

# ATLANTIC AND LOCAL: SCALES OF INTERDEPENDENCE IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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## ABSTRACT

Using Charleston, South Carolina, USA, as a case-study, this article argues that this interplay of scales and, more specifically unequal scales, was just as important to fostering the growth of globally-connected cities in the early modern Atlantic. In the course of the eighteenth century, Charleston grew from a few thousand inhabitants to one of the largest cities in the North Atlantic with a population of roughly 15,000 at the first United States Census in 1790. Historians have customarily attributed this growth to the simultaneous expansion of the plantation economy, which produced mainly rice and indigo. Nevertheless, there were a host of complex local processes at play that also contributed to Charleston's importance, which have until recently been almost completely overlooked by scholars. Delving into the relationship between the local and the global is essential to fully understanding both the reasons for Charleston's growth and its critical role in connecting the region to the Atlantic economy.

## KEYWORDS

Charleston, South Carolina – local/global – interplay of scales – merchant-planter elites – African slaves – immigrant workforce.

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# ATLÂNTICO E LOCAL: ESCALAS DE INTERDEPENDÊNCIA EM CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, NO SÉCULO XVIII

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## RESUMO

Usando Charleston, na colônia britânica e posteriormente estado americano da Carolina do Norte, como estudo de caso, esse artigo argumenta que um jogo de escalas, especificamente escalas desiguais, promoveu o crescimento de cidades globalmente conectadas no mundo atlântico durante a era moderna. Ao longo do século XVIII, Charleston expandiu de uma vila de mil e poucos habitantes para uma das maiores cidades do Atlântico Norte, com uma população de 15,000 de acordo com o primeiro censo americano em 1790. Historiadores comumente explicam esse crescimento como sendo produto da economia de plantação, dedicada principalmente à produção de arroz e índigo. No entanto, diversos e complexos processos locais foram fundamentais à expansão de Charleston, mas até recentemente foram completamente ignorados. A investigação desse relacionamento entre o local e o global é essencial para se entender as razões para o crescimento de Charleston e o papel crítico que a cidade exerceu na formação de conexões entre a região e a economia Atlântica.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Charleston, Carolina do Sul – local/global – jogo de escalas – elite mercantil-agrícola – escravos africanos – mão-de-obra imigrante.

As part of her idea of the “global city,” Saskia Sassen identified the tensions between global capital and its owners, and an immigrant workforce that services this elite and its companies, as being one of the chief dynamics of the modern globalized metropolis. The mobile, global elite that finds coherence through its involvement in extending networks of technology and finance comes face-to-face with local city-dwellers, and an immigrant population that has a different relationship to the city – but still exists in a global urban system.<sup>3</sup>

The eighteenth-century city ran on different technologies and less sophisticated financial systems, but it nevertheless replicated these scales and inequalities. This is not something that historians have necessarily noticed, however, as they have customarily focused on the more expansive networks underpinning these modern-day capitalist systems. Applying Sassen’s model therefore draws our attention not only to the historic roots of the global city on the large-scale, but also urges us to dig deeper into how this related to the small-scale, local, dynamic.

Using Charleston, South Carolina, as a case-study, this article argues that this interplay of scales and, more specifically unequal scales, was just as important to fostering the growth of globally-connected cities in the early modern Atlantic. In the course of the eighteenth century, Charleston grew from a few thousand inhabitants to one of the largest cities in the North Atlantic with a population of roughly 15,000 at the first United States Census in 1790. Historians have customarily attributed this growth to the simultaneous expansion of the plantation economy, which produced mainly rice and indigo. Nevertheless, there were a host of complex local processes at play that also contributed to Charleston’s expansion, which have until recently received less attention in a southern colonial American context than they have in a northern one. Delving into the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> SASSEN, Saskia, “The Global City: Introducing a Concept,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Winter/ Spring 2005, Vol. XI, Issue 2, 27-43.

the local and the global is essential to fully understanding both the reasons for Charleston's growth and its critical role in connecting the region to the Atlantic economy.

To explore these complex connections, I will investigate two urban spaces in which they are visible, attending closely to the centrality of the interplay of scales. All of these spheres are connected, however, in the sense that they facilitated the success of a merchant-planter elite, who used long-distance commercial connections to trade rice and indigo for enslaved Africans and consumer goods. Making this elite successful, and facilitating the lifestyle to which they aspired, materially and culturally, became a business opportunity for citydwellers who operated on a local economic scale. However, it also became a major source of inequality in the town, as enslaved African laborers grew to be the core workforce servicing the needs of white elites. By the time of the first US census, Charleston was populated half by relatively wealthy whites, and half by enslaved Africans. Perhaps even more starkly than in the modern global city, the South Carolina metropolis was a place characterized by a globally connected elite and the immigrant workforce that serviced them.

The rise of a merchant-planter elite in colonial Charleston has now been carefully documented by a succession of historians. This was an elite with Atlantic, and often global connections, who occupied a position of economic, political and cultural power in this major Atlantic city by the second half of the eighteenth century. For many historians of the region, the merchant and planter Henry Laurens has epitomized this elite, in large part because extensive quantities of his letters and account books have survived. These materials reveal a number of critical characteristics shared by the lowcountry's merchant-planter class; they grounded their power in Charleston, a city which became a conduit for the rice that was produced by the lowcountry's enslaved population on rural estates, and also for the

Africans who came from West Africa and the Caribbean to work in this plantation economy.<sup>4</sup>

As the owner of multiple plantations and a large townhouse, Laurens was entirely typical of the merchant-planter elite. As Max Edelson has shown, by joining these locations together in a network of trade, he was able to take advantage of the Atlantic economy. Rice, indigo, timber, and beef moved from plantation to city wharf. Laurens himself moved from wharf, to townhouse, then around his plantations, managing their development. Enslaved people moved from Charleston's wharves to Laurens' plantations, and sometimes to the workforce that kept his urban estate running. Laurens himself made numerous trips across the Atlantic, living in London for a period of time. He cultivated business contacts in Bristol, Madeira, Lisbon, and numerous other places. He was part of transatlantic networks not only of trade, but of imperial politics and polite culture. In short, the wealth and reputation built by Laurens was Atlantic in scale but was ultimately anchored in the city. Charleston had become a global hub that, through men like him, connected a region to an expansive imperial economy.<sup>5</sup>

What has been less appreciated by scholars, however, was the degree to which men like Laurens did not achieve their status purely through their own work and initiative (or their personal direction of enslaved workers). Like the international elites of today's global cities, these eighteenth-century forbearers were largely reliant on other workers within the global city to support their endeavors. Laurens may have succeeded in creating a trading network for the goods

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4 On Charleston's function as a socioeconomic hub see HART, Emma, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth Century British Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, 2010); PEARSON, Edwards "Planters Full of Money," in Eds. GREENE, Jack P. et al, *Money, Trade, and Power: The Evolution of Colonial South Carolina's Plantation Society* (Columbia, SC, 2000) 299-321; COCLANIS, Peter, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1670-1920* (Oxford, 199); NASH, R.C. "South Carolina and the Atlantic Economy in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 45, no. 4 (1992): 677-702

5 EDELSON, S. Max, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

he produced on his plantations, but there was not much that he could achieve alone beyond this. His status was utterly dependent on urban workers and their skills. We can explore the dynamics that existed between the globally active planter-merchants and the more local scale of the urban economy through numerous spaces, but here I will focus on two – first the city’s wharves and second its elite homes.

British America’s urban wharves operated in quite a different way to their British counterparts. Wharves in leading British cities, such as Glasgow and Newcastle were commercial spaces governed by established lines of authority and customary power structures that had long existed to order the local economy. There were of course tensions between users and authorities. The port of Greenock in Scotland saw a major strike by dock workers for pay, merchants flouted the rules, and no doubt hucksters hovered on the quayside to try and sell to sailors. Commercialization meant wharves were increasingly busy. However, the experiences of Ralph Jackson, an apprentice to one of Newcastle’s leading coal merchants in the 1750s, seems to confirm the idea that British wharves mostly places for loading and unloading goods, under the watchful eye of the designated corporate authority. As ensign to his master, who was a member of one of the most powerful Newcastle guilds, Jackson spent part of almost every day on the “key” supervising the keelmen who loaded up coal brought to the waterfront. Jackson’s exhaustive diaries, with daily entries over almost his entire apprenticeship, record his presence there. They also include observations of what happened on the quay – boats were launched, once a pot of ale was drunk, prisoners were loaded onto a ship, a copper brewing vat got stuck fast while being unloaded from a boat, fights broke out, and gossip spread about a recent murder in the town. The only thing Jackson ever bought on the key was a pennyworth of oysters – which he did twice in six years.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Journals of Ralph Jackson, 1750-1790 transcribed by the Great Ayton History Society and available to download at <http://greatayton.wikidot.com/ralph-jackson-diaries>.

The regulated and confined role of the wharf in these British cities was entirely in contrast to the role played in commerce by their North American cousins. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Charleston wharves were privately-owned spaces and central locations in the trafficking of provisions – a market place in their own right, albeit one lacking in oversight by any official other than the (sparse) customs men and the occasional packer or measurer. Laurens spent a lot of time negotiating with wharfingers, on whom he totally depended to get his cargoes in and out in a timely manner. Early on in his career, he positioned himself as physically close to the wharf as possible, renting a countinghouse and store in a prime position on the East Bay directly opposite the waterfront. This enabled Laurens to maintain a dialogue with the wharfingers who loaded, unloaded, and stored, the goods and people in which he dealt. It is to these wharfingers that we should now turn our attention, as these were powerful commercial brokers in the urban economy.<sup>7</sup>

Each wharf in Charleston, as contemporary maps revealed, was designated by the name of its individual owner. With a number of stores, shops, and facilities constructed by each owner of the wharf, these spaces became private empires. In these private spaces, the “public interest” became the interloper on the waterfront. Legislation designed to organize and regulate the activities of the majority private interest often showed restraint and respect (and even deference?) towards property owners that was noticeably absent in Britain. The question of damage to the wharf by the ships using it preoccupied the Charleston legislators in 1750. A wharfinger was required to “attend at all times at his *wharfs*, to give directions about mooring any vessel coming to the same, on pain of forfeiting *ten pounds* for

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7 For discussions of these activities see, e.g., Laurens to James Crockatt, July 29, 1747; and to Samuel Wilson & Son, July 8, 1747, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 1, *September 11, 1746–October 31, 1755*, ed. HAMER, Philip M., and ROGERS JR. George C. (Columbia, S.C., 1968), 35–36, 13–14. Laurens to James Harford, December 19, 1768; to Reynolds, Getley & Co., February 2, 1769; and to William Fisher, March 1, 1769, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 6, *August 1, 1768–July 31, 1769*, ed. CHESNUTT, David R. (Columbia, S.C., 1978), 230, 264, 389–90.

every offence.” At the same time, though, pilots were held responsible for bringing vessels in correctly, so as to avoid damage. Furthermore, wharfingers’ role as masters of their own commercial waterfront domain was bolstered by the same law, which allowed them to have their own set of weights and measures – periodically checked by the authorities – for the measurement of goods marketed on their property. The function of the city as a “rubber stamp” for the activities of wharf owners was continued on after Charleston was incorporated in 1783, when a revised ordinance stipulated that wharf owners were permitted to develop their property with commercial buildings as they wished, but that they must conform to certain building standards (mostly to ensure fire resistance) ascertained by the council.<sup>8</sup>

The ability of traders to buy up waterside lots and develop them into personal commercial empires, fronting directly on the Atlantic, meant that when local government wished to access or use waterside property for public purposes, they faced an uphill struggle. While in Britain public and corporate interests regularly took precedence over private ones at the waterfront, in early America the individual property owner and trader was the arbiter of access to the sea.<sup>9</sup> Goods of every sort flowed through the portal. William Roper’s waterfront lot was capacious enough for Charlestonians to store their wood supplies on it—for a fee, of course. On sale at the wharf was “Matlock’s best Philadelphia beer” and “good GUATIMALA INDICO SEED of last year’s growth, small rice by the single barrel, muscovado sugar, bacon, and good butter in small casks.” Joseph Brown explained to his Charleston clientele that he had “Just imported, and to be sold *very reasonable*, in a small Store next to Mr. *Beakman’s Shop on Elliott’s Wharfs*, choice and clay’d Sugar, *Carancas Cocoa*, Bay Salt, Verdigris, Limes, &c”<sup>10</sup>

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8 Act for Keeping the Streets Clean etc, July 6, 1750, *South Carolina Gazette*; City Ordinances, Charleston Corporation, 1783.

9 Act for Keeping the Streets Clean etc, July 6, 1750, SCG.

10 *South Carolina Gazette* August 3, 1747.



But not only was Henry Laurens reliant on these powerful wharfingers. The wharfingers were reliant on a host of other people. Wharves were a vital site of the local provisions trade. In an advertisement in the *South Carolina Gazette*, one fisherman and wharf owner notified the public that they would know that fish was available when there “is a WHITE-FLAG hosted at the upper-end of Capt. Roper’s wharf, near the *Curtain-Line*.”<sup>11</sup> Even after the construction of the town’s fishmarket in 1770, its wharves continued to be central places of trade as boats came ashore bringing livestock, wood, and corn. The arrival of such commodities at the wharves nearest the market, according to one commentator, often resulted in them being sold off to individual buyers before they even reached the main marketplace. Another lamented “Does a boat come to town with corn, hogs, sheep, calves or other provisions, for the *Charles-town* market, there are people who watch the wharves before day, to engross the whole...This sort of fraud, is practiced both by white and black people.” This trade, therefore, was only possible because so many of the links between Charleston, the countryside, and the coastal waterways, were sustained by free and enslaved Africans.<sup>12</sup>

As laborers on the docks, and indeed pilots who brought ships safely to those docks, Africans were essential to the movement of these goods through and across the city’s wharves. Two of the most successful Africans working in these roles – so successful that they appear in the records as individuals in a society that attempted to completely depersonalize them – were Thomas Jeremiah, a pilot, and Leander, a butcher and meat dealer. Both men used the proceeds of their labor in the city to purchase their freedom, allowing them to make an independent living from their skills. In these roles, they became indis-

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<sup>11</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, June 29, 1765.

<sup>12</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, November 26, 1772; *South Carolina Gazette*, November 12, 1772. Accounts I found between planters and wharfingers also show that the former maintained private accounts with the latter for the storage, shipment, and sometimes packing, of not only rice but also other commodities. This kind of relationship further emphasizes how the wharf had become a privatized commercial space, rather than a public concern.

pensable to the wharfside marketplace, and the supply of food and consumer goods to citydwellers.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of the Revolution, however, both men ran up against the ambitions of white Charlestonians, including Henry Laurens, to their importance. Jeremiah was accused of fomenting a slave rebellion curtail, and was lynched on Charleston Green as an “example” to his fellow black townsmen. Leander was prosecuted under Revolutionary-era laws that restricted the amount a dealer could mark up their provisions. While one could hardly call these two men fortunate, they had in fact escaped previous efforts by whites to corral blacks into space and restrict their status and economic possibilities. With the wealth and power they had gained from trade, and their increasingly secure status in the lowcountry, whites were able to assemble ever-more comprehensive programs of control. The Fire of 1740 was a good starting point – as Charlestonians persuaded the British monarchy to send them £20,000 sterling to rebuild their wharves and warehouses following a damaging blaze. Support also came from the slave code following the Stono Rebellion, which conflated black networks of trade with networks of sedition.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, however, efforts were afoot to remove black traders from the wharves and place them in marketplaces, at the wharfside, where they could be surveilled and punished. In 1737 a fruit, vegetable, and meat market was established between wharves on the East Bay, and in 1770 a fish market was also raised at the wharfside, a few blocks northwest of the existing market building. These spaces were governed by customary laws promoting the “public good” in local trade. Early American market regulators agreed wholeheartedly with their British brethren on forestallers, engrossers, and regrators, devoting large sections of market statutes to making their activities

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13 Misc. records OO:385, 387, SCDAH, as cited in BLANCK, Emily, *Tyrannicide: Forging an American Law of Slavery in Revolutionary South Carolina and Massachusetts* (Athens, GA, 2014), 62–63

14 MULCAHY, Matthew “The ‘Great Fire’ of 1740 and the Politics of Disaster Relief in Colonial Charleston.” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99 (April 1998): 135-157; WOOD, Peter *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1680 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1966).

illegal and pursuing those who committed these offenses. By the late 1730s the practices were outlawed in Charleston; culprits faced a fine of five pounds and a 1752 newspaper notice reminded readers of the illegitimacy of hawking foods. At the fishmarket itself, the connection between regulation and black dealers was at its most explicit. The legislation accompanying the market's establishment stated that from November 1770 no fish was to be "offered to Sale at any Stand, Dock, Wharf, or Place, in any other Part of CHARLES-TOWN, except at the FISH-MARKET." Explaining that "the Business of fishing is principally carried on by Negroes, Mulatoes, and Mestizoes, who are apt to be riotous and disorderly," the act also legislated for stocks and a whipping post, which would be used to punish any black fishermen refusing to obey the authority of the market commissioners.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that Charleston's whites were trying to subjugate blacks on the wharves, in the end, the relationship between the two was too entangled to be able to separate them clearly. Whites depended on black agents much more than they would care to admit. In May 1777 commissioners noted that citizens were being "greatly imposed on by the Free Negroes, who usually attend the Market to sell Veal, Mutton etc on Commission." Henceforth blacks were required to carry a ticket written by a free white person stipulating the highest price at which provisions could be sold, "in order that the Inhabitants may be satisfied whether the Owners or Sellers are the Extortioners." Successful free black butcher Leander was then charged with selling overpriced veal according to the new law and suffered a month in prison. By early 1780, just two months before the British laid siege to Charleston, the situation had become desperate enough for white traders to be directly targeted. The Assembly passed an ordinance "to prevent the monopolizing and for regulating the Retailers" of several imported commodities, including rum, salt, sugar, flour, butter,

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<sup>15</sup> "CHARLESTOWN, WHEREAS the several Commissioners for putting in Execution an Act . . ." *South Carolina Gazette*, April 30, 1737. See also "Whereas several Offences have been committed against the Law for regulating the Market of Charlestown . . .," *South Carolina Gazette*, December 22, 1739. For details of the fish market legislation see *South Carolina Gazette*, November 1, 1770.

“negro cloth,” and coarse blankets. Heavy financial penalties faced those who retailed these goods at more than a 25 percent markup on the wholesale price, either at a store or by vendue. In a further return to historic British practices, the authorities empowered the courts to prosecute monopolizers.<sup>16</sup>

As the clerk of the market’s appeal to “owners and sellers” suggests, however, planters did not always support this drive for a regulated trade answering the “public good.” War and drought had disrupted the plantation economy, leaving planters without income from rice and indigo, and sometimes without enslaved laborers. Such difficulties left those who still had provisions to sell, and a way of transporting them, in an advantageous position. At Margaret Colleton’s plantation a rice crop brought a good return in July 1777, but for the next two years almost all income came from renting out a schooner to sell wood, livestock, and butter on the local market. The rewards of such trade were scant compared with those from producing staples, driving planters to charge as much as they could for these increasingly valuable commodities, often by giving their enslaved proxies permission to get the highest price possible. The tough new regulations clashed with the priorities of slave owners, who were happy to put the stability of their plantations before the “common good” of the Lowcountry.<sup>17</sup>

Caught in midst of these complex dynamics of commerce and power, Charleston’s merchant-planter elites thus depended on their

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<sup>16</sup> Entries for October 12, 1776, June 24, 1777, and May 30, 1778, Christopher Marshall Sr. Diary, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Josiah Smith to Mr. John Ray, New Jersey, March 7, 1778, Smith letterbook, Southern Historical Collections; As Allan Kulikoff has commented, “The military market was neither reliable nor lucrative” and so was hardly a substitute for a peacetime market. See KULIKOFF, Allan. “Such Things Ought Not to Be,” in *The World of the Revolutionary American Republic: Land, Labor and the Conflict for a Continent*, ed. SHANKMAN, Andrew, Routledge Worlds (New York, 2014), 134–64

<sup>17</sup> “An Act for Regulating and Ascertaining the Rates of Wharfage of Ships and Merchandise and Also for Ascertaining the Rates of Storage, in Charlestown,” April 12, 1768; *Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, May 5, 1777, and May 12, 1777, *ibid.*, February 9, 1780, “An Ordinance” and also “An Act to empower the holding of Special Courts,” *Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, September 15, 1777.

successful management of all these agents. Henry Laurens' wealth was partly a result of his own skills as a negotiator and agricultural manager. But he also depended largely on the capacities of Charleston's wharfingers, who themselves relied on networks of local trade, and on the Africans who often conducted it. While the lowcountry elites would not have liked to acknowledge it, their status as successful dealers in an Atlantic commercial system was not entirely of their own doing and, what is more, could quite easily be undone by the actions of those many citydwellers on whom they relied for support.

If planter-merchants were dependent on wharfingers and dealers, black and white, in their trading lives, in domestic spaces the situation was just as complex. Their reliance on the multiple scales of the city's economy were twofold. First, elites were dependent on Charleston's construction industry for the homes they owned or rented in the city. Whether grand mansions, or more modest accommodation, they did not have the skills to put up such houses themselves. Once resident in their homes, these lowcountry grandees then entered into a complicated relationship with the enslaved servants who lived in them and serviced the family and its needs. Indeed, the desire to accommodate these essential enslaved laborers often shaped the construction of these houses, which came to have complex arrangements of outbuildings and only a single entrance to the street.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Charleston was home to a sophisticated building industry, composed not just of lone craftsmen, but of sizeable firms who could undertake multiple house-building contracts at once. At the Revolution, one-man enterprises still existed, but contracts were increasingly completed by those who could offer a larger workforce. Bricklayer Thomas Gordon, for example, was able to deploy five hands on a contract for Charleston

attorney Othoniel Beale in 1757. His contemporary, James Cooke, a carpenter, had at least four slave employees at work during the 1770s.<sup>18</sup>

One such contract undertaken by these “firms” was drawn up in May 1770 between the bricklayer and carpentry firm of Axson & Gaborial and the planter William Clay Snipes. Before a witness, Axson & Gaborial agreed that they would build a Charleston residence for Snipes, “with outhouses and other appurtenances agreeable to a plan given in and signed by the said John Gaborial.” The house was “to be finished in a compleat perfect workmanlike manner on or before 6th November 1770,” with Axson & Gaborial receiving half of their SC£3,500 fee when the house was “inclosed,” and the other half when it was completed. For their money the partners undertook to provide “all the materials and workmanship,” and to pay a penal sum of SC£500 if the building was not completed on time. The agreement was clearly couched in formulaic terms, implying that its writing was a familiar process for the builders.<sup>19</sup>

The appearance of building contractors occurred partly for economic reasons – it was more profitable. But their prevalence was also a result of the demands made by the popularity of the classical building style endorsed by Fire Acts of the period, Charleston’s included. Such styles required high levels of knowledge and skill, as the symmetry and regularity inherent in a building’s interior and exterior barred the non-expert from their successful execution. Although many could learn how to raise an irregular wooden house, few could plan a brick Palladian villa or create the intricate mouldings that finished every room and chimneypiece. Even if a house was plainer,

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18 In December 1758, five bricklayers were used for a day by Thomas Gordon at a cost of £4.2.6., total £71.17.6., 1767, information summarized from vol. 68B, no. 10A, Judgment Rolls, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereafter SCDAH); James Cook, vol. 87(1), reel no. 86, mfm., LOC; Thomas Harrison vs. Jervey and Walter, 1785, vol. 119A, no. 318A, Judgment Rolls, SCDAH

19 Jacob Axson Jr. vs. William Clay Snipes, 1771, vol. 99A, no. 255A, Judgment Rolls, SCDAH; Thomas Robinson vs. Luke Stoutenburgh, esq., 1768, vol. 88A, no. 173A, Judgment Rolls, SCDAH; expense of Building Mrs. Ann Middleton’s House and kitchen 1799-1800, 43/118, South Carolina Historical Society.

literacy and numeracy were still essential to measuring out a regular plan. With his access to materials and men, and his knowledge of classicism, the building contractor was, therefore, crucial to the creation of the classical Charleston that rose from the ashes of the 1740 conflagration.

In particular, contractors were critical to wealthy Charlestonians seeking to create a prestige town residence. Such houses were an essential accoutrement for any aspiring elite trader in the British Atlantic world and were universally acknowledged as status symbols. One of the most impressive of these eighteenth-century structures is the Miles Brewton house. Standing at number 27 Church Street, this building is often described as the greatest surviving example of the Palladian style in Colonial America. With its large portico and majestic flight of steps ascending to the main entrance, the Brewton house stood in stark contrast to the dusty street and its neighboring brick and wooden buildings; it had a splendor designed to bolster the reputation of Miles Brewton Jr., slave trader and son of the Huguenot silversmith Miles Brewton Sr.

Leading the construction of Brewton's monument to trading wealth was Richard Moncrieff, one of Charleston's more successful cabinetmakers and building undertakers. At the time of Brewton's contract, Moncrieff was in partnership with another builder, Kinsey Burden, and it is likely that both would have been involved in the organization of the considerable labor and materials that were required to undertake this substantial project.<sup>25</sup> Although it is not possible to know the precise nature of the works undertaken by these master builders, a public dispute over the credit for the carving and carpentry work does reveal the extent to which they had conceived and controlled the project. Using the *South Carolina Gazette* as his mouthpiece, carver Ezra Waite challenged the assumption that it was Kinsey Burden, Moncrieff's partner, who had crafted all of the house's interior woodwork. In his advertisement, Waite styled himself as a "civil architect, house builder...and carver," and he claimed to have

had a hand across all of these areas during the course of construction in Church Street.<sup>20</sup>

While his five slaves, including one bricklayer, labored on the structure of the edifice, Waite claimed, he had engaged in the more skilled work of carving the wood-paneled interiors. To this end, Waite alleged that he had “finished the architecture and conducted the execution thereof, viz. In the joiner’s way, all tabernacle [door] frames, that in the dining room excepted, and raised all the said work in the four principal rooms; also calculated and adjusted, and drew at large for the joiners to work by the Ionick entablature, and raised the same in front and round the eaves of Miles Brewton’s.”<sup>21</sup>

These claims demonstrate just how much the image of the wealthy merchant or planter lay in the hands of the craftsman. According to Waite, he had designed and realized the “look” of those rooms in Brewton’s house that were most likely to be used to entertain guests. Recent research by architectural historians seems to support Ezra Waite’s authorship. Comparison of the design of Brewton’s interiors to designs featured in the British pattern books and guides listed in Waite’s inventory, and to those in the contemporary Charleston Library Society, reveals numerous similarities in both form and motif. What is more, the design of Brewton’s interiors seems to have heavily influenced other wealthy Charlestonians who were raising city houses in the same period. Planter William Burrows, Colonel John Stuart, and planter Peter Boucquet all commissioned residences with similar interiors in the immediate pre-Revolutionary decades.<sup>22</sup>

But it was not white craftsmen alone who finished the elite mansion. European building tradesmen were heavily reliant on South Carolina’s character as a slave society as they expanded their busines-

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20 DIXON, Caroline Wyche. “The Miles Brewton House: Ezra Waite’s Architectural Books and Other Possible Design Sources.” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 82, no. 2 (1981): 118-42. Discussion of these connections can be found in SIMONS, Harriet P., and SIMONS, Albert, “The William Burrows House of Charleston,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 3, no. (1967): 172-203.

21 Advertisement of Ezra Waite, *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, 18 August 1769.

22 Dixon, “Miles Brewton House.”



ses. The relationship between those black and white skilled workers who worked alongside one another was often a fraught one in the Low Country, and the conflicts between white artisans and their black counterparts are well documented, leading historians to conclude that slave labor was rarely conducive to the creation of an innovative skilled enterprise. Yet, for the most part, whites were extraordinarily successful at forcing slaves to conform to their European work practices, a success no doubt encouraged by the dire alternatives that blacks faced on the rice plantation. Builders used their existing apprenticeship arrangements to train slaves in their trades, and blacks' quick absorption into skilled work structures was already reflected in the 1740 Fire Act. There, the metropolitan idea of implementing fixed rates for labor and materials, to prevent unscrupulous artisans from taking advantage of desperate and homeless victims, was transposed to the Low Country. But in addition to rates for white masters, journeymen and apprentices, the act also specified lower fixed sums for slave bricklayers and carpenters, thus incorporating this new kind of labor into existing ideas about the regulation of work.

Soon, slaves had been embraced by the building sector and had become integral to its day-to-day operation, a state of affairs reflected in the slave Boston King's unhappy experiences as an apprentice in Charleston to a group of carpenters who were building houses in the city. Up to 1800, Charleston building artisans owned at least 250 slave carpenters, bricklayers, painters, and plasterers. The carpentry firm of Wyatt and Richardson--one of the few artisan enterprises for which detailed records survive--drew a quarter of its workforce from among Charleston's black population. Enslaved labourers were crucial to Charleston's building industry, to the extent that if artisans and other Low Country slave owners had not encouraged blacks to work as builders, the emergence of such a sophisticated industry could well have been stymied.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Act for Rebuilding Charleston, published in the *South Carolina Gazette*, 18 December 1740; "Memoirs of Boston King," 4 June 1796, accessed at <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/blackloyalists/documents/diaries/king-memoirs.htm>; Number derived from all types of records that name a slave skilled

Not every elite merchant or planter wanted a bespoke town-home like Miles Brewton, however. Many elites wished to have a home in the town that was less costly. Fortunately, the emergence of a speculative building industry in Charleston in the course of the eighteenth century provided them with the option of renting a property. Building tradesmen were among the leading promoters of this practice. Altogether, half of all white carpenters who were recorded as working or living in Charleston in the eighteenth century were involved in the buying and selling of land. In some cases, they were encouraged in their activities by the building lease, which supported speculative construction by allowing a builder to pay for its cost through rents and sale to the plot owner. With their access to “free” slave labor, white Low Country bricklayers and carpenters also found it easier to buy and develop land, as they could undertake projects without having to hire and pay additional employees. As they speculated in land, developed it, and sold or rented houses, carpenters and bricklayers provided homes for those who did not wish to build or buy them themselves. As these tradesmen revealed the money that could be made from such practices, others among Charleston’s trading community then also became involved in building and renting townhouses, increasing even further the accommodation possibilities for elites.

One builder who viewed town development as a major, longer-term, investment was bricklayer Anthony Toomer, who, shortly before his death, had engaged to develop a similarly substantial set of town holdings. In his will, Toomer instructed his executors to sell off undeveloped country lands straight away. However, they were to keep his city property and “compleat [the] buildings in Hazell Street according to the plan that is known to my family,” as well as impro-

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in these trades owned by an artisan from Charleston. I have included slaves named in inventories or wills up to the year 1800, on the assumption that they would have been working in the city during the lifetime of their owner. Records from Index of Artisans, MESDA; Company accounts of Wyatt, Richardson, and Richardson, included as evidence in the case of Wyatt vs. Richardson, Chancery Court Records, bundle 10, Box 1, 1797, SCDAH.

ving “the lands which I purchased of Mr. Cannon to the best of their judgment.”<sup>24</sup> The Hazell Street property of Toomer is detailed in the plat drawn up shortly before the bricklayer’s death; quite possibly this was the plan with which the deceased’s family was familiar. The plat illustrates a 27,000-square-foot holding situated on the edge of Charleston as it stood in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, divided into seven developed lots. Descriptions of the buildings to be laid out on these lots suggest that Toomer was planning a substantial development. Each piece of land bore a “house three stories with cellars of brick and covered with slate roof, kitchen and washroom two stories with cellars of brick, covered with slate, stable and carriage house one story with lofts of brick covered with tiles.” These properties were clearly destined for occupants of some wealth, who would be willing either to rent or to buy for a handsome sum—enough to presumably support Toomer’s widow and the couple’s sons well into the future.<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, we can trace more precisely how city tradesmen compiled extensive portfolios of rental property. The successful silversmith John Paul Grimke purchased a Tradd Street lot for SC£2105 in 1762; by 1766, it had a brick house on it substantial enough to attract the planter Arthur Middleton as its tenant. In February 1768 Grimke purchased another town lot on the corner of Queen and Meeting Streets for SC£2,600. He then mortgaged his Tradd Street assets for SC£3000 the following October, almost certainly using the money as capital to finance the development of his second lot, as by September 1769 he had a “new finished house” for rent on it, with two additional three-story brick houses to be ready for rent in the new year. In 1778, with the Charleston land market at its pre-Revolutionary zenith, Grimke took his chance and sold both lots with their houses for the grand sum of SC£16,500.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Will of Anthony Toomer, vol. 27, Book C, 507, CCPL; Plat number 182, Plan of the Lands of Anthony Toomer, McCrady Plat Collection, SCDAH.

25 S.v. “Grimke, John Paul,” Index of Artisans, MESDA.

Equally successful was Thomas Elfe, one of Charleston's best-known cabinetmakers. Elfe operated on a grand scale. At the opening of accounts in 1768, he was in possession of five town properties: two grander houses and lots on Friend and Broad Streets; a pair of tenements, also on Broad Street; a lot with his shop on it, on King Street; and an empty lot situated on Queen Street. For the entirety of this period, Elfe rented his own town home from the merchant and planter Othoniel Beale. Both the houses and tenements were rented out, and constant occupancy of all three properties meant that in the space of eight years, they brought in a total of SC£8,720. Of course, this sum did not amount to a straight profit, as Elfe was frequently making repairs and improvements to his holdings. He spent small sums, usually under SC£40, on installing pumps, drains, and wells, putting up fences, painting and glazing windows, and maintaining the brickwork. The cabinetmaker also undertook some larger improvement projects: he spent SC£551 on a new kitchen for the Broad Street tenements, and SC£50 on a coach house adjacent to his workshop in King Street.<sup>26</sup>

However, Elfe was also interested in further increasing his holdings and, if possible, acquiring more rental properties. In 1773, after having made SC£3,750 from selling off a portion of his Queen Street lot, Elfe embarked on the construction of another house. The house, built by the local carpenter and contractor Benjamin Baker, cost SC£1,979 and was completed at the beginning of 1774; by 1775, Elfe was renting it out for SC£330 a year. In April 1774, the cabinetmaker made his last major investment of this period; he purchased a fifth rental property in the suburbs of Charleston and let it for SC£330. At the end of his accounts, in late 1775, Elfe was receiving SC£660 more in rent a year, and despite substantial expenditures on his holdings, was SC£6,224 better off.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> All figures derived from Daybook of Thomas Elfe, Charleston Library Society.

<sup>27</sup> Op.Cit., CLS.

Charleston's rental properties attracted a broad range of tenants – but commercial elites were a vital source of demand in a market characterized by notoriously high rents. In 1750, Governor James Glen's assessment of East Bay property was done on the basis of rents paid, as opposed to the value of a building at sale. Prime buildings close to the center rented for up to SC£900 per annum, with cheaper ones at the less developed western end of the bay going for SC£100. These larger sums were garnered by landlords from wealthy planters, such as Arthur Middleton, who paid handsomely to lease a town residence. Many such rental properties could be quite luxurious. The Scottish settler Dr. William Murray rented a house that he described as “not small when I tell you that the doctor . . . Annie and I have each of us a good room . . . we have a good parlour and a dining room besides.” The large merchant firm of Faesch and Guerard rented a town house from building contractor Richard Moncrieff, and a tenement owned by the carpenter Henry Gray was let out to the Reverend Mr. Martyn. Indeed, by the end of third quarter of the eighteenth century, renting had become so customary that some house sale advertisements included a note about the sum that they usually rented for. The merchant Barnard Elliott's holdings brought in an estimated SC£1,570 per annum in rent. And the silversmith Jonathan Sarrazin's house “usually let at SC£350 year,” and his corner tenement on Broad Street, “if it was to let, would no doubt command a very great rent.” The bricklayer Anthony Toomer was also keen to inform the public that his Archdale Street tenements, up for sale in 1773, “can be let for SC£350 per annum.”<sup>28</sup>

Such widespread purchasing and renting of town properties took place not merely because it was a good route to a steady income, but

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28 Governor Glen's report on South Carolina, 1751-1753, “An Account of Houses and Lotts Fronting the river on the Bay in Charlestown in South Carolina Together with the Trades and professions of the occupiers thereof and the rents paid annually for the same,” in MERRENS, H. Roy, *The Colonial South Carolina Scene: Contemporary Views, 1697-1774* (Columbia SC, 1977), 257; James Murray to his mother, 1 August 1754, Murray of Murraythwaite Muniments, NAS; Advertisement of Barnard Elliott, *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 24 May 1774; memorial of John Rose, vol. 132(2), reel 134, Loyalist Claims, Library of Congress.

also because it could even represent a better choice than investment in rural land. A lack of data makes sustained comparisons between the rural and urban land markets difficult, but it is clear that annual returns on urban lots could be substantial, especially in comparison to actual and potential returns gained from improvement of a rural tract. Thomas Elfe, for example, regularly received a greater than 20 percent annual return on his town holdings. In contrast, the cabinet-maker's suburban plantation on Daniel's Island vacillated between an 8.6 percent loss and a 7.3 percent return over the same years.<sup>29</sup>

The average cost of a lot on Queen Street in the 1750s and 1760s at SC£1124. Barnard Elliott's charging of SC£500 a year for the rent of his brick house on this street would furnish him with an impressive 44 percent return had he paid a current price. In the same decades, the average price paid for a lot on Archdale Street was SC£3850; Anthony Toomer's tenement on that street rented out for SC£250, yielding a 9 percent return, even from this more modestly situated house. Similar profits are suggested by Governor Glen's 1750 figures, as the average price of an East Bay lot between 1753 and 1767 was SC£4,745 and Glen's rental estimates averaged out at £404 per annum--again, a return of 8.5 percent. This was in the same region as the figure Alexander Petrie was receiving from his East Bay property, which had been purchased for SC£7025 in 1758, and in 1768 was renting out for SC£840 a year--a return of 12 percent on his original purchase price. Without being able to calculate the outlays associated with the majority of these properties, such estimates must remain approximate, but they nevertheless suggest an impressive return that was at least on a par with--and often outstripped--the 10 percent projected by contemporaries who discussed investment returns on South Carolina's rural lands.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Daybook of Thomas Elfe, CLS.

<sup>30</sup> On the difficulties of estimating urban land values and yields, see RYDEN, David B., and MENARD, Russell R. "South Carolina's Colonial Land Market: An Analysis of Rural Property Sales, 1720-1775." *Social Science History* 29, no. 4 (2005): 599-623.

For landowning Charlestonians, urban property undoubtedly made a notable contribution to their status as financially comfortable men who had found success in the Low Country. Collectively, however, their personal urban assets also generated income for South Carolina as a whole. The 1767 General Tax accounting put the total value of Charleston lots at SC£2,881,600, when all other rural and urban lands in the colony totaled SC£2,956,910. Clearly, most of this sum was capital tied up in property and so cannot be considered under the same auspices as the income brought to the region through the export of rice, indigo, and other agricultural products. However, in the period 1767-73, urban property sales witnessed £82,967 sterling changing hands in the colony, meaning that the average transaction value of Charleston's land market in this period almost equaled the value each of livestock, grains, and sundry produce exported from the colony during the same period. The town had become a not inconsiderable generator of income in South Carolina.<sup>31</sup>

Within this vibrant urban land market, clear trends emerged among the buyers and sellers of Charleston's lots. Artisans formed the largest group of traders throughout the third quarter of the eighteenth century. What is more, these craftsmen significantly increased their stake in the town as the century progressed. Merchants were also a very important group of property traders, maintaining a quarter share of the market throughout the period. Together, planters and men who did not list a profession but styled themselves as gentlemen, also made up a notable proportion of buyers. However, numbers suggest that these elites gradually withdrew from the urban land market as the number of tradesmen buying and selling increased. Likewise, as the town matured, women became less involved in the purchase of urban land. Overall, merchants and tradesmen con-

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<sup>31</sup> "A 1768 Tax Account," in MERRENS, *Colonial South Carolina Scene*, 248-52. The prices of all Charleston land sold between 1767 and 1773, as listed in LANGLEY, Clara L. *South Carolina Deed Abstracts, 1719-1772* (Greenville, 1983), were compared against table 8.2, "Average Annual Value and Destinations of Commodity Exports from the Lower South, 1768-1772," in MCCUSKER, John, and MENARD, Russell, *Economy of British America* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 174.

solidated their share of urban lands at the expense of planters and gentlemen, who, in the five years between 1768 and 1773, represented only a fifth of all buyers, but almost a quarter of sellers.<sup>32</sup>

The Low Country's plantation and merchant elite did have a notable stake in urban property--property that further augmented their wealth and their status as the leading members of South Carolina society. Without doubt, merchants like Henry Laurens, who owned city land and a plantation, used rents and profits from their urban land deals to bolster their fortunes and social position. However, it is equally clear that urban growth also supported the wealth of an urban "middling sort," made up of tradesmen grown rich on the city. Many of the merchants engaged in the purchase of land were not of the highest rank, and never truly became "planter-merchants" of Laurens's ilk. This tendency to concentrate wealth in the city was also reflected in the habits of Charleston's artisans, only 7.4 percent of whom bought a rural tract, whereas 80 percent traded in town lots. The result of such an investment strategy was a convergence of the quantity of land owned by individual middling town dwellers throughout the British Atlantic town of the eighteenth century. In Britain's provinces, about 65 percent of the metalworking craftsmen owned city real estate, and among property owners a holding of circa 1.5 properties was the average. In Charleston, there was an identical level of real estate ownership among artisans, with 66 percent of testators mentioning town property in their bequests. What is more, since these colonial craftsmen held an average of 2.2 urban properties each, they had actually become more successful than their metropolitan counterparts in their domination of the town's land market.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> All land deed records are from Clara Langley, *South Carolina Deed Abstracts*, vols. 1-4; Among the merchants who most often bought and sold urban land were Josiah Smith Jr., Thomas Corker, William Ellis, William Banbury, and Francis Bremar.

<sup>33</sup> See BERG, Maxine, "Small Producer Capitalism in Eighteenth Century England," *Business History*, Vol. 35, No.1 (1993) 17-39, tables 5 and 6, 31-32. See also wills of Charleston artisans before 1800 as gathered in the Index of Artisans, MESDA.



Elites were increasingly reliant on city-dwelling tradesmen and their enslaved workers for the houses they bought or rented. Once they set up their households within their chosen four walls, they then became enmeshed in a new set of interdependencies with the enslaved people who serviced their needs. The success of “modern” stylistic ideas about building in the Low Country also rested on the ability to accommodate the needs of a slave society situated in a subtropical climate. Importantly, the new type of uniform, terraced, brick property being raised in towns throughout Britain by the middle of the eighteenth century had a footprint that also answered the needs of a city with a large slave population. New developments in the metropole were often laid out on long, narrow plots, with a kitchen at the rear and a selection of outbuildings at the foot of a garden. Such an arrangement perfectly suited the Charleston household, as outbuildings and kitchens could simply be detached and adapted to accommodate a family’s slaves.<sup>34</sup>

As extant urban property deeds show, such rearrangements of this model were indeed made by lowcountry house owners. With its extensive detached “dependencies” to the rear of the main house, grand eighteenth century mansion such as the Miles Brewton House and the Heyward-Washington House, contained spaces where enslaved Africans could live and work for the benefit of their elite owners. As cooks, washerwomen, personal servants, liverymen, butchers, fishermen, tradespeople or market traders, Africans kept the elite household running. While such jobs were in many ways preferable to field labor, there were also major disadvantages for those chosen to perform urban work. The urban mansion and its dependencies formed a discrete compound. Often, there was only one way in or out of this complex, and this was no accident; it had been designed to permit easy surveillance by free inhabitants of its enslaved inmates. Nevertheless, enslaved people avoided the gaze of white Charlesto-

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<sup>34</sup> See MCKELLAR, Elizabeth. *Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City, 1660-1720* (Manchester, UK, 1999) 155-87, for a discussion of London house plans, and HERMAN, Bernard L., “Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820.” *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 88-101.

nians as much as possible by shutting doors and using the city streets and “ordinary” taverns as meeting places. Once again, elites’ reliance on the free and enslaved urban workforce and its skills forced them to enter a succession of trade-offs; when they enjoyed the status and comforts afforded them by enslaved servants they also had to accept that they could not control all the movements of such people.<sup>35</sup>

As a city made by its global connections at the start of the eighteenth-century, Charleston was, to a large extent, a product of Atlantic commerce. The merchant and planter elites who found stupendous wealth through this commerce valued the city both as a trading hub and a stage for the display of their status and profits, a display which they mostly achieved through their splendid townhouses. Like today’s global urban elites, however, these people were utterly dependent on a local economy, which itself was propped up by immigrant laborers. Without the enslaved Africans, and European craftspeople and dealers who populated Charleston, the city would not have acquired its central status as a hub of Britain’s plantation south. Planters and merchants were reliant on these instrumental dealers and their skills, and when they tried to subjugate them, they always faced the possibility that doing so might undermine their own status within the colony.

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35 HANEY, Gina, “Understanding Antebellum Charleston’s Backlots through Light, Sound, and Action,” in Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, *Slavery in the City: Architecture and the Landscapes of Urban Slavery in North America* (Charlottesville, 2017); SHARP, Kelly K. “The Creolized Kitchen: Interpreting the Life of a Catawba Indian-Made Pan from Urban Charleston, 1800-1830” in *Folk and Folks: Variations on the Vernacular* ed. Dale Couch (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art), 2018.

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