take a more real and empathetic approach to discussing the events and how hysteria was affecting those afflicted.

‘A GENERAL INSURRECTION IN THE COUNTRIES WITH SLAVES’: THE US CIVIL WAR AND THE ORIGINS OF AN ATLANTIC REVOLUTION, 1861–1866*

In this article, Samantha Payne goes into detail about how slave societies in the Atlantic, specifically Cuba and Brazil, reacted to the Civil War happening in the United States and discusses how it both influenced indentured servants to revolt as well as struck fear into slave-owners. Payne spends a lot of time in the article setting up slave-owners relevant to the event and describes their initial fears and worries about what the Civil War could mean for their livelihoods. Measures were taken to deal with insurrectionary slaves across their plantations, but ultimately the slave-owners' fears were realized across a series of wide-spread revolts due in large part to the inspiration slaves in these areas were given from the U.S. Civil War and the crumbling of the Confederacy.

The primary differences between this article and my own study is both the actual events discussed as well as the location. However, the analysis of slave-rebellion hysteria dealing with places outside of the U.S. but still concerning the Civil War provides an interesting change of perspective, even more so considering the fear of insurrections were actually validated by the wide-spread revolution that actually occurred.

III. Methodology

Sources of data utilized by this research primarily comes from the material found through the Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi database (CWRGM). The database hosts letters collected from private collections of Mississippi's governors from the late 1850s - 1882, all of which have been digitized and translated by the CWRGM team. The NSF-REU program Mapping Freedom took around 5000 of these digitized letters and compiled them into a spreadsheet containing their locations and accompanying tags for the purposes of finding revelations through the geographical data the letters were coming from.

The process of this research first involved examining the spreadsheet provided by Mapping Freedom and going through the letters with the tag “[Military Procedures & Events--Insurrections](#)” since that's the tag associated with the topic of slave rebellions and private militias to protect from slave rebellions. Letters pertaining to the topic were noted while off-topic letters merely mentioning the word or were out of the time period were discarded from the spreadsheet. The noted letters were then plotted on a map of Mississippi using the Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS) and categorized into either being a location of a rebellion, whether successful or not, or detailing the location of where a private militia or an aid request was made in an effort to prevent any rebellions from occurring. Once the points are plotted, they will be accompanied by a county map of Mississippi from the year 1860 that shows a heat-map for the population of enslaved people during the same year. From there we can examine where Southerners were most wary of a rebellion occurring and compare it to the data of where they actually occurred to see if there are any patterns, and also see if the militias were effective or even necessary given the circumstances.

IV. RESULTS

After a thorough analysis of all 89 letters tagged with “[Military Procedures & Events--Insurrections](#)” only 40 of the letters were sent to the governor during the time period of the Civil War and were on topic. Of the 40 letters collected, they were organized into categories based on what the topic of the letter was discussing. The following categories were chosen based on the most common patterns of topics in the letters tagged, and letters that contained similar or more than one topic were chosen based off personal preference for what best fit :

Insurrection Allegation Debunk	mdah_757-932-01-13
Warning of Insurrection	mdah_757-932-02-09 mdah_757-930-12-15 mdah_757-945-04-35 Mdah_757-944-13-41
Fear of Insurrection	mdah_757-940-09-25 mdah_757-943-06-33 mdah_757-942-05-33 mdah_757-942-12-32 mdah_757-931-01-19 mdah_757-942-07-01 mdah_757-944-07-10 mdah_757-942-01-17 mdah_757-942-03-08 mdah_757-942-08-19 mdah_757-942-08-40 Mdah_757-945-10-17 mdah_757-942-06-04 mdah_757-932-10-23
Militia Creation / Aid Request	mdah_757-931-09-19 mdah_757-931-13-15 mdah_757-931-13-17 mdah_757-932-01-22 mdah_757-932-02-05 mdah_757-932-02-10

	mdah_757-932-02-29
	mdah_757-932-07-09
	mdah_757-939-06-01
	mdah_757-942-11-36
	mdah_757-942-12-32
	mdah_757-939-07-09
	mdah_757-942-06-06
	mdah_757-942-07-29
	mdah_757-944-09-05
	mdah_757-943-05-06
	mdah_757-945-03-28
	mdah_757-942-08-36
	mdah_757-945-10-18
	mdah_757-942-07-46

From this chart we can get an interesting insight that a majority of the letters concerning insurrections were not about them actually happening nor were they warning, but instead were usually asking the Governor for aid usually in the form of weapons or soldiers for the purposes of aiding militias or upstarting them in the case of the “Fear of Insurrection” letters. What can be determined by this data at the very least was that the people of Mississippi were clearly concerned of an insurrection happening enough to mail the Governor numerous times both to request aid to prevent insurrections, as well as ask the Governor to not conscript soldiers who worked on plantations in order to have more able-bodied white men patrol private land. Another conclusion to be drawn is that since there was a low number of letters concerning actual enslaved rebellions that the measures taken by Mississippians at the time to prevent insurrections were either effective in their efforts or were ultimately unnecessary precautions given the low instances of insurrections occurring.

When it came to plotting the locational data found within the letters, unless stated otherwise within the letter itself, such as naming a location they were afraid of an insurrection

occurring, the location the letter was sent from was considered the primary location the writer was talking about. When it came to mapping the points there were some oddities among the letters. Some letters wouldn't contain a location at all, such as in the case of `mdah_757-944-13-41`, and as such can't be attributed to the data. In total, 35 points were mapped across Mississippi, all of which represent locations expressing some need of aid out of fear of an insurrection occurring. In the case of `mdah_757-932-01-13`, it was not mapped due to not providing meaningful data or correlating with any data shown by the map.

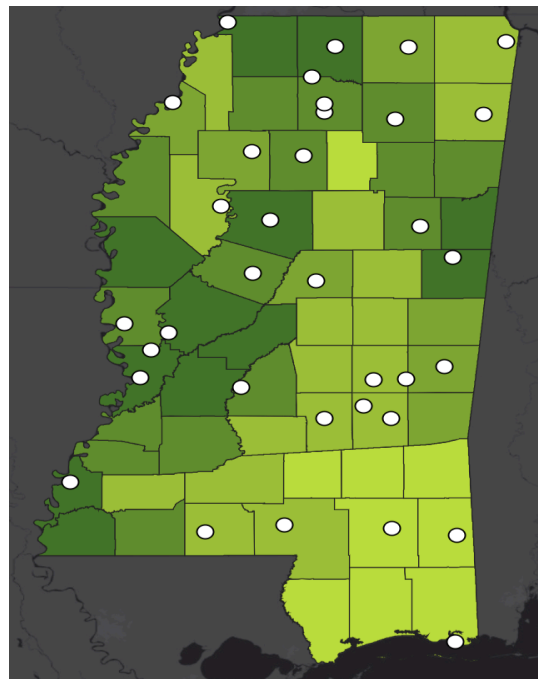


Figure 1 - Map showing locations letters were sent from in Mississippi

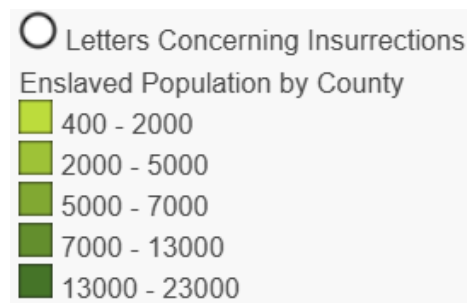


Figure 2 - Legend for the map in Figure 1

Looking at the data the map shows, it statistically shows letters concerning fears of insurrection are more likely to come from areas with a larger population of enslaved persons. This is the expected result since fears of insurrections should be directly tied to the number of slaves in an area as more slaves means more plantations which means more unease, however there is still a fairly large amount of letters coming from these lower slave populated counties. The following table shows the number of letters per slave population increment.

Enslaved Population	Letters In Each County
400 - 2000	3
2000 - 5000	10
5000 - 7000	5
7000 - 13000	9
13000 - 23000	8

V. DISCUSSION

From the results of organizing the letters into topics and the creation of the map, the next logical step comes to figuring out what, if anything, was inspiring white southerners to mail the Governor about their fears. When it comes to discussing the letters, our first step is to look at when the letters were sent and try to narrow down what the fear was stemming from during the time. We focus on timing because according to the similar study done by David T. Gleeson found that in Georgia people did have initial fears regarding the possibility of a slave insurrection, but as the years went on instead just used the rhetoric of slave violence to further their own personal gain through receiving additional aid.²

One interesting letter comes from a Commander of a group of volunteer soldiers. He discusses a fear of a raid similar to Harper's Ferry being plotted in Issaquena county to the Governor and asks for advice to handle the situation.³ I believe this to be an example of a Mississippian caught up in the hysteria from outside events especially since he went as far to liken it to the Harper's Ferry Raid. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind this letter was sent in December 1860, months before Mississippi's secession but still clearly wrapped in politics surrounding slavery during the time. This falls in stark contrast to some letters sent further along in the Civil War from other commanders of militias as in the case of one letter sent in 1861, who opens by declaring the creation of a "Home Guard" before talking of rumors of black insurrection plots, then finally requesting the governor send muskets to replace their old ones.⁴ Not only is this letter a blatant request for military arms during a war, but the letter comes

² Gleeson, David T. "The Rhetoric of Insurrection and Fear: The Politics of Slave Management in Confederate Georgia." *The Journal of Southern History* 89, no. 2 (2023): 237–66. doi:10.1353/soh.2023.0056.

³ McCardle, W. H., "Letter from W. H. McCardle to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus; December 19, 1860," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757: Box 930, Folder 12 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_757-930-12-15.

⁴ Harnley, Jno. B., "Letter from Jno. B. Harnley to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus; May 4, 1861," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757: Box 932, Folder 1 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_757-932-01-22.

from Jasper county, a county with a lower percentage of enslaved populations compared to others. It is my belief that this is the exact kind of letter Gleeson discusses in his article, someone who aims to use the hysteria of slave insurrections and the government's readiness to help defend its slave to their advantage for personal gain.

While most of the letters during the early days the Civil War concerning insurrections may have been written from hysteria and a drive for Mississippians to defend themselves from those they held captive, it is a common trait among all the letters that claim to be developing a “home guard” always request things such as ammunition and guns. However as the months go by and conscription only continues a new kind of letter begins to emerge with Mississippians beginning to fear being outnumbered by their slave population as more white men head off to war.⁵ While I personally believe the fear of being outnumbered by having your able-bodied men and overseers be conscripted is genuine, and some letters do seem genuinely concerned to ask the governor for soldier to be sent, usually the letters would come from a place of personal request begging to the governor to rescind the draft in order to keep personal farms occupied and keep the threat of an insurrection at a minimum and protect at times over a hundred men just to keep the home militia in place.⁶ Gleeson once again draws on similar conclusions in his own study as he discusses instances where letters sent to the Georgia Governor would ask to defend home plantations and avoid being drafted, but ultimately the Confederacy’s war effort would outweigh the personal want, and end up sending its men away anyway.⁷

⁵ Buck, C. L., "Letter from C. L. Buck to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus; June 7, 1862," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757: Box 942, Folder 1 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_757-942-01-17.

⁶ Bailey, J. S., "Letter from J. S. Bailey to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus; June 25, 1862," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757: Box 942, Folder 3 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_757-942-03-08.

⁷ Gleeson, David T. “The Rhetoric of Insurrection and Fear: The Politics of Slave Management in Confederate Georgia.” *The Journal of Southern History* 89, no. 2 (2023): 237–66. doi:10.1353/soh.2023.0056.

An interesting thing to note is across all letters sent to the Governor throughout the Civil War, not a single letter was sent to make the Governor aware of a large-scale insurrection that had occurred. Furthermore in the case the only letter categorized as an “Insurrection Allegation Debunk” provides an interesting look into the time as a Commander has his troops return after finding no such evidence of an insurrection having occurred or a threat of one oncoming.⁸ It provides context to the fact that if the hysteria people were feeling were genuine or not, the ever oncoming letters requesting aid, men, and exemption from draft was ultimately wasting the time and resources of the Confederate army. This in turn proves that even if the resources were being used effectively to help calm the fears of the people from insurrections occurring, the rhetoric of violence and the fear of Mississippians was still ultimately costing the Confederacy in the war overall.

⁸ White, F. M., "Letter from F. M. White to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus; May 3, 1861," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757: Box 932, Folder 1 in *Civil War & Reconstruction Governors of Mississippi*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://cwrgm.org/item/mdah_757-932-01-13.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that in more ways than one, hysteria surrounding the possibility of slave insurrections at the very least had an effect on Confederate Mississippi. Beyond just the letters talked about in this paper, numerous other writers both show signs of genuine fear over their slaves rebelling against them as well as show a desire to take advantage of the threatening rhetoric an insurrection could mean for them. By analyzing the letters from Mississippi during the Civil War and following the timeline through their fear, it paints a picture of the Civilian life in Mississippi and their struggle to maintain that way of life under both threat of the Union forces and a theoretical fear of the people they oppress. And by seeing the letters request military aid to be sent onto plantations and to leave the able-bodied men left free of conscription in order to continue their patrols, it shows that in an effort to maintain slavery and ensure that no violent insurrections occurred, the Confederate army of Mississippi was ultimately a sinking ship.

For Future Research :

Similar to how this study mimics the work done by David Gleeson, an effective way to continue this research would be to analyze other states using similar methods to see if the same patterns appear akin to how they did between Mississippi and Georgia.

For research to continue being done in Mississippi, it would be good to stem outward from just letters sent to the Governor of Mississippi for data collection.

VI. CITATIONS

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