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Charleston's Artisans and their Tea Parties: Popular Action and Empowerment in the Colonial South's Largest Seaport, 1773-1774

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CHARLESTON'S ARTISANS AND THEIR TEA PARTIES:

Popular Action and Empowerment in the Colonial South's Largest Seaport, 1773-1774

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Liam Joseph Paskvan

2006

APPROVAL SHEET

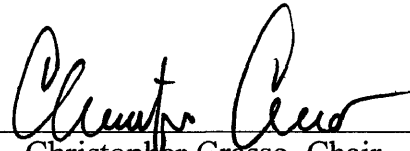
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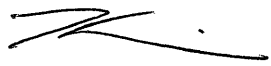


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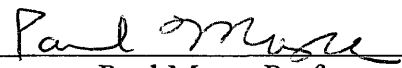
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For you, Mom and Dad

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ABSTRACT

During 1773 and 1774, residents of Charleston, South Carolina contested the importation of British tea by mariners and merchant consignees of the British East India Company. In three instances, crowd action allowed members of the community to express their opposition to what they perceived as British transgressions. Prominent among the protestors were the city's artisans, who, along with other crowd participants, gained a measure of public authority by their actions. The artisans' acquisition of this public voice was a substantial development for these mechanics, who had occupied a marginal socioeconomic niche in pre-Revolutionary Charleston—a social world in which gentlemen viewed them with disdain and an economic one in which British imports and slave labor tore at the free artisan's economic viability. Some artisans even gained membership on the various legislative committees that coordinated the city's nonimportation actions and became Charleston's de facto governing bodies in the immediate pre-war era. Officeholding artisans, however, were predominantly men of wealth and import, while journeymen and less successful craftsmen remained without such definite political gain during the tea party era and subject to similar economic pressures long after the revolution. This study, then, seeks not only to chronicle the popular actions of the nonimportation era in Charleston, but also to gauge to what extent socioeconomic position within the artisan class defined the limits of sociopolitical gain in the immediate pre-Revolutionary era.

CHARLESTON'S ARTISANS AND THEIR TEA PARTIES

Introduction

The splash of tea in Boston Harbor rippled eastward and brought Great Britain and her American colonies ever closer to war by late 1773. The East India Company had also sent merchant ships stocked with Bohea tea to Charleston, among other cities, but in South Carolina, no “Mohawks” destroyed Crown property. Instead, anxious magistrates hustled the tea ashore to the King’s stores before protestors could act. While the Crown enacted the Port Act to punish the recalcitrant Bostonians, a senior royal official reasoned that Charleston’s actions were “not equal in criminality to the Proceedings in other colonies.”¹ And so it went, even in posterity: while Boston’s Mohawks still live “in song and glory,” those who gathered and mobbed in support of nonimportation at Charleston were forgotten, not only by popular culture, but also by historians.² Most of Charleston’s overt clashes with English merchants and authorities over imported tea were non-violent; the only tea party mob allowed its intended victim to escape, and when the town did enforce its ban on tea, it was not rowdy “liberty boys” dressed as Indians who flung leaves of tea into the harbor, but rather East Indian Company consignees—and with little fanfare.

While the audacity of the Boston Tea Party moved Whitehall to enact policy that hastened rebellion, Charleston’s three tea parties, occurring between November 1773 and

¹ Great Britain. Public Records Office: Letter from Earl of Dartmouth to Lieutenant Governor William Bull, February 5, 1774, *Records of the British Public Records Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-1782*, microfilm, reel 11.

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, “A Ballad of the Boston Tea Party,” in Samuel Francis Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies in the Year 1773, by the East India Tea Company. Now First Printed From the Original Manuscript* (Boston, 1884), clxxv.

December 1774, also initiated change—albeit of a more local nature—within the city’s sociopolitical power structure. Among the non-gentry groups who benefited from their involvement in these tea parties were Charleston’s artisans. Though it is difficult to gauge how much crowd participants—let alone artisans, specifically—benefited, many of those who made concrete political gains in the wake of the tea parties were in fact artisans, albeit wealthy ones. Most historians have devoted little attention to Charleston, the south’s largest seaport, preferring to relate the stories of tea parties in Newport or Boston. Events in Charleston, however, provide an opportunity for comparative study—to examine how protestors of different societies expressed similar political grievances in similar ways. Participation in the popular actions of the non-importation era—attending the denunciation of a Crown official, mobbing a transgressive merchant mariner, or witnessing an overt act of contrition by an offender of the community—first allowed for the emergence of a more consensual and community-wide form of public authority and, subsequently, led to the widening of the participatory dimensions of Charleston’s political sphere for some in the upper part of the artisan class. Thus, this subtle transformation of public and political authority entailed two-steps. Initially, protest allowed crowd participants of diverse socioeconomic stations a measure of public authority.³ Compared with the political circumstances that most endured (or accepted) in the pre-Revolutionary era, the “out of doors” nature of public authority adopted during the tea party era was exceptional. Years of political underrepresentation, followed by a

³ A primary goal of this paper is to chronicle all three tea parties in one study. For separate accounts of the various tea parties, see Marguerite Steedman, “Charlestown’s Forgotten Tea Party,” *Georgia Review* 21 (Summer 1967), 244-259; Richard Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763-1789* (Columbia, SC, 1959); Charles C. Rogers, Jr. “The Charleston Tea Party: The Significance of December 3, 1773,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 75 (July 1974), 153-168; and Pauline Maier, “The Charleston Mob and the Evolution of Popular Politics in Revolutionary South Carolina, 1765-1784,” *Perspectives in American History*, 4 (1970), 173-196. The best narrative of events in Boston remains Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (New York, 1964).

complete lack of political representation, in the immediate pre-Revolutionary era made Charleston's experiment with more popular government in 1773 and 1774 a substantial departure from historical precedent. If but for a fleeting moment, a very real (though perhaps not quite tangible) sense of empowerment came to the protestors in the street.

The second act of popular empowerment was a much more circumscribed (and quantifiable) dilation of the city's political participatory sphere. The election of non-gentry artisans to the de facto legislative committees that governed Charleston in the late pre-Revolutionary era gave, for the first time, a select few mechanics some political authority. Only affluent artisans, however, benefited from these later changes in Charleston's political culture. The limits of public empowerment in Charleston, then, were at least partly the function of socioeconomic status. This study, accordingly, strives for something of a dual objective: in addition to gauging changes in political culture during the late colonial period, it describes the socioeconomic fissures within the artisan demographic of eighteenth-century Charleston that were critical determinants of who, exactly, could most benefit from the political upheaval of the era.

The sources that detail artisan actions in Charleston during the tea party era are scanty, and make the achievement of these goals somewhat elusive. Artisans' presence in newspaper accounts of the era were limited to passing mentions of the "gentlemen of the schools," and there are no sources that elucidated the plight of the Charleston artisan during the nonimportation era as clearly as George Hewes' recollections did for artisans of Boston. The record is often fragmentary, and George Rude's warning, that "faces" of

the crowd are difficult to elucidate, certainly holds true.⁴ But, through the use of all available sources: memoirs of wealthy observers, newspaper accounts, and—most germane to this study—relevant demographic information, an image—perhaps more a reflection than a portrait, but an image nonetheless—of the artisan, his actions during the nonimportation era, and his subsequent political gains, emerges.

Thus the conclusions subsequently offered here—while incorporating a fair amount of inference—are not products of guesswork. In Chapter One, using a blend of secondary and primary sources, I have attempted to describe the artisans' niche in pre-Revolutionary Charleston. The main narrative of the tea parties, which constitutes the bulk of the second chapter, relies predominantly on accounts of the tea parties culled from both local and international newspapers. In the third and final chapter, however, the style and source base of the paper shift dramatically, from narrative to a prosopographic analysis of the select few artisans who attained political station in the pre-Revolutionary era. This blend of both narrative and demographic sources allows for not only a retelling of the tea party actions, but an at least preliminary analysis of their lasting effects on the artisans of Charleston.

The time, it seems, is ripe for an evaluation of these events. Indeed, none of the three Charleston tea parties fits seamlessly within the historiographical frameworks previously set forth by “consensus” or “conflict” historians. None of the popular actions of December 1773 or July and November of 1774 grew violent, and most participants seemed intent on achieving limited goals. But neither did those who attended public meetings en masse, threatened East India Company consignees, or pursued British

⁴ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964), 14.

merchant captains down wharves and piers at night seem opposed to force. Furthermore, while in some instances Charlestonians' support for the extralegal activities of the tea party era seemed to provide crowds and other organs of de facto authority with a popular mandate, in no way did these extralegal bodies have the unanimous support of city residents as "consensus" historians would argue. Nor, indeed, did conflict break neatly along class lines as other works would suggest. The study of these popular actions makes one chary of historiographic models. Nevertheless, a brief canvassing of historians' work regarding popular action and, more specifically, the artisan role in the tea party actions of the Revolutionary era, provides valuable points of departure for comparisons between mobs in Charleston and other locales in British North America.

The study of eighteenth-century American crowds owes much to the pioneering efforts made by historians working outside the American context. Two scholars in particular set the terms of historiographic debate during their respective eras, one at the end of the nineteenth century through a pioneering study of the "mob," and the other, writing more than fifty years later, by his groundbreaking work that has influenced historians of popular action ever since. Gustav Le Bon, in his 1895 publication *The Crowd*, described the "mob" as a mindless and brutal rabble of "automatons." Without exception, mob rule was "tantamount to a barbarian phase"; the mob's sole objective (and desire) being the wanton destruction of the rational and orderly. For Le Bon, mob participants "ceased to be guided by their wills" and exchanged "conscious personality" for the mindlessness of the crowd, where all members of the "servile flock" followed at the beck and call of a single, maniacal leader. Participation in mob activity required a complete forfeiture of individual rationality and acceptance of or indulgence in primitive

lawlessness. The mob was, in the terminology of the times, a decisive triumph for the collective *Id*.⁵

George Rudé provided an effective counterbalance to Le Bon. Rudé not only dismissed Le Bon's theories as prejudiced but also leveled blame at the academic community in general, which, Rudé insisted, had allowed crowd studies to become the exclusive domain of sociologists and psychologists. While he acknowledged that "identifying faces [in the crowd] was beset with obstacles," Rudé implored historians to make crowds the focus of historical studies. He also set forth his rebuttal to Le Bon and his "conservative" supporters by his own "liberal, humane, and democratic" interpretation of the crowd, one that eschewed the blanket characterization of the crowd as a mindless mob and viewed most popular activity as meaningful if base forms of political expression.⁶

Many Americanists incorporated Rudé's findings into their own interpretations of crowd action, but also endowed the crowds of revolutionary America with an orderliness and purpose that complicated extant historiography. So-called consensus scholars like Pauline Maier expanded on Rudé's attribution of ideology to the crowd and deemed mob action a "stage in the development of the popular organized politics of the nineteenth century."⁷ Unlike Rudé and Le Bon, who had never discounted the volatility and impulsiveness of the crowd in eighteenth-century Europe, Consensus scholars described many American pre-Industrial crowds as pragmatic and of limited scope and purpose. Crowds became a political weapon of a watchful public, especially for members of society's lower ranks who could rarely make their sentiments known through orthodox

⁵ Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York, 1960) (reprint), 18, 32, 118.

⁶ Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, (New York, 1964), 14.

⁷ Maier, "The Charleston Mob," *Perspectives* 4 (1970), 173.

channels of government. Scholars such as Gordon S. Wood dismissed the spontaneity of revolutionary crowds, a quality that even Rudé—the father of the “humane” interpretation of crowd action—had acknowledged. The “mobs,” explained Wood, “often showed remarkable restraint, pinpointing their objectives with extraordinary care.”⁸ The limited nature and purposefulness of this American crowd had no more explicit herald than Lloyd Rudolph, who proclaimed, “in America, the mob stopped when it had attained what it had set out to do” and praised the “common middle class culture and character of the crowd” and its leaders.⁹ Maier interpreted the use of crowd action by the officially powerless “out of doors” faction as a “lawful” arm of extralegal political expression, and marveled at the way in which Americans harnessed “popular force . . . such that violence in the modern sense: the infliction of injury, death, or property damage—was for the most part avoided.”¹⁰ Wood, however, counseled caution, questioning the crowds’ supposedly non-violent, “remarkably moderate and disciplined” character as a quality unique to American crowds. In an influential essay, Wood proposed that what set European and American crowds apart was not necessarily their varying levels of violence, but the ability of local authorities to put down public disturbances. Wood posited that, unlike in America—where established municipal authority was barely extant—the presence of formidable local authority in Europe spurred the heightened confrontation and violence of crowd action. In short, it was “especially distorting to stress the unusual moderation and respect for lives displayed by

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, “A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 23 (October 1966), 636-637.

⁹ Lloyd I. Rudolph, “The Eighteenth Century Mob in Europe and America,” in *American Quarterly*, 11 (Winter, 1959), 469.

¹⁰ Maier, “Charleston Mob,” *Perspectives* 4 (1970), 173.

American crowds.”¹¹ Mob actions in Revolutionary America rarely devolved into violence precisely because mob participants faced little if any policing. Perhaps, even, the crowd was the authority. Even this qualification, however, was not a complete indictment of American crowd exceptionalism, but only of a single tenet of Consensus thought. Indeed, even in Wood’s qualification of the Consensus position, he supported another signal characteristic of the American mob by averring to Maier’s view of the crowd as an extralegal arm of communal authority.

Paul A. Gilje demonstrated the continued strength of the Consensus persuasion nearly two decades after Maier’s first writings on the community-oriented crowd. Gilje deemed eighteenth-century crowd action a “benign type of rioting”—actions condoned and performed by the community at large—and, above all, an effort to “preserve the world as it was.”¹² For Gilje, corporatism spurred townsfolk to participate in crowd action. Their belief in society as an “organic whole” and the defense of the community from outside aggression justified popular action. Crowd activity was perhaps the purest form of communal collaboration, undertaken to “support traditional customs and moral relationships” against external threats.¹³

In Rudé’s wake, then, Americanists like Maier, Wood, and later, Gilje, proffered a historiographic model of revolutionary era popular action that, while averring to many of Rudé’s “humane” characterizations, also built upon these foundations to construct an exceptional American model. The revolutionary era crowd of the American port city

¹¹ Wood, “Note on Crowds,” *WMQ* 23 (1966), 638.

¹² Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), 12.

¹³ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834*. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), 34.

became, for Consensus scholars, reactionary, acting to preserve rather than upset social order. The social tumult that Le Bon had deemed primitive was, in fact, conservative.

Despite the “formidable paradigm” for crowd study established by historians such as Maier and Wood, critics of this “rubric-oriented past” soon voiced serious concerns of their own.¹⁴ Scholars of the “conflict” school questioned the monolithic composition of the revolutionary crowd as envisioned by consensus historians, denying that eighteenth-century crowds had a middle-class character and instead emphasizing the diverse composition and motives of crowds and their constituents. Social histories of the “inarticulate,” pioneered by Jesse Lemisch’s work on the seamen of late colonial and revolutionary America, helped spur a new “history from the bottom up,” which, while it certainly did not strip the crowd of an ideological significance, questioned the consensus version of the crowd’s ideological unanimity.¹⁵ Scholars like Thomas P. Slaughter doubted that revolutionary crowds had ever acted to retain corporate solidarity or had risen to fulfill some nostalgic vision of a harmonious and collective past.¹⁶ In fact, explained Dirk Hoerder, communal solidarity centered on such a shared past was impossible to achieve in the ethnically diverse urban centers of colonial America, where, by the mid-eighteenth century, “community homogeneity was a thing of the past.”¹⁷ Crowd ideology, then, sprang not from a single vision of a homogenous people, but from differing viewpoints colored by diverse socioeconomic experiences.

¹⁴ Dirk Hoerder, “‘Mobs, a Sort of Them, at least, are Constitutional’: The American Revolution, Popular Participation, and Social Change,” *Amerikastudien* 22, (January, 1977), 303.

¹⁵ Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution Seen From the Bottom Up,” in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting essays in American History* (New York, 1968), 29.

¹⁶ Thomas P. Slaughter, “Crowds in Eighteenth-Century America: Reflections and New Directions,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 1 (January 1991), 4.

¹⁷ Hoerder, “‘Mobs, a Sort of Them, at least, are Constitutional,’” 301.

Indeed, for Gary A. Nash, the agendas of poor and marginal crowd participants often differed starkly from those of their social betters. The street tumults of the revolutionary era were in fact emblematic of the lower orders' dissatisfaction with the social status quo: they were rebellions against the very social stability that, according to consensus scholars, entire communities had risen to protect. Instead of single-minded communal movements, then, Nash interpreted popular action as a means for society's dregs to define and pursue their own goals. The historiographic pendulum had centered itself once more, balanced by two conflicting interpretations of revolutionary crowd action.¹⁸

Hoerder and other scholars have since engaged in a more pointed discussion of the American tea parties of 1773 and 1774. In several influential essays and monographs, Hoerder concluded that by the late stages of the pre-Revolutionary era, control of the crowd by local elites—merchants and planters, mainly—was “fairly well-established.”¹⁹ Hoerder, however, did not deprive (as had Le Bon) the crowd of an ideological impetus. With an increase in the number of garrisoned British troops in North American ports and crown legislation that rankled members of all social echelons of colonial America, however, elites had little trouble in leading a fairly united front against perceived British

¹⁸ Wood authored a resounding condemnation of Conflict scholarship in his scathing review of Nash's latest work on Revolutionary America. Wood not only cast doubt on Nash's findings but also implied that Nash's undergirding biases kept him from an accurate interpretation of the past. Indeed, Wood claimed, Nash “ha[d] always sought to project his political vision into history-writing.” That vision, according to Wood, was a Marxist one: an anachronistic perspective that held little relevance to study of the eighteenth-century world, and a worldview that distorted Nash's interpretation of revolutionary crowds. Wood chastised Nash for ignoring the findings of Maier and Gilje, who had “superbly demonstrated” that “the premodern mobs, far from being the preludes of revolutionary class warfare, were often testimonies to the paternal and hierarchical organization of society,” instead deeming mob violence as class warfare, a struggle not between united protestors and threatening outsider, but between intracommunal groups. Still, then, the central questions regarding crowd action—communal consensus or fractiousness? Unified ideology or conflicting interests?—spark intense debate. Gordon S. Wood, “Political Correctness,” *New Republic* (June 6 and 13, 2005), 34, 38.

¹⁹ Dirk Hoerder, ““Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776,” in Alfred F. Young, *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, IL, 1976), 265.

transgressions. The crowds' obedience to protest ringleaders, then, stemmed not from a lack of will or intelligence, but from the perception of a common and alien threat.

The crowd of the late pre-Revolutionary era had indeed become quite a political animal. Protestors of the period between 1765 and 1780 had, for Hoerder, cultivated a definite "political consciousness," one that—at least for the moment, while the foundations of class-consciousness within urban society were still inchoate—dovetailed with the agenda of colonial America's planter and merchant elite.²⁰ By 1774, in fact, a "new form of mass action emerged during the universal resistance to British authority," one in which crowds "made it abundantly clear that they did not interpret their actions as rioting but rather as open-air town meetings."²¹ Crowd protestors were not the gentry's henchmen, but their collaborators.

Despite Rudé's warning that identifying faces within the eighteenth-century crowd was a difficult task, most scholars have concluded that both master craftsmen and journeyman artisans held critical roles in the quasi-political public actions of the tea party era. In his seminal narrative of events in Boston, Benjamin Woods Labaree remarked that although it was customary for Bostonians of the post-Revolutionary era to claim a role in the tea parties for "men of all social stations . . . most alleged participants were artisans."²² Mechanics seemed to have filled two stations within the crowds' chain of command. Artisans of little or no affluence were most often actual members of the tea party crowds. With little social prestige to lose, these "nobodies"—at least in Boston—were able to destroy Crown property in public while donning only superficial "Mohawk" disguises, usually nothing more than a coal-blackened visage and an occasional feather

²⁰ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (New York, 1977), 375.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 375-376.

²² Benjamin Woods Labaree. *The Boston Tea Party* (New York, 1964), 143.

for ornamentation.²³ While one cannot dismiss the possibility that master mechanics, like their journeyman and apprentice underlings, dumped tea overboard from merchant ships or mobbed Crown officials, Hoerder has singled out these master craftsmen not as the crowd's footsoldiers, but as crucial "intermediaries" between the watchful gentry elites and the jacks in the street who partook of the era's crowd actions.²⁴

Alfred F. Young has measured not only the extent to which artisans participated in tea party mobs but also articulated the often intangible benefits that artisans reaped by their participation. Young's findings regarding Boston tea party member George Robert Twelves Hewes conveyed what at least one humble artisan gained from his destruction of British tea. Through his involvement in the nonimportation movement the shoemaker Hewes became a "citizen, a political man." Hewes beheld, most squarely in December 1773, a "sense of citizenship and personal worth" of which no one could ever deprive him. Young recounted how, years after the Revolution, an aged Hewes, penniless and broken by a life of seemingly bottomless economic valleys, had nevertheless retained his fondest memory of his involvement in the tea party: in an assertion that many of his contemporaries disputed, Hewes claimed to have thrown tea into Boston Harbor alongside merchant luminary and local Whig leader, John Hancock. The veracity of Hewes' recollection is unimportant to Young's argument. For the shoemaker, the tea party was a "moment of equality," an event that transcended the extant socioeconomic power structure and, for an instant, allowed him to voice an opinion, to be a citizen—the equal of the wealthiest patriot in Boston.

²³ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 1999), 43.

²⁴ Hoerder, "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in Young, Alfred F. *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, IL, 1976), 265.

Such ready access to the thoughts and recollections of South Carolina's nonimportation era crowd members is impossible. No participant recounted Charleston's tea parties and their aftermaths as completely as George Hewes did for Boston. Faces in the Charleston crowd—not to mention their motivations—are difficult to identify. Yet in the stories of Charleston's tea parties, tantalizing clues allow for preliminary conclusions regarding the effects of the tea party era upon both the common mechanics and master tradesmen of lowcountry Carolina. In the different opportunities afforded rank and file participants of Charleston's crowds and the affluent tradesmen who rose to political prominence in the wake of the tea parties, two trends of the nonimportation movement in Charleston emerge: the potential of the era to bring real change to the local political culture and, conversely, the persistence of socioeconomic hierarchy—though after the Revolution based less on birth than in previous times.

Their varied political experiences during the tea party era notwithstanding, Charleston's artisans were a small and interwoven community of masters and day laborers, successful factors and marginal journeymen. They shared at least basic economic interests, especially regarding perceived threats to their livelihoods—British imports, for example. If their commercial interests were at least somewhat similar, the political ascendancy of even the wealthiest artisan should have proved beneficial to all other craftsmen. Thus one cannot simply delineate between those mechanics who made substantial political gains during the era and those who did not. Artisans of the lower sort may indeed have viewed the gains of their affluent colleagues as advancements for the entire mechanic community. This possibility of gain by association aside, however, there is little doubt that those who did make concrete political advances—namely, by attaining

political office—were of a much loftier economic station than the mechanics who remained politically anonymous after the brief outbursts of 1773 and 1774. Though such a conclusion may seem decidedly unextraordinary, inevitable, even—when the real political gains of the few are viewed against the contextual backdrop of what preceded them, namely, at least some degree of popular empowerment of artisans from across an array of socioeconomic stations, the ascendance of wealthy artisans in this second stage of empowerment in Charleston seems less an inevitable progression than a divergence from the erstwhile pattern of broad popular empowerment. Nevertheless, for lower artisans, a fundamental and grave struggle for economic viability remained the preeminent concern long after the American Revolution. Indeed, despite the political rise of Charleston's most prominent artisans after the tea parties, the daily struggles of most of the city's mechanics—not for political clout but for basic economic survival—continued unabated throughout the early national era.

CHAPTER I

Charleston's Artisans In Their World

Knowledge of the preconditions and social pressures that compelled the substantial—but often overlooked—artisan demographic to embrace popular action are necessary for a fuller appreciation of what truly was at stake for those mechanics who participated in the tea parties. Despite their importance to Charleston's economy, mechanics faced serious political and economic disadvantages during the colonial period. While artisans throughout British North America competed for market shares against the imported goods of the metropole, the undercutting of white by slave labor was an especially acute problem in Charleston. For upwards of seven decades, however—since Charleston crossed the urban threshold and gained sufficient residents to exhibit any kind of social hierarchy—artisans shouldered this burden and accepted their undistinguished middle position within society. Consistent commercial hardship and the unprecedented political upheaval of the late colonial era, however, marginalized artisans more than ever before, and eventually brought events to a flashpoint.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that artisans inevitably joined the protests against the tea because they sought more money, status, or political power. After years of sustained economic and political pressure, Charleston's artisans were a patient, even a resigned, lot. Artisans of all economic stations had inhabited a society in which social, political, and economic difference was at least tepidly accepted. Supporting themselves

and their families was more important than shaping public policy. The continued economic and political hardships of the late colonial era, however, culminating in the complete disabling of local government during the Wilkes Fund controversy, encouraged them to step forward.

For most of the eighteenth century, however, Charleston seemed an unlikely locale for a crisis with at least partially economic roots. Charleston was British North America's "most important commercial center south of Philadelphia." The bustling and diverse port city was home (chosen or otherwise) to wealthy merchants and planters, to sailors and black slaves. Between the social extremes of owner and human chattel, however, a considerable free artisan community also called Charleston home. Though the city's black majority made Charleston "resemble the West Indies" more than its northerly neighbors, by 1790, white artisans accounted for twenty-two percent of the city's free population and were prolific contributors to the city's material culture. Even during the late colonial era, mechanics, according to royal governor James Glen, accounted for nearly one-fifth of the city's white population. Mechanics were critical to Charleston's prosperity, offering many services essential to the local economy. Skilled craftsmen such as shipbuilders, coopers, candlemakers, and gunsmiths; industrial artisans such as cabinetmakers, silversmiths, engravers, and blacksmiths—all were "mechanics." Indeed, the contemporary definition of "mechanical arts" read: "such Arts wherein the Hand and Body [were] more concerned than the mind." While this term discounted the virtuosity attained by many master craftsmen, it denoted the wide assortment of duties that mechanics and artisans of various employs fulfilled throughout the city.²⁵

²⁵ N[athan] Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum* (London, 1730), Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Library, Williamsburg, VA.

Predictably, economic prosperity varied dramatically within the artisan demographic, as mechanics comprised a “vertical, and not horizontal section of the colonial population.”²⁶ Successful artisans like John Rose, for example—a shipbuilder who amassed a personal fortune worth more than £30,000 sterling before the beginning of the American Revolution—occupied much different financial straits than most carpenters or blacksmiths.²⁷ Rose was one of the exceptions; the majority of mechanics were not affluent members of Charleston society. Many seemed, though, to have earned competences sufficient to purchase small tracts of property and to support their families. Mechanics, then, were not gentlemen for the most part, but neither were they all day-laborers. They held an “intermediate position in the prestige hierarchy,” and were, for historian Richard Walsh, colonial Charleston’s “middle class.”²⁸ Fierce economic competition, however, made prosperity elusive for many artisans. The city’s burgeoning import market left craftsmen to contend with the trendy and often less expensive baubles of the mother country, while unpaid slave labor threatened to compromise the economic viability of white artisans from below.

The mass importation of European finished products left many craftsmen at a commercial disadvantage. Though the coopers who sold storage barrels to outgoing mariners and the shipwrights who repaired foreign vessels benefited from their commercial relationships with Britain, most artisans suffered from the imbalance of trade between colony and mother country. Imports flooded the local market. Goods from all British commercial centers filled the merchants’ shop windows on King and Broad

²⁶ Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (New York, 1950), 156.

²⁷ Richard Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763-1789* (Columbia, SC, 1959), 3. (hereafter *Sons of Liberty*). For a condensed version of Walsh’s study, see “The Charleston Mechanics: A Brief Study,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 60 (April 1959), 123-144.

²⁸ Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty*, 177.

Streets. Dockworkers unloaded a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of goods from the hulls of the merchant vessels anchored in Charleston Harbor. Artisans fretted, as “before their eyes,” an unending stream of European products arrived at local warehouses and busied the stevedores on the piers of Charleston.²⁹ Newspapers spoke of the glut of imports. Lists of available goods filled columns on the frontpage of the *South Carolina Gazette*. Amidst notices for estate sales and slave auctions, advertisements of foreign goods informed Charlestonians of their buying options and reminded artisans of the import’s burgeoning popularity in the local marketplace. Joshua Lockwood, a merchant who advertised his extensive inventory lists with regularity throughout the pre-Revolutionary era, offered an array of goods, from “silver handled knives and forks” to “Turtle Shell Tooth-Pick cases” and “Gentlemen’s pocket-books of all kinds.”³⁰ Samuel Gordon, a merchant of Elliott Street, hawked “a large and valuable Assortment of Goods” including “Mahogany Tea-Chests” and “a Choice of Men’s fine fashionable hats.”³¹ Across Charleston, discriminating customers could easily find a “complete assortment of European articles” to satisfy their piqued appetites for the fineries of Europe.³² Merchants had brought the luxuries of the metropole to the empire’s provincial appendages.

Local craftsmen advertised less frequently than their merchant competitors. When artisans did submit product descriptions to the newspaper, it was with a keen awareness of the craftsman’s struggle to locate a niche within an import-dominated marketplace. Furniture maker Richard Magrath, owner of a shop on King Street,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰ *South Carolina Gazette* (hereafter *SCG*), October 8, 1772.

³¹ *Ibid.*, November 5, 1772.

³² *Ibid.*, January 21, 1772.

preceded the listing of his “Double Chests of Drawers, Dining Tables, Carved Chairs, and Sophas” with an assurance to readers that he had an “Assortment of Work for Sale which [he] will engage to be as good as any imported from Europe.”³³ Haberdasher Richard Hurlstone prefaced his advertisements with the avowal that he and his partner Charles Robert “ma[d]e and s[old] hats of all Kinds, Sizes . . . equal in Quality and Neatness to any ever imported.” Perhaps to assure readers of his refined tastes, Hurlstone always noted that he himself was “from London.” More than others, mechanics realized the advantage of being an import.³⁴

While imports menaced artisan economic well-being from abroad, unpaid slave labor threatened to undercut the value of white artisan labor from below. Philip D. Morgan’s research on colonial Charleston—while focused on the slave perspective—elucidated the plight of the white craftsman.³⁵ Blacks—some free, most unfree—pervaded Charleston, and were the preeminent laborers in many of the city’s industries and trades.³⁶ Slaves dominated not only the fish market, where they daily hawked their wares, but also the maritime and riverine traffic on the Santee River, where slaves undertook jobs as ship pilots and other roles of commensurate responsibility. But more importantly for the city’s white artisans, slaves—whether as members of work crews or as independently contracted craftsmen—“infiltrated” even the city’s specialized trades.

³³ Ibid., July 23, 1772.

³⁴ Ibid., April 2, 1772.

³⁵ Philip D. Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” *Perspectives in American History*, New Series 1 (1984), 187-232. See also Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998) and Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974).

³⁶ As Wood and Morgan both make plain, the Lowcountry’s “black majority” was fundamental to the emergence of the paranoid style that pervaded white thought in colonial South Carolina after the Stono Rebellion. Artisan visions of a market in which slaves predominated may have in some ways exemplified such fears, but were not simply the fabrications of excited white minds. Blacks—free and unfree—were a prime source of competition for white (and, by comparison, overpriced) artisan labor.

White masters employed slaves as gunsmiths, silversmiths, and at other posts requiring considerable technical acumen.³⁷ Thomas Elfe, a wealthy cabinetmaker and slaveowner, not only employed slaves in his workshop but also subcontracted their services to his business associates. Two of Elfe's slaves, Oxford and Lake, often worked away from home for periods of six to eight months. Elfe's system proved profitable. Between 1768 and 1775, the cabinetmaker made annual deposits in his ledger book to a "handicraft slaves" account for several hundred pounds Sterling.³⁸ Artisans who competed for jobs against unfree mechanics like Oxford and Lake suffered from Elfe's business savvy. Thus while affluent artisans prospered from this consignment labor system, such practices certainly undercut those mechanics who depended on their own labor. This controversial system of labor—for the wealthy artisan an effective use of his "assets" but for other mechanics a dire blow to competitive white labor—would remain a point of inter-artisanal contention long after the Revolutionary era.

By the latter stages of the colonial era, then, a grave dual threat confronted many of Charleston's artisans. Whether through the importation of inexpensive finished goods from across the Atlantic Ocean or the undercutting of free by slave labor, most artisans had good reason to view their economic fortunes with pessimism. Lowcountry gentlemen, however, exhibited little sympathy for the artisan plight. A lack of concern bordering on outright callousness often colored a planter or merchant's musings on artisans and other "*humani generis*."³⁹ Such attitudes were in fact common in a society in which difference—not only racial, but also socioeconomic—was understood. Historian

³⁷ Morgan, "Black Life," *Perspectives*, 196-197.

³⁸ Mabel L. Webber (contributor), "The Thomas Elfe Account Book, 1768-1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 35-40 (April 1934-July 1939).

³⁹ William Henry Drayton, comp., *The Letters of Freeman, Etc.*, ed. Robert M. Weir (Columbia, SC, 1977), 30-31.

Carl Bridenbaugh once noted that a colonial gentleman tended to “look down a well-bred nose at the tradesman.”⁴⁰ Such was certainly the case in the eighteenth-century lowcountry. For Carolina planter and merchant luminary William Henry Drayton, mechanics were Charleston’s “*profanum vulgus*.”⁴¹ Wealthy visitors to the lowcountry echoed these sentiments. During his tour of South Carolina in 1773, in which he dined with wealthy merchants and planters, danced with their daughters, and attended musical concerts performed by well-paid musicians, Massachusetts native Josiah Quincy, Jr., limned the stark outlines of the lowcountry’s social hierarchy. Charlestonians, the Yankee aristocrat concluded, “may well be divided into opulent and lordly planters, poor and spiritless peasants and vile slaves.” The young New Englander echoed the gentry’s opinion of the city’s mechanic class quite clearly when he added that the “middling order in the capital [we]re odious characters.”⁴²

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Whatever resentment mechanics may have harbored for Charleston’s condescending gentry or the economic imbalance of either the mercantile or slave labor systems, they rarely manifested their dissatisfaction through political channels. Yet most mechanics were not necessarily bereft of political power. South Carolina law, in fact, guaranteed the voting rights of many craftsmen. Strict eligibility requirements for membership in the state’s legislature and the electorate’s deference to its assemblymen, however, imbued South Carolina politics with a constancy that buffered elected officials from the interests of the enfranchised public. The Commons House of Assembly, with its

⁴⁰ Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (New York, 1950), 161.

⁴¹ Drayton, comp., *Letters of Freeman, Etc.*, (Columbia, SC, 1977), 30-31.

⁴² Mark Antony DeWolfe Howe, comp. “Journals of Josiah Quincy, Jun.,” Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings* XLIX (October 1915-June 1916), 454-455.

affluent and well-acquainted members, was, for one historian, more akin to a “gentleman’s club” than a representative political body.⁴³

While the Voting Act of 1721 enfranchised South Carolina’s small property owners and thus provided a degree of political agency for many mechanics, the legislation also established strict criteria for membership in the Commons House of Assembly that affirmed the mechanics’ virtual presence in South Carolina politics. Assuredly, most artisans met or exceeded the voting requirements set forth by the statute. Aside from the basic age, residency, and race qualifications (the most stringent prerequisites for the vote) a minimum of twenty shillings in annual tax payments and ownership of a fifty-acre freehold were rarely problematic for reasonably successful artisans. A viable candidate for the assembly, however, had to own “a settled plantation or free-hold . . . at least five hundred acres of land, ten slaves or h[ad] in his own right, to the value of one thousand pounds in houses, buildings, town lots or other lands.”⁴⁴ Thus the land assets alone of the least affluent assemblyman dwarfed the personal estate of the average mechanic, which historian Jackson Turner Main estimated as approximately £110 sterling.⁴⁵ Consequently, few South Carolinians could fulfill the necessary financial prerequisites for assembly membership. The effects of such a circumscribed candidate pool were apparent. Reelection was commonplace for members of the ruling elite. Between 1762 and 1768, a period that encompassed three election cycles, seventy-five

⁴³ Frederick P. Bowes, *The Culture of Early Charleston* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1942), 115.

⁴⁴ Thomas Cooper, *The Statutes of South Carolina, III, Containing The Acts From 1716, Exclusive, To 1752, Inclusive* (Columbia, SC, 1838), 137.

⁴⁵ Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, NJ, 1965), 79.

assemblymen, many of whom were second or third-term representatives, filled a possible 117 seats in the Commons House of Assembly.⁴⁶

The familiar faces and similar backgrounds of most members lent an air of informality to the assembly's proceedings. After he visited the assembly, Josiah Quincy, Jr. (always a willing critic) decried the legislature's casualness: "The members convened, lolled, and chatted much like a friendly jovial society, when nothing of importance was before the house; nay once or twice while the speaker and clerk were busy in writing the members spoke quite loud across the room to one another. A very unparliamentary appearance."⁴⁷ Indeed, though Commons House assemblymen attained membership through public election, the chummy setting of their legislature was far removed from the everyday existences and interests of freeholder artisans. Quincy may have been justified in concluding that assemblymen "[we]re all very wealthy, and have in general but little solicitude about the concerns of the many."⁴⁸ Thus, while many mechanics could claim a participatory role in South Carolina politics, few could assert that their elected representative remained attuned to the electorate's concerns once he gained membership to the insular assembly.

Nevertheless, Charleston's mechanics did not voice overt opposition to the established political arrangement. For the electors, wealth may have been a perceived attribute of the "good ruler," while economic independence "promoted courage and

⁴⁶ The Voting Act of 1721 allotted the following number of seats to each parish in the assembly: St. Philip's, 5; Christ Church, 2; St. John's, 3; St. Andrew's, 3; St. George's, 2; St. James Goose Creek, 4; St. Thomas, 3; St. Dennis, 3; St. Paul's, 4; St. Bartholomew's, 4; St. Helena, 4; and St. James Santee, 2. In each of the elections of 1762, 1765, and 1768, then, candidates vied for thirty-nine seats, or a total of one-hundred-seventeen seats over the three-election cycle. And yet, only seventy-five South Carolinians became assemblymen during that period. Cooper, *Statutes*, III, 137, and Jerome J. Nadelhaft, *The Disorders of War: The Revolution in South Carolina* (Orono, ME, 1981), 4.

⁴⁷ Howe, *Journal of Quincy, Jr.*, 452.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 454.

fostered rational behavior.” Though these perceived virtues of wealth helped to reinforce the belief that members of the elite should rule, other, more mundane factors also kept even the wealthiest artisans from the inner workings of local government. The mechanic’s long workday, for instance, was a practical explanation for the artisan’s absence from the assembly.⁴⁹ Even if government officials had reduced the economic demands for assembly candidacy and permitted a wealthy shipwright like John Rose or cooper David Saylor to pursue public office, the assembly’s frequent meetings would have conflicted with the mechanic’s professional responsibilities.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the assembly’s tradition of unpaid public service made political office an unfeasible proposition for even the most successful artisans. The assembly thus remained the exclusive domain of those who could afford disinterested and unpaid service: the low country planter and merchant elite. The colony’s adherence to this “aristocratic principle” not only enabled the gentry to retain its stranglehold on colonial politics, but also further detached the mechanic elector from his gentleman representative.⁵¹

The “lasting political peace” in South Carolina before the 1760s, then, was partly dependent on the mechanics’ acceptance of a limited role in colonial government.⁵² The planters and merchants ruled while the artisans and the slaves worked. David Ramsay, one of the era’s most widely-read pundits, described those supposedly halcyon days: “Every man was healthy and industrious . . . they were also content and wished not for the smallest change in their political institution.”⁵³ Yet in the decade before war with

⁴⁹ Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Millwood, NY, 1983), 135.

⁵⁰ By many accounts, Saylor was the most affluent cooper in Charleston. On the eve of the Revolution, he employed more than thirty other barrel-makers and owned several slaves. Walsh, *Sons of Liberty*, 24.

⁵¹ Bowes, *The Culture of Early Charleston*, 115.

⁵² Eugene Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina: A Political History, 1663-1763* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1966), 224.

⁵³ David Ramsay, *History of South Carolina From Its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808* (Newberry, SC, 1858), 69.

Great Britain, visceral conflict within the South Carolina governmental system deprived the mechanic of any previous political agency he had held through virtual representation in the Commons House of Assembly. The timing could not have been worse. As the fiscal encroachments of the royal government infringed upon the craftsman's chance for prosperity, mechanics lost even their former, constricted avenues of political expression. Without the means to pursue legitimate political protest, artisans took to the streets to voice their opinions. In the 1760s, amidst the contention surrounding increased English taxation and what would be known as the Wilkes Fund controversy, the roots of the mechanic's extralegal expression took hold out of necessity. These protest experiences shaped artisan political activity for the duration of the colonial period.

The Wilkes Fund controversy derailed royal government in South Carolina. From 1769 until the outbreak of war, the disagreement between the Commons House of Assembly and the Crown over fund appropriation ground the daily operations of royally sanctioned government to a halt. Historians have long acknowledged the significance of the colony's administrative shutdown in the pre-war years as representative of the ever-widening gap between colony and mother country. Henry Wallace referred to the controversy as one "unprecedented in the history of the province."⁵⁴ Historian Jack Greene posited that the crisis "furnished abundant testimony to the seriousness of the imperial challenge and helped to crystallize Revolutionary sentiment among the colony's political leaders."⁵⁵ Though the jurisdictional struggle between Commons House and crown was significant, the effect of the Wilkes Fund controversy on the politically

⁵⁴ David D. Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens; With A Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens* (New York, 1915), 163.

⁵⁵ Jack P. Greene, "Bridge to Revolution: The Wilkes Fund controversy in South Carolina, 1769-1775," *Journal of Southern History* XXIX (February 1963), 19-52.

marginal mechanic demographic—while less explored by scholars—was also extensive. Indeed, South Carolina’s “governmental paralysis” jeopardized the relationship between crown and colony, and thrust a new sense of political detachment upon all Carolinians, not solely the colony’s craftsmen. For Charleston’s artisans, however, this development was the final constriction of their already limited political rights, privileges that had been tenuous and indirect from the start.⁵⁶

In the autumn of 1769, while tensions over the Townshend Acts still roiled the relationship between Britain and her American colonies, South Carolina’s descent into governmental impasse began with the seemingly mundane payment of a defendant’s legal fees. The accused was John Wilkes, a known English critic of King George III who had gained notoriety on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean for his outspoken denunciations of royal policy.⁵⁷ In 1768 the Crown charged Wilkes with libel and slander. His subsequent arrest, however, only enhanced the rebel’s cult popularity. Wilkes’s supporters in London founded the Society of the Gentlemen Supporters of the Bill of Rights, which petitioned the American colonies for contributions to a legal fund for the defendant. Most of the colonies were not forthcoming. Planters in Maryland donated forty-five hogsheads of tobacco but only South Carolina obliged the society’s request with a hard currency contribution. On December 8 the assembly appropriated £1,500 sterling for donation to the Society of Gentlemen. Unbeknownst to the assemblymen, their

⁵⁶ Robert M. Weir, “A Most Important Epocha”: *The Coming of the Revolution in South Carolina* Tricentennial Booklet Number Five (Columbia, SC, 1970), 49.

⁵⁷ On April 23, 1763, Wilkes’s *North Briton*, No. 45, criticized the king’s speech from the throne. After ensuing legal troubles and a period of exile in France, Wilkes returned to England, only to be imprisoned in the Tower of London. For Greene, Wilkes became “associated with the cause of liberty,” as his imprisonment and the Crown’s taxation of the colonies “were viewed as part of the same general assault on liberty.” Jack P. Greene, *Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963), 404. For a contemporary account of Wilkes’s imprisonment and the text of his infamous pamphlet, see *An Authentick Account of the Proceedings Against John Wilkes, Esq.* (Philadelphia, 1763 [orig. pub. London, 1763]).

appropriation from the treasury would be one of the last fiscal transactions of the colonial period.⁵⁸

The assembly had somewhat ulterior motivations for its action. Overshadowed by the restive New England colonies, many members of the assembly longed to stage a novel protest against the Crown. The *Gazette* described the underlying purpose of the donation: “In this instance, it cannot be said that we have followed the example of the Northern Colonies.”⁵⁹ These measures of “boldness and originality” were, if nothing else, demonstrative.⁶⁰ Not only had the grant to Wilkes galvanized South Carolina’s support of a slanderer of George III, but the appropriation had also been made without consent of the colony’s royal council. Predictably, the Crown reacted with vigor. On April 14, 1770, the king issued his “additional instructions” regarding the contested contribution. Because it was “highly just and necessary that the most effectual measures be pursued for putting a stop to such dangerous and unwarrantable practices,” the Crown directed South Carolina’s Lieutenant Governor William Bull never to assent to a monetary appropriation that would defray “any expense occurred for services or purposes not immediately arising within or incident to our said province of South Carolina.” The Crown’s orders were a patent proscription of the “lately assumed” powers of the lower house to appropriate money as it saw fit.⁶¹

This fundamental disagreement between Crown and colony over fund appropriation proved an immovable obstacle to all government legislation in the last

⁵⁸ Committee to Robert Morris, December 8, 1769, in “Correspondence of Charles Garth,” *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, XXXI (April 1930), 132-133.

⁵⁹ *SCG*, December 8, 1769.

⁶⁰ Green, “Bridge to Revolution,” *JSH*, XXIX (February 1963), 21.

⁶¹ “Method of Appropriating Money in South Carolina,” in Leonard Woods Labaree, ed., *Royal Instructions to British Colonial Governors, 1670-1776*, I, (New York, 1935), 208-209.

years before the Revolution. The assembly's insistence that the Wilkes donation was a legitimate transaction became a *cause celebre* in Charleston.⁶² Repeated prorogations of the legislature and years of stalemate failed to deter either the colonial assembly or royal government. The disagreement pervaded all aspects of the government. After 1769 the assembly did not pass another tax bill. After 1771 the assembly did not enact a single piece of legislation for the duration of the colonial era.⁶³ The assembly, which had at least ostensibly served as the electorate's political voice, faded into irrelevance. While the Wilkes affair's raising of questions regarding the assumed powers of a governing body were perhaps too removed from daily life to profoundly affect the everyday existences of Charleston's mechanics, the enervation of the Commons House was a development of singular importance to the middling sort. The controversy tore away the only shred of representative government available to the electorate. By the early 1770s, Charleston's mechanics were without even a nominal political voice. The "governmental vacuum" created by the Wilkes affair had turned South Carolina's top-heavy political structure on its ear.⁶⁴

The Wilkes Fund controversy's full proscription of the mechanic's already circumscribed political voice came at a most inopportune time: heightened royal taxation threatened the economic well-being of most mechanics. Yet in the decade before revolution, artisans and craftsmen responded to the perceived "intrusion" of British colonial policy through effective, if less official, means.⁶⁵ Organizations like the Sons of Liberty afforded mechanics an effective channel of extralegal protest, while their alliance

⁶² Greene, "Bridge to Revolution," *JSH* XXIX (February 1963), 32.

⁶³ Greene, *Quest For Power*, 416.

⁶⁴ George Edward Frakes, *Laboratory for Liberty* (Lexington, KY, 1970), 101.

⁶⁵ Joyce Appleby, "The Social Origins of American Revolutionary Ideology," *Journal of American History*, LXIV (March 1978), 954.

with local powerbroker Christopher Gadsden gave artisan interests an unprecedented air of “patrician respectability.”⁶⁶ Indeed, the ten years before the first tea party of December 1773 witnessed the politicization of the mechanic.

Crown policy of the 1760s posed a serious threat to the prosperity of Charleston’s master craftsmen. The Stamp Act imposed a high tax on all contracts negotiated with apprentices, while the Currency Act lessened an already insufficient amount of circulating paper money, making it difficult for mechanics to both collect and pay debts.⁶⁷ With their orthodox avenues for protest blocked by legislative inactivity and indifference, mechanics sought union in extralegal associations like the Sons of Liberty. The high percentage of artisan membership in the Sons of Liberty during Charleston’s protest of the Stamp Act revealed the extent to which mechanics had, even at that early date, adopted unofficial means to pursue political goals.⁶⁸ Mechanics comprised the vast majority of those who met under the Liberty Tree in 1766 to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act. The roster of twenty-six attendees included six carpenters, three painters, two blacksmiths, a tailor, a wheelwright, a saddler, and an upholsterer. Their participation in such an association endowed artisans with a quasi-political vehicle for their interests. This new form of popular participation was disconcerting to many supporters of royal policy. Even after Charlestonians relaxed most of their nonimportation resolutions in December 1770 (measures which local artisans had fervently supported), Lieutenant Governor Bull remained convinced that the “clouds of popular discontent” would

⁶⁶ Walsh, *Sons of Liberty*, 32.

⁶⁷ According to Walsh, the price of a stamp for negotiating a contract with an apprentice was £7 sterling, or more than half of a mechanic’s weekly wages; *ibid.*, 143-145.

⁶⁸ “A List of Those Persons Who First Met At Liberty Tree, In Charleston, In The Fall of the Year 1766, After The Repeal of the Stamp Act,” in R.W. Gibbes, ed., *Documentary History of the American Revolution: 1764-1776* (New York, 1855), 10-11.

reappear. The governor's apprehension was prescient. Many of the same mechanics who had gathered under the Liberty Tree in 1766 to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act and had lobbied for nonimportation later in the 1760s held active roles in the popular demonstrations of the 1770s and would benefit from the resultant political upheaval.⁶⁹ The popular actions of the tea party era would continue Charleston's legacy of popular action begun during the Stamp Act protests. Public protests of 1773 and 1774 allowed an important but economically and politically limited portion of the population to gain, at least for a time, a public voice.

⁶⁹ Great Britain. Public Records Office: Lieutenant Governor William Bull to Earl of Dartmouth, December 13, 1770, *Records of the British Public Records Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-1782*, microfilm, reel 11.

CHAPTER II

Three Tea Parties

The widening of the participatory dimensions of Charleston's first public and then political spheres of authority during the nonimportation era began in earnest on December 1, 1773, when city residents contested the first of three tea shipments from English merchants. During this initial tea party, crowd members gathered—much as George Hewes and his compatriots had in Boston—as “citizens” to remonstrate against the perceived transgressions of the East India Company's merchant mariners and local consignees. They would do so twice more, during the summer and winter of 1774. These second and third tea parties, while expressing similar sentiments as the initial protest, offered their own indications of crowd empowerment. In July 1774, crowd participants attempted to exact violent retribution upon a British merchant captain, and exhibited a public authority that broke with their past sociopolitical docility. That November, Charlestonians would undertake their only destruction of British tea, as crowd members cemented their international reputation as public protestors of British policy. Whatever the effects of such recalcitrance upon the colony's relationship with the metropole, the tea parties had undeniably empowering effects on the “gentlemen of the schools” and journeyman artisans who took to the streets in 1773 and 1774.

The South Carolina *Gazette* had reported the comings and goings of Captain Alexander Curling and his vessel the *London* for years.⁷⁰ The captain's cargoes of imports had replenished the inventories of local merchants since the beginning of the decade. But the *London's* sighting off the Charleston bar on December 1, 1773, and arrival in the harbor one day later caused an unusual stir. While the merchant crew prepared to anchor, "handbills were circulated" throughout the city, "inviting all the inhabitants, without exception to assemble in the Great Hall over the Exchange."⁷¹ At issue was Curling's cargo: 257 chests of Bohea Tea, a load that violated Charleston's nonimportation agreement.⁷² Charlestonians attended the subsequent meeting in droves. To one observer, the rafters of the Exchange Building seemed to "creek" from the burden of accommodating such a congregation.⁷³ Amidst the clamor, townsmen called upon the merchants who had agreed to import the tea—Roger Smith, Peter Leger, and William Greenwood—to explain their flouting of the city's nonimportation resolution. In a "wrath of declamation," chief interrogator Christopher Gadsden harangued the three merchants. Unsurprisingly, before the disapproving masses and vociferous Gadsden, the consignees soon "saw the propriety of abiding by the sense of the community thus formally expressed" and agreed to join the extant nonimportation association.⁷⁴ As a closing measure, attendees established a "General Committee" to secure full subscription to the nonimportation agreement from city residents. The committee members were all men of affluence. Three—Charles Pinckney, Charles C. Pinckney, and Thomas

⁷⁰ See advertisements in the *Gazette (SCG)* for period of 1770-1773.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* December 6, 1773.

⁷² *Ibid.* The cargo was valued at about £157 sterling.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ John Drayton, *Memoirs of the American Revolution, From Its Commencement to the Year 1776, Inclusive; As Relating to the State of South-Carolina and Occasionally Referring To North-Carolina and Georgia*, I (New York, 1969 [orig. pub. Charleston, SC, 1821]), 98.

Ferguson—were planters. Mechanics' champion Christopher Gadsden and wealthy craftsman Daniel Cannon were also selected for committee membership.⁷⁵

Lieutenant Governor William Bull did not attend the "Meeting of the Inhabitants," and was suspicious of the gathering from the outset. In a recounting of the incident to his superiors at Whitehall, he intimated that the volatile tenor at the Exchange had been the determining factor in the merchants' change of heart. For Bull, the agents of the East India Company were "prevailed upon by threats and flattery," and had little choice but to accord with public sentiment.⁷⁶ Despite Bull's doubts, however, Curling's controversial shipment stayed aboard the *London*, and tensions over the tea remained high throughout the first three weeks of December.⁷⁷ Anonymous letters from "warm, bold spirits" warned Curling to "hawl his ship into stream," and that there was a "desire to do some mischief to her, for bringing over the tea."⁷⁸ Even the owners of the wharf where Curling's vessel lay received word that their property would be "fire[d]" unless the *London* "was obliged to quit the wharf."⁷⁹ Bull perceived the gravity of the situation, and on December 21, 1773, the acting governor summoned the colony's royal council and the *London*'s master and owner to his home to discuss the impasse.

Gathered at the governor's residence that Friday evening, members of the Council sounded the captain's sentiments. Curling began by assuring the governor that he was not then "under apprehension of personal violence."⁸⁰ Yet neither he nor Mr. Lord—the

⁷⁵ Walter Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, SC, 1989), 136; Edgar Walter, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, SC, 1998), 121.

⁷⁶ Great Britain. Public Records Office: Lieutenant Governor William Bull to Earl of Dartmouth, December 24, 1773, *Records of the British Public Records Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-1782*, microfilm, reel 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Drayton, *Memoirs*, 116.

London's Charleston-based owner—knew “what would be the consequence . . . if the tea was landed.”⁸¹ Customs officer Robert Haliday further complicated the situation when he informed Bull that after twenty-one days he would have to seize the tea for non-payment of royal duties and stow the cargo in the “King’s Stores” below the Exchange.⁸²

By all accounts, Bull was torn. Though the fulfillment of Haliday’s responsibilities might resolve the stalemate in the crown’s favor, the governor feared the violent opposition of city residents, what one contemporary deemed the “hostile opinion of the People.”⁸³ The customs collector was adamant, however, and convinced Bull to allow the sheriff to accompany him aboard the *London*, “to attend to keep the peace, if any tumult should be made, when the tea was landed.”⁸⁴ The course of action set, Bull asked his councilors whether “any other measures [were] necessary to be taken.” Council members replied unanimously in the negative. “They were in hopes,” noted one observer that the “measures already directed, would be effectual on the present occasion.” Bull and his advisors retired, placing their faith in the customs collector and his armed escort.

On December 22, Haliday and John Morris, Charleston’s Comptroller of Customs, came aboard the *London*. Morris awoke Curling and begged him to bring the tea ashore. Soon the crew was “hard at work” and by noon, after five hours of transporting the controversial goods, the men had stowed “half the tea in the warehouse, and the rest before the door [of the Crown’s stores].” Residents, meanwhile, posed no threat to the customs officers’ actions. The *Gazette* observed, “the People, though not pleased with the landing at all; were perfectly quiet.” Haliday and his men had, in fact,

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 99.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 116.

completed the landing “by the Time that the People in general imagined it would be begun.”⁸⁵ In hindsight, the customs officer was satisfied with his efficiency, remarking that the tea had been “seized, landed, and stored . . . without one Person appearing to oppose him.” Comptroller Morris, despite initial foreboding, noted not the “least disturbance” by city residents.⁸⁶ Charleston’s first tea party had not been well attended.

The timely diffusion of tensions and the initiative taken by Bull’s men, however, did very little to temper the local significance of the first tea party. The proceedings at the Exchange and the bullying of the East Indian Company’s agents disturbed the Crown. With Gadsden impugning their actions and the public looking on, the agents certainly had little choice but to renounce their practices and rejoin the fold. Historians have chronicled similar episodes of public shaming during the revolutionary era. Perhaps the most notable of these works are Rhys Isaac’s studies of the “dramaturgical” in revolutionary Virginia. As with Virginians compelled to take oaths at local courthouses, transgressors in Charleston appeared before an assembled public at a place of communal importance—in this instance, not a courthouse, but an exchange, the epicenter of mercantile life in bustling Charleston—and received a stern rebuke for their actions. The role of the crowd at the Exchange as onlookers, however, was far from passive. Behind Gadsden, the people expressed the will and feeling of the community. The audience was an active reminder to the accused of their positions as the transgressive minority.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *SCG*, December 27, 1773.

⁸⁶ “Copy of a Letter From Mr. John Morris, at Charles Town, South Carolina, to his Brother, at London,” in Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves*, 342.

⁸⁷ Rhys Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776,” *WMQ* 33 (July 1976), 362.

The results of such actions transcended the cramped and tense atmosphere at the Exchange. Powerful officials, thousands of miles distant from the wharf where Curling's vessel lay, ruminated on the town's intransigence. From Whitehall on February 5, 1774, Lord Dartmouth dispatched a pithy correspondence to Bull, lauding the governor's actions but also excoriating town residents for their recalcitrance. While the December standoff was "not equal in criminality to the Proceedings in other colonies," the Crown could only consider "what passed at Charles Town" as a "most unwarrantable Insult to the authority of the Kingdom."⁸⁸ For the Crown, then, despite the safe removal of the tea and the town's passivity in opposing its landing, residents' actions at the Exchange were nevertheless an all too public display of sedition.⁸⁹

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Months passed before another attempt to import tea aroused the passions of Charlestonians to demonstrate not only their disapproval of royal policy but also their ability to convey such sentiments. In the summer of 1774, city residents expressed their sentiments boldly; in this instance not as interested bystanders, but as members of a mob bent on violence. Though the actions taken by the crowd in July exhibited many of the same qualities as those of the protestors' at the Exchange the previous winter, the summer mob of 1774—the only one of its kind during the tea party era—voiced popular opinion in a new and violent manner, one that was more direct than the approach taken by the audience at the Exchange. By 1774, protest—and violence—had indeed come to the streets and piers of the South's largest seaport.

⁸⁸Great Britain. Public Records Office: Letter from Earl of Dartmouth to Lieutenant Governor William Bull, February 24, 1774, *Records of the British Public Records Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-1782*, microfilm, reel 11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

The General Committee received word of the London merchant vessel *Magna Charta*'s arrival in Charleston on July 18, 1774. Amidst reports that the vessel's master, Captain Richard Maitland, had presented three chests of tea for inspection at Charleston's customs office, the Committee immediately summoned Maitland to inquire whether he realized that such "conduct was contrary to the sense of this Colony in particular, and of America in General." Maitland seemed contrite. Reportedly, Maitland had not known of the tea's presence until he was already at sea and had "the leisure to look over his coquettes." Indeed, for John Laurens, one of Maitland's Charleston-based business partners, the captain's gaffe was surely an honest blunder. "If I was requir'd to write particularly against Capt. Maitland," Laurens related to his brother, community luminary Henry Laurens (then on business in England), "I could not in honour & Conscience do it, as It did not appear to me that he offended willfully and premeditatedly, but rather by accident & Inadvertancy."⁹⁰ To allay any residual tension, the captain added that he would reclaim the tea from the collector and "throw it into the river at his own cost" if the Committee deemed such actions appropriate. After a short conference, committee members deemed the gesture apropos, and requested that Maitland "burn the tea on the wharf." Captain Maitland, it seemed, had averted public ire.⁹¹

The next day—July 19—Committeemen and city residents assembled on the public wharf to witness Maitland's act of open contrition. Yet when the captain approached the customs collector and "tendered the duty in money," to reclaim the tea, the Crown's representative refused the exchange. The waiting Committee members

⁹⁰ Letter of James Laurens to Henry Laurens, July 22, 1774 in Rogers, George C., Chesnut, David R., Clark, Peggy J., and C. James Taylor, eds. *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Nine: April 19, 1773—Dec. 12, 1774* (Columbia, SC, 1981), 525-526.

⁹¹ Drayton, *Memoirs*, 132.

became impatient. Quickly, they denounced the captain and appointed a second committee “to desire the merchants not to ship or receive any goods in any bottom, wherein Captain Maitland was, or should be concerned.” However, this measure—tantamount to blackballing the captain—did not satisfy the many restive Charlestonians who had gathered along the pier to witness Maitland’s come-uppance. As word of Maitland’s failure to make public amends spread, many onlookers, especially the “folks call’d Patriots” became “much incensed.”

Maitland was by then understandably eager to set sail for London. His attempt to assuage his accusers had (due to the dutifulness of Charleston’s royal officials) failed, and now his ship and crew lay helpless at anchor in what had become an unfriendly port. A royal official had even warned the captain of possible mob stirrings. Before he retired to his quarters, then, the master alerted the night watch aboard the *Magna Charta*. While such information provided Maitland and his crew with a chance to pass the night unharmed, the men were tense, and the captain readied a launch in case their situation aboard the docked ship became untenable.⁹² There, in the summer night, while he and his crew watched the long pier and listened for the “great threats” of the rabble, Maitland may have wondered how such a dire situation had arisen.⁹³ After all, Maitland was a veteran of the city’s maritime trade, had developed lasting commercial relationships with the city’s most prominent merchants, and had been accustomed to the gracious “Civility” of the port’s residents. Assuredly, he had disobeyed (but unknowingly!) nonimportation measures when he had reported his tea at Charleston’s royal customs’ house, and the

⁹² Drayton, *Memoirs*, 135.

⁹³ Great Britain. Public Records Office: Lieutenant Governor William Bull to Earl of Dartmouth, July 31, 1774, *Records of the British Public Records Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-1782*, microfilm, reel 11.

tea's presence was due to his negligence at the voyage's outset, when he had failed to thoroughly examine his cargoes. But he had already endured the harangue of the General Committee and the merchants' efforts to sever his local business connections, and, was "not very desirous of receiving [a] visit" from angry city residents. But the "Protestors," according to Maitland's source, were nevertheless in a state of "great agitation," and captain and crew could only warily watch the waterfront for signs of trouble.

They did not wait long. Before midnight, "several hundred men" crowded the section of the pier nearest the *Magna Charta* and "intended to la[y] hands" upon the vessel's master.⁹⁴ The captain panicked. Forsaking his crew, Maitland boarded the awaiting launch and ferried himself to the HMS *Glasgow*, anchored in Rebellion Roads, barely escaping the mob, which "went on board with their tar, feathers, and &tc, to execute vengeance on the Captain." In an instant, Charleston's only tea party wherein protestors were bent on violence came to an unremarkable end. For contemporaries, however, the mob's lack of violence did nothing to temper its radical character or grave potential. Indeed, the flighty Maitland had been fortunate to escape. "It was impossible to tell," penned one observer, "what might have been the consequence, had [the mob] found him."⁹⁵ If the mob damaged the ship or harmed the crew after the captain's escape, however, no contemporary chronicler deemed it sufficiently noteworthy to recount. Maitland, it seemed, had been the only target of the crowd's ire.

The captain escaped, but the mob had certainly acquainted him with Charleston's preferred mode of public demonstration. Captain Maitland was not the first British mariner to incur the scorn of the Charleston crowd, nor would he be the last. But not all

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 132-135.

locals lauded the crowd action. John Laurens decried such “outrageous measures.” While he did blame Maitland for his “Impudence” and foolish tendency to “rattl[e] disrespectfully of some folks,” he hoped that “the most judicious and more Moderate part” of the community would scorn the mob. But by his own admission, Laurens was a distant observer of events in the streets and on the docks of Charleston in late July 1774. His capricious “Humours” had “confine[d] him at home” to sickbed, far from the buzz of an “incens’d” protestors.

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More than a year elapsed between Captain Curling’s initial stirring of Charleston’s non-importation sentiments and the November 1774 arrival of Captain Samuel Ball—another veteran merchant mariner accustomed to the long voyage between the mother country and colonies—and his vessel *Britannia*. Much had remained more or less constant in Charleston during those months, especially the manifestation of an at least ostensible devotion to the tenets of non-importation by the town’s popular forces. And indeed, the circumstances that confronted Captain Ball upon his arrival at Charleston in the final days of November smacked unmistakably of the tea parties of the previous summer and December 1773. But, as Captain Ball’s preemptive apology would make plain, the third tea party was more than just another crowd bullying a few importers and ship captains: the events of November 1774 revealed, in fact, the extent to which Charleston’s non-importation leanings had transcended the local sphere. The third tea party displayed both the sustained tenor and now international reputation of Charleston’s de facto authorities.

For Samuel Ball, the crisis that jeopardized the safety of his crew and cargo upon arrival in Charleston began before the vessel's departure from London. As the captain prepared to "clear out" and set sail westward across the Atlantic Ocean, a crewman informed the captain that "his Mate" had accepted two small cargoes of tea from the London merchant houses Ross and Mill and James Graham and Company. Despite the inconsiderable amount of tea aboard—only seven cases in all—the captain foresaw the hostile sentiments that the "mischievous drug" would arouse in Charleston. For the next two days, Ball delayed the *Britannia's* departure while he attempted to unload the illegal cargo. His efforts, however, proved "ineffectual." Ball's inability to rid the vessel of contraband forced him to adopt a hastily conceived contingency plan—a written protest. On August 29, 1774, Ball rowed ashore and professed his prior ignorance of the tea's presence to a notary public in Surry. When the *Britannia* arrived in Charleston on November 1, Captain Ball had only his word to protect him.⁹⁶

The city responded as the prescient Ball had anticipated. After only "Hours in Port," and with help from a "Number of Young Gentlemen from the different schools,"—trade apprentices, most likely—word of Ball's cargo percolated throughout the town. Peter Timothy's *Gazette* deemed "the mind of the People . . . to be very much agitated."⁹⁷ The Committee of Observation quickly relayed word of Ball's arrival to the General Committee, and after a hastily convened meeting "early on Wednesday morning,"

⁹⁶ SCG, November 21, 1774. The petition, witnessed by David Ewart, notary public in Surry, read: "On the 29th Day of August, 1774, Before me, David Ewart, Notary-Public, dwelling in London, personally appeared Samuel Ball, jun. Master of the ship *Britannia*, that cleared out from London for Charles-Town, South-Carolina, and requested me, Notary, to protest, as, by these Presents, I do protest, against the shippers of Three Half-Chests and Four Quarter Chests of TEA, by the said Ship, without the Knowledge or Consent of him appears, or any applications in him in Respect thereof—Witness my Notorial Firm and Seal, the Day and Year above-written." Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Before Ball's arrival, the "Gentlemen"—most likely local apprentices—had not lacked for activity. Earlier that day, they had gone door-to-door throughout the town in an attempt to confiscate any tea possessed by local families. They had found all "Houses without any." Ibid.

summoned the *Britannia*'s master to appear at the Exchange. Ball assented to the request and came to the Exchange, hat-in-hands. Members of the Committee acted their part, expressing "Concern and Astonishment" at Ball's conduct. But Ball was prepared for the browbeating, and presented his "Protest" in hopes that the document would "acquit him from the Suspicion of having any Design to act contrary to the Sense of the People [in Charleston] of the Voices of America."⁹⁸ The captain readily admitted to possessing the tea, but disavowed any intention of knowingly shipping the cargo to Charleston. Bull's affidavit proved efficacious. But urgent business remained: as the Committee dismissed Ball, it summoned local merchants Robert Mackenzie, Zephaniah Kinsley, and Robert Lindsay, to whom the tea had been consigned, to appear that evening at a public meeting of the General Committee at the Exchange.

The "Importers of the Tea" arrived at a "very full" Exchange that evening. Like their fellow merchants Roger Smith, Peter Leger, and William Greenwood, who had quickly reversed their positions on nonimportation in December 1773, these latest targets of public ire "declared that they were willing to do any Thing . . . to preserve the Peace and Quiet of the Community." The charged atmosphere at the Exchange had once again proven quite persuasive.⁹⁹

At noon on November 3, the guilty importers ferried out to Ball's *Britannia*. In the presence of the Committee of Observation and within "View of the General Concourse of People," Mackenzie, Kinsley, and Lindsay, "with their own hands respectively stove the chests belonging to each, and emptied their Contents into the River." An "Oblation to Neptune" thus made, the assembled crowd "gave three hearty

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Cheers” and “separated as if nothing had happened.” The crowd remained peaceful. The merchants had disposed of their own tea. Once again, a tea party in restive Charleston had ended without incident, but not without significance.¹⁰⁰

The actions of the protestors during Charleston’s final tea party of November 3, 1774, were much more akin to the events of December 1773 than to the crowd’s intended treatment of Captain Maitland in July 1774. Indeed, protests were non-violent. The public’s intimidation of the violators of nonimportation agreements, however, was baldly apparent. Indeed, the third tea party was not just another display of a discontented public and humbled, cowed importers. The preemptive actions taken by the implicated English merchant captain spoke to Charleston’s newly garnered reputation as an anti-import hotbed, while the party’s symbolic conclusion clearly displayed the general public as arbiter of extralegal justice.

By the end of 1774, Charleston’s extralegal crowds—staid and stolid audiences or vehement mobs—had garnered enhanced extralegal authority through their roles in Charleston’s tea parties. Their means were effective; their sentiments had garnered a transatlantic reputation. Historians must not discount these “moments of equality” where, members of Charleston’s crowds undertook what they deemed meaningful public action on behalf of their community. Such influence, however, was undoubtedly fleeting. The crowd’s power was temporary. Indeed, though Charleston’s protestors helped dispense public authority in 1773 and 1774, a correspondent amelioration in station or influence for most of the “gentlemen of the schools” who supposedly comprised the crowds was not forthcoming. Though the tea parties empowered participants in the short term, most individual protestors failed—or did not desire—to parlay their temporary

¹⁰⁰ Steedman, “Charlestown’s Forgotten Tea Party,” 247-251; *SCG*, November 21, 1774.

extralegal influence into lasting gains within Charleston's established sociopolitical orthodoxy. While the initial phase of popular empowerment in Charleston, then, allowed the journeymen and others in the crowds a public voice, most mechanics did not make demonstrable political gains during the tea party era. Only later in the revolutionary era would a handful of wealthy mechanics make inroads into Charleston's top-heavy political culture.

CHAPTER III

The Limits of Change

The general meetings and mob of 1773 and 1774 that comprised the first phase of the tea party era brought a semblance of public authority to all protestors. Historians have noted this shift toward popular power. In his narrative of the first tea party and the subsequent “meeting of the inhabitants” at the Exchange Building in December 1773, George Rogers purported to have identified an “important milestone—perhaps even a starting point” in the “search to discover the voice of the people” of revolutionary South Carolina.¹⁰¹ Richard Walsh’s thorough analysis of the city’s artisan population in the middle and late eighteenth century affirmed that, at least for some mechanics, the immediate pre-Revolutionary period was an epoch of political gain. Indeed, the argument that the tumult of the times allowed some politically anonymous citizens a more prominent voice in the local public and political arenas is somewhat plausible. Tea party protestors wielded a considerable amount of public authority, and, by their actions, defined themselves as concerned and proactive citizens. The empowering effect of this civic awareness upon individuals was considerable. Nevertheless, the gains made by the “gentlemen of the schools” during this first phase of popular agitation did little to alter Charleston’s sociopolitical order.

¹⁰¹ Charles C. Rogers, “The Charleston Tea Party: The Significance of December 3, 1773,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 75 (July 1974), 153.

The second phase of popular empowerment, however, effected more permanent changes in local political culture, as affluent mechanics ascended to leadership positions in the de facto assemblies that came to be Charleston's ruling political bodies after the tea parties. The General Committee, the unofficial legislative body that corresponded with similar committees throughout the colonies at the height of the non-importation era, claimed fifteen mechanics as members, along with an equal number of merchants and sixty-nine planters.¹⁰² Thirteen artisans became members of the First Provincial Congress, which, upon its creation by the General Committee in 1774, "gradually assumed the legislative powers of the Province."¹⁰³ In these instances, some artisans, whose profession and social place—despite their economic worth—had precluded them from authentic participation in local politics before 1773, became elected leaders of the community.

Prosopographic information is extant for nearly half of the artisans who held positions on Charleston's General Committee, First Provincial Congress, or both.¹⁰⁴ The documents that relate such enticing clues—estate inventories, slave and ship registers, to name but a few—offer, of course, only snapshots of an individual's life. The exact financial standing of each of the mechanics who gained committee or congressional membership at the moment of election is perhaps unattainable. Nevertheless, there remains evidence—a sufficient number of snapshots—to arrive at a preliminary conclusion regarding the artisans who came to power in the late pre-Revolutionary era:

¹⁰² Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty*, 64.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ Slave ownership records, ship registrations, and estate inventories are available for nine mechanic members of the General Committee and First Provincial Congress. Since Daniel Cannon, Peter Timothy, and Edward Weyman held both posts, information is thus available for twelve of a possible twenty-eight officeholders.

Charleston's officeholding mechanics of 1773 and 1774 were all artisans of high economic status.

All artisan members of either the General Committee or First Provincial Congress for whom estate information is available held much greater material assets than other, non-officeholding artisans. To be sure, these master craftsmen-come-politicians were not all economic peers. Some, like William Johnson and Cato Ash, owned massive estates that dwarfed the holdings of other elected committeemen and congressmen, including even some merchants and planters.¹⁰⁵ Johnson and Ash were two of the wealthiest men in the city, each claiming estates worth well over £25,000 sterling. Officials like Daniel Cannon and Simon Berwick were of more modest economic means, but wealthy nevertheless, each with holdings of more than £5,000 sterling.¹⁰⁶ A third economic tier within the elected artisan contingent, one to which the majority of committee members and congressmen belonged, is perhaps most germane to the current study. These artisans—five in all—were, compared with Johnson, Ash, or even Cannon, not rich men.¹⁰⁷ Their median estate worth of £464 sterling, however, was still more than quadruple the holdings of most Charleston mechanics.¹⁰⁸ While a great monetary divide separated the wealthiest artisan committee members and congressmen from elected artisans of this tertiary and lowest state, the holdings of even the most humble elected mechanic dwarfed those of who remained politically muted. Most of Charleston's

¹⁰⁵ Ash's estate worth at the time of his death during the Revolution was £23,441 sterling. Johnson, who lived well into the nineteenth century but had prospered during the eighteenth, died with an estate worth \$79,533.

¹⁰⁶ At the time of his death, Cannon was a substantial area creditor. Charlestonians owed him £5,891. Berwick's assets totaled £5,085.

¹⁰⁷ Include first names: Matthew Morris, £509; Edward Trusler, £645; Edward Weyman, £385; Michael Kaltieson, £381; Peter Timothy, £400.

¹⁰⁸ Main estimated the median holdings of Charleston's mechanics to be approximately £110 sterling.

mechanics, then, shared their trades with artisan members of the General Committee and First Provincial Congress, but little else—and certainly not common economic straits.

William Johnson, blacksmith and member of the General Committee, most glaringly exemplified the gaping economic gap between Charleston’s elected and non-officeholding craftsmen. Upon his death in 1818, Johnson’s diverse financial portfolio—valued at more than \$79,000—included extensive land, human, material, and stock assets.¹⁰⁹ Aside from his house in St. Phillip’s Parish, Johnson had also purchased a plantation in the rural parish of Grove-Creek. A substantial slaveowner, Johnson’s human chattel—from “blacksmith negroes” in Charleston, valued at over five hundred dollars each, to “prime” and “inferior” fieldhands on his plantation—comprised nearly half of his fortune. The worth of his rich mahogany dressers and tea tables alone dwarfed the average estate worth of lesser artisans. A schooner, anchored in Charleston Harbor, and a carriage and horses only accentuated the atypical financial standing of this Charleston blacksmith.

Nor was Daniel Cannon—a member of both the General Committee and First Provincial Congress—in any way an artisan of ordinary means. As the “most influential mechanic in Charleston,” the house-carpenter known familiarly as “Daddy Cannon” sat firmly atop the pinnacle of the vertical artisan social strata of pre-Revolutionary Charleston. His assets—real and liquid—possessed in life and left to his progeny after death spoke to the man’s material worth. After the Revolution, the first United States Census listed Cannon as a considerable slaveholder, possessing thirty-one human chattel. Upon his death in 1816, the founder of Cannonsborough was even the primary creditor of

¹⁰⁹ Cannon’s value in pounds Sterling was approximately £ 18,400. John J. McCusker, *How Much is That Worth in real Money? A Historical Commodity Price Index for use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States* (Worcester, MA, 2001), 34.

many Charlestonians, who owed him sums ranging from forty to two thousand dollars. Even before the Revolution, however, Cannon had prospered. In 1765, local shipwrights completed construction of the *Cannon*, a twenty-five ton schooner that expanded its owner's commercial role from producer to conveyor of goods. Cannon bridged the often-gaping breach between mechanic and merchant interests; his vessel, anchored in Charleston Harbor, attested to his considerable worth.

Though Johnson and Cannon were glaring examples of the economic disparity between artisans of Charleston's unofficial legislative bodies and those who remained politically anonymous, they were by no means the only council members or congressmen who embodied this disparity. One glance inside the residence of provincial congressman Mark Morris, in fact, announced this disparity much more clearly than figures of net worth or stock holdings on an estate inventory. Though not at all a financial peer of either Johnson or Cannon, Morris adorned the front room of his home with tables and desks of mahogany, tea stands, and chests. Framed prints hung on the wall. He displayed sets of chinaware in his backroom, which doubled as his library, and contained the congressman's numerous volumes. Nor was Morris bereft of human property. His slaves—Isaac, John, Prince, and David—were all skilled carpenters, bricklayers, and painters, and accounted for one half of Morris's estate worth of £585, more than five times the average worth of most other Charleston artisans.

Likewise, though also worth much less than either Johnson or Cannon, upholsterer Edward Weyman's economic (and thus social) position within Charleston's artisan community also allowed him to prosper from the partial democratization of the city's politics in the immediate pre-Revolutionary era. A substantial property holder,

Weyman, despite his stance as a “zealous whig,” indulged in the fineries and baubles that distanced him from less affluent artisans, and had, by his death in 1783, amassed an estate worth nearly £400. The mahogany tables, twenty-two chairs, library of books, and backgammon table that adorned his home clearly distinguished Weyman as a man of taste and worth. A slaveowner and wartime confidant of city patriarch William H. Drayton, Weyman’s status and social connections earmarked the affluent mechanic as a spokesman for the mechanic community, as was evidenced by his election to the Provincial Congress in 1774.

By contrast, the decorative tastes and estate values of Charleston’s less successful artisans are much more difficult to trace. Available evidence, however, suggests that artisans who occupied more modest economic straits than their elected betters not only failed to reap the fruits of a widened political sphere in the late pre-Revolutionary era but also continued to deal with pressing financial crises throughout the early national period. While wealthy artisans reaped real political gains in the aftermath of the tea parties, those who did not—the majority of Charleston’s mechanics, in fact—experienced little political empowerment and dealt with discouraging economic conditions and a grave struggle for professional viability.

As was the case before the tea party era, economic competition from enslaved black labor depressed the power of artisan labor well into the early national era. Throughout the immediate post-Revolutionary period, mechanics’ groups peppered the state legislature with petitions to redress their economic grievances. These petitions—aside from their immediate purpose of ameliorating the mechanics’ impaired position within the local economy—were, in fact, resolute policy statements by men who

otherwise tread quite softly through the historical record. In 1783, the Master House-Carpenters and Bricklayers implored the assembly to rid the streets of “jobbing Negroe tradesmen,” who precluded white artisans from profit by accepting assignments “for very little more than the Materials would cost.”¹¹⁰ The master-carpenters and bricklayers begged for the enforcement of earlier legislation that had strictly prohibited “negroes from undertaking work on their own Account.”¹¹¹ One decade later, the city’s master coopers decried the same debilitating effects of slave labor on the economic prospects of white artisans. Convinced that the latitude afforded slave craftsmen to “self-traffick” caused “great and manifest Injury” to the “mechanical part of the Community,” the coopers—much like the carpenters ten years earlier—beseeched the assembly to restrict contracted slave labor.¹¹² Decades after Charleston’s tea parties, then, the popular empowerment of the immediate pre-Revolutionary era had brought little socioeconomic amelioration to Charleston’s artisans who struggled to remain competitive in the local economy.

While a few artisans, then, rode the popularizing currents of the pre-Revolutionary period to unprecedented political heights, most failed to reap real and tangible benefits. For every Daniel Cannon, whose newly found political clout only supplemented an already assured economic security as one of the city’s most accomplished artisans, there were others who struggled not for political accolade but for basic economic well-being. This divergence of artisan experience in the tea parties’ wake presents in fine relief not only the limited sociopolitical gains of the era but also the

¹¹⁰ “Petition of the Master Coopers’ Society, 1793,” Item 64, Microfilm Roll ST 1367, Drawer 104, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² “Petition of the House-Carpenters and Bricklayers of Charleston, 1783,” Item 159, Microfilm Roll ST 1360, Drawer 104, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC.

extent to which internal, socioeconomic stratifications parsed members of the mechanic class into a variety of primarily economic subgroups.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment's Breakwater

Popular empowerment came to pre-Revolutionary Charleston in the same manner in which the tea had left: by waves. It radiated outward from the events of the tea party era and brought public authority to protestors, and later, specific political gains to wealthy tradesmen. In two waves, popular participation empowered Charleston's many, and, subsequently, its few. The first phase of this "out of doors" movement was, in its own way, no less substantial than the latter period of concrete political gain. That later artisans gained political legitimacy by their participation in legislative bodies like the General Council or Provincial Congress did not lessen the importance of the initial and broader empowerment of Charlestonians in the street. The men, women, and perhaps even children who mobbed sea captains and shamed city merchants must have perceived their authority—felt it, even. But for most, this initial public authority did not transform into eventual and tangible political gain.

Whether most artisans even desired further political amelioration, is, of course, a relevant concern. They had been virtual participants for some time, and had shown little inclination to alter the local sociopolitical hierarchy. Whatever the answer, however, the fact remains that no mechanic of ordinary means became a member of either of the city's de facto legislative bodies. From local luminaries like William Johnson to the less wealthy but nevertheless well-to-do Edward Weyman, the artisan contingents of both the

General Council and First Provincial Congress were enclaves of the financially secure. While day laborers perhaps did much of the mobbing in Charleston, none became councilors or congressmen.

The changes in Charleston's political culture during the tea party era, then, were quite circumscribed. Assuredly, the second phase of popular empowerment allowed artisans to gain elected office. Though Charleston's officeholding artisans may not have been born to a social station befitting an elected official, acquired affluence compensated for low birth during the tea party era. Even this tangible gain, however—the puncturing of a strict political culture wherein membership and relevance was tied fast to birth and station—had definite limits. Mechanics of more ordinary economic standing could not hope to partake equally of the extant opportunity for political empowerment. In Charleston, the waves of popular empowerment broke upon the rock of socioeconomic difference.

As many “faces” of the Charleston mob remain hazy, so too do the motives of crowd participants. No single cause, it seems, moved mechanics and other Charlestonians to assemble and mob in favor of nonimportation in 1773 and 1774. The reasons why townspeople stood behind Christopher Gadsden at the Exchange in December 1773 or terrified Captain Maitland the next summer were complex, and did not always meld exactly to the interpretive dichotomies subsequently set forth by many “conflict” or “consensus” scholars. By 1773, assuredly, crowd members and leaders had both concluded that public action was an appropriate response to British transgressions; their actions were often well orchestrated and constrained. Yet this restraint was noticeably absent in July 1774. Furthermore, it seems that any protest against the

metropole by members of diverse socioeconomic groups within Charleston could have signaled a momentary unity among various interests as easily as it could some absolute ideological and lasting community-wide accord. British tea and all for which it stood hastened this coalescing of colonial interests, allowing planters, artisans, and others to form a united front against an external enemy. Whether the ties that bound this alliance that transcended socioeconomic divides were anything more than urges to defend the community against an external threat is subject to debate. Crowd participants, certainly, while perhaps sharing some reasons for mobbing or defaming a merchant mariner, may have held other reasons for their actions. The actors of Charleston's tea parties arrived on the same historical stage by different prompts, varying cues.

Conversely, however, the actions of Charleston's artisans cannot be immediately construed as direct plays for popular or political empowerment. It is incorrect to assume that their efforts were—originally, at least—conscious attempts at sociopolitical amelioration. And yet, consciously or otherwise, their participation in the tea party crowds afforded craftsmen a very real form of public authority in 1773 and 1774. Such an accomplishment did not make Charleston craftsmen unique—as Alfred Young has demonstrated, artisans in other cities made similar gains during the nonimportation era. But in Charleston, where artisans had long dealt with not only constricted political rights and the economic pressures caused by cheap imports, but also the debilitating effects of slave labor on their economic viability as wage laborers, the tea parties afforded mechanics a forum in which they sounded a long stifled note of socioeconomic frustration.

The reasons why artisans participated in Charleston's tea parties were, in fact, far too muddled to fit the parameters of any reductionist interpretive framework. Artisans were not required—nor were they likely—to have protested either solely for the betterment of the community or the amelioration of their own socioeconomic class: perhaps by their protests, they did both. Viewed in this light, Charleston's artisans remain complex, their circumstances intricate, and their presence in the historical record more conflicted and ambiguous—that is to say, more human.

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