

Noiseless, Automatic Service: The History of Domestic Servant Call Bell Systems in Charleston, South Carolina, 1740-1900.

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Noiseless, Automatic Service: The Domestic Servant Call Bell System in Charleston, South Carolina, 1740-1900

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Date of Award

5-2013

Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Science (MS)

Legacy Department

Historic Preservation

Advisor

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Abstract

Shortly before Europe's industrial revolution, tradesmen discovered bell systems in houses to mechanize communication between householders and servants. Mechanical bell systems, now known as house bells or bell-pull systems, were prevalent in Britain and America from the late 1700s to the early 1900s. These technological ancestors of today's telephone were operated by a knob or a tug of a tassel mounted on an interior wall. Bell-pull systems separated both servants and their employers by separating both parties into different rooms, but they also increased masters' powers of nonverbal control. Servants undoubtedly played a large role in the operation, maintenance, and repair of these practices of historic houses. But, like a lost language, surviving hardware and wire are a puzzle to many modern viewers who have taken for granted the technology that usurped the bell-pull--electric doorbells, intercoms, and telephones. Unfortunately, many mechanical bell systems have been lost to historic houses.

Although domestic servant call bells were ubiquitous across America, very little has been written about them. This report addresses the lack of literature by creating a technical and cultural history of bell systems in the Charleston, South Carolina area. Many historic dwellings retained a remarkable quantity of house bell hardware consisting of wires strung through walls and attached to cranks, pulleys, and knobs, as well as exterior bells. Many private residences and several historic houses, including the Aiken-Rhett House, Heyward Washington House, and the Joseph Heyward House, retain fragments of their original bell systems. These systems were used by white slave owners to communicate with their slaves. Even after emancipation, Charlestonians continued to use servant bells to communicate with their emancipated household servants.

By studying local tradesmen, installation practices, and technical drawings, this report will fit Charleston bell hanging practices into a larger context of bell systems globally. To accomplish this aim, full-scale mapping of the bell systems at the Aiken-Rhett House museum was undertaken. As one of the most well-preserved in a historic house museum, the Aiken-Rhett House offers an opportunity to interpret the daily life of slaves and servants in the Charleston area. This report makes the case for preservation of these peculiar old hardware systems and sheds light on what these systems were, how they worked, and how they were used.

Recommended Citation

Madill, Wendy Danielle, "Noiseless, Automatic Service: The History of Mechanical Bell Systems in Charleston, South Carolina, 1740-1900" (2013). *All Theses and Dissertations*. https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/1660

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