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Charleston merchants 1790 – 1819: The structure of a profession

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the professional trajectory of merchants in Early Republic South Carolina. The goal is to show that southern commerce in this era is more complex than what has been claimed in the current scholarship, which is dominated by discussions of northern merchants. This has been done by examining Charleston Directories from 1790 to 1819 and tracking individual merchants, their professions prior to and after being merchants, and their addresses through the entire period. Quantitatively examining the data compiled shows a complexity and level of risk in middling commerce that is absent in scholarship on Early Republic commerce in the South. Showing this level of dynamism illustrates the importance of understanding southern middling commerce in Early Republic America. It also shows that more research on middling merchants is vital for a full understanding of American export trade in the Early Republic.

INTRODUCTION

Florian Charles Mey died in Charleston, South Carolina in 1819. As a fixture of the city's merchant community for nearly forty years, through times of incredible uncertainty and turmoil, his will offers a snapshot of what many merchants in South Carolina hoped to accomplish. The wealth he bestowed on Antoinette Caroline Waters, one thousand dollars, shows how deeply he cared for her, indicative of close relation. His estate disposed of five slaves. Windsor, his "old and faithful servant man," was given \$100, all of Mey's "wearing apparel," and passed into the care of Mey's sons. This suggests that he cared enough for Windsor to ensure he had a place to stay after Mey passed. The other slaves, ranging from a "cooking wench" to his wharf servant, were each handed \$50 and a suit of mourning; each of those gifts betokens Mey's success in commerce and perceived social standing. After the executors of the estate—his "friend" Captain John Eras and Mey's two sons—paid for the funeral expenses and Mey's debts, the rest of his estate was divided between his two sons.ⁱ The details in Mey's will offer an interesting glimpse into his affairs; the events of his life are equally intriguing. Mey "arrived in America penniless from Danzig," at which point Michael Kalteisen, the founder of the German Friendly Society, found Mey a position working for the merchant Alexander Gillon.ⁱⁱ He eventually made enough money to open a trading firm with a partner, John Splatt Cripps selling goods imported from Amsterdam.ⁱⁱⁱ Mey provided supplies for patriot ships in 1778 and most likely throughout the American Revolution.^{iv} More than this, he was a member of the German Fusiliers and was present at the Siege of Savannah in 1779.^v Mey's service is remarkable when compared to so many other merchants from Charleston in this time, many remained loyal to the crown due to close trade ties with

England. Mey gambled on liberty – or opportunity -- and came out on top in the new Republic.

Despite everything we know about Florian Mey, there is much that we do not know. His career offers a prime example of how understudied middling Charleston merchants, South Carolina in the Early Republic have been. Historians have written so much on trade out of Boston, Philadelphia and New York that the broad strokes of Mey's story make one wonder why Charleston merchants have been so neglected. One reason for this is that scholarly focus on Charleston and other areas of the South has often been centered on planters and politicians. Without a doubt, they were a dynamic and exciting group, but they were only a minority of the population. Their story cannot stand for all. Historians have focused so intently on men like the Pinckneys and Henry Laurens that they gloss over a crucial aspect of what fueled Charleston: middling commerce. Relations between Americans and the British, their historical trade partner, were often less than friendly in this period, a problem which merchants had to navigate. A boon for neutral American traders regardless of location, the French Wars had a large impact on commerce. The slave trade boomed in South Carolina in 1807 creating tremendous opportunity for merchants.^{vi} This was a dynamic period of turmoil and change for commerce in Charleston, yet little attention has been paid to it

Many scholars have studied Charleston, though few focus on the Early Republican period. Two of the classic works are *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* by George C. Rogers^{vii} and *Charleston! Charleston!* By Walter J. Fraser Jr. Rogers'^{viii} analysis ably describes elite society from the founding of the city to the Civil War. What this study leaves out unfortunately is almost everyone else in the city, with the Pinckneys to solely decide the

fate of Charleston. This is badly misleading. By contrast Fraser's work is one of immense detail to the point that it reads like an encyclopedia entry. It is invaluable as an in-depth chronology of events, yet it misses the opportunity for deep analysis. Even with the detail Fraser includes, middling merchants are somehow left out of the majority of events. More recently Emma Hart's book *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World*, focuses on the urban character of colonial Charleston and how that character influenced society.^{ix} Hart discusses how the Charleston was vital to building culture in the low country and not simply an extension of British society. Hart's study breaks the notion that the city of Charleston was simply feeding off the plantations, that the city played a role in the formation of low country society. Regardless of how much she focuses on Charleston, Hart misses the opportunity to elaborate on the middling merchant's role in building Charleston both physically and culturally. Merchants were vital to the export economy of Charleston, though they receive little attention in this literature and are often relegated to the periphery of events.

In addition to the studies on Charleston, there have been interesting books about merchants in the Early Republic. One of the works that does cover Charleston and merchant activity in the Early Republic is Frederick Cople Jaher's *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles*.^x This work examines the upper class in several large U.S. cities, considering topics ranging from what professions the upper class comprised to the structure and influence of upper class society. This great comparative study details the influence of Charleston merchants, but it only assesses the very rich. What remains outside of Jaher's work is almost everyone else, including middling merchants. James R. Fichter's *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed*

Anglo-American Capitalism approaches similar ideas from a different angle, considering how capitalism in America shaped by trade with the East Indies.^{xi} Fichter looks closely at how the French Revolution gave American merchants the opportunity to gain a leg up in the East Indies. His study explains how this led to American industry in the North. Again, southern merchants' role in this are overlooked. Likewise, Thomas M. Doerflinger's *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* provides a close study of the mercantile profession delving into topics of the culture, mobility and evolution of Philadelphia's merchant class.^{xii} Doerflinger does include a discussion of the merchants of the South within the book. However, they are painted as lacking the spirit of entrepreneurship. According to Doerflinger this prevented them from having the same impact on America as their northern counterparts. Doerflinger's assumptions are based on only a cursory investigation of Southern merchants and lack the necessary research for solid conclusions to be made.

Each of these works makes valuable contributions, but their shortcomings are clear. When Early Republic commerce is investigated, historians have focused on New England and Mid-Atlantic merchants to the near exclusion of the merchants of the South. This focus has stemmed from the introduction of industry in the United States, which was primarily in New York and Pennsylvania. Northern merchants championed this cause, thus garnering the attention of historians. By comparison the focus in a great deal of scholarship on the South centers on: plantations, slavery and the political conflicts surrounding those issues.^{xiii} This is probably because the export trade boomed in colonial times and slave-driven cotton plantations dominated the economy of much of the South from the introduction of the cotton gin in 1794 to the Civil War. Both groups of scholars have ignored the role of middling

merchants in port cities like Charleston. This leaves room to investigate why Southern merchants supposedly deviate from their Northern counterparts. Were they less innovative or determined than their Northern counterparts? Did they smile upon the cotton cash-cow and grow complacent? Many of the explanations fall to the plantation economy of the South. Few delve into the cities, thus overlooking the middling merchants who were an integral part of urban economies.

Given the lack of investigation in this area, little is known about Southern merchants. This study aims to correct that, laying a foundation for future work on the topic of the merchant community within Charleston, South Carolina. It analyzes basic information about this group especially: where they lived and what the professional mobility of the group looked like. To add to this narrative, I highlight some individual members of the merchant community. This data not only provides essential information about the structure and basic dynamics of the merchant community. It also shows that more in-depth analysis of the group can pay big rewards in understanding this linchpin of southern economy and society.

Charleston merchants were not simply an extension of the planter class of the low country. They did not exist to sell the indigo, rice and cotton produced by the plantation economy. It is true that South Carolina was an export-based economy but, as Emma Hart argues, Charleston merchants played a role independent from the planters—a role the planters depended on.^{xiv} Charleston and the merchants of the city created a place of culture for the gentry of the low country that planters needed to be considered refined.^{xv} Planters relied on merchants to handle their personal finances in the city. In several letters from Charles Kershaw, a merchant/factor in Charleston, to Mrs. Allston, the wife of a rice planter, he carefully discusses various Allston finances. Kershaw informed Mrs. Allston of the status

of the family's debt, balances between the Allstons and various tradesmen, and he even encloses cash for the family.^{xvi} Kershaw provided the Allston family with news on the price of rice and goods for the family business, but also from Charleston, Europe, and family travelling the country.^{xvii} Harold Woodman in *King Cotton and His Retainers* suggests that the factor of a planter, often the planter's merchant as well, had a close business relationship with planters, but personal as well.^{xviii} In correspondence there was often a personal note attached in which personal favors, health and family were often inquired about.^{xix}

Long before the American Revolution Charleston merchants enjoyed success and prestige. Most great merchants who worked out of Charleston were British or worked for British firms. They saw Charleston "as an excellent place for making a fortune to be spent in England."^{xx} Many ran operations from London and delegated day-to-day operations to factors in the city. A Charleston factor, according to Leila Sellers "was not only a merchant, but a banker and broker as well."^{xxi} These men: found buyers and sellers, negotiated prices, made judgements on the profitability of goods and had the authority to extend credit or demand cash/specie depending on the situation. Communication across the Atlantic was delayed for weeks, which meant that these men had tremendous leeway to do business, as well as massive responsibility.

Like most other cities, the coming of the Revolution meant that those in Charleston had to either side with Britain or the Revolutionaries. Many of the Loyalists of Charleston either fled or hid their allegiance after 1776. When the British captured Charleston in 1780, the loyalists emerged, gained government positions, and resumed commerce in privileged positions. After peace came in 1783, these Loyalists were mainly forced into exile. Many had their properties seized.^{xxii} Though some escaped with only the humiliation of a fine.^{xxiii}

The activity of Loyalist and British merchants during the period of occupation left a bad taste in the mouths of the Patriots.

In the 1790's Charleston was generally distrustful of commerce and merchants. Prior to the Revolution, merchants had enjoyed prosperity and a great deal of influence. From the 1790's onward, that respect was mostly gone. Merchants who had been tied closely to British firms went back to England. Those who decided to stay in Charleston retired from commerce or adopted professions that were less reviled.^{xxiv} The merchants of the 1790's were mostly new arrivals from England or Scotland who entered Charleston to gamble in the hostile export trade. These arrivals had access to foreign investment to start their businesses and friendly connections to British ports as well.^{xxv} The composition of the merchant class of Charleston then was mostly immigrants, though native merchants stuck with the profession as well. As Jaher writes, natives from Charleston rarely participated in trade and did so with great reluctance.^{xxvi}

Piecing together the social characteristics of merchants of Early Republican Charleston is difficult. What is known about the Charleston merchant from 1790 to 1819 is general, though recent scholarship has begun defining the group's identity. In her article on the merchants as a middle class, Jennifer J. Goloboy described the population as international and "originally [lacking] strong local ties."^{xxvii} She also explains that, like many others in the Early Republic, Charleston merchants tended to move on from the city after only a few years. With these characteristics it is easy to see why little work has been done on these men. Once they arrive in Charleston, merchants are fairly easy for historians to track. Before they arrive and after they leave the city, the amount of work necessary to attain accurate data on them is much greater, given the lack of meticulous records being kept wherever they happened to go.

The bulk of this study was carried out through a spread sheet using information from Charleston directories transcribed by James W. Hagy, *People and Professions of Charleston, South Carolina, 1782-1802.*, *Directories for Charleston, South Carolina for the Years 1803, 1806, 1807, 1809, and 1813*, and *Charleston, South Carolina City Directories for the Years 1816, 1819, 1822, 1825, and 1829* from Genealogical Publishing Co. compiled in 1999, 2000 and 2002 respectively. These directories contain all free heads of household, their listed address(es) and their occupation. These directories are aimed at being comprehensive, meaning all merchants that resided in Charleston from 1790-1819 are documented. These sources leave out many people: slaves, children, most women and itinerant peoples. The frequency that the directories were recorded in Charleston allows close tracking of the population of professions in concrete numbers. To ensure the accuracy of the study, census data of Charleston County from 1790 and 1800 was used to increase the accuracy of the merchant population numbers. These censuses contained: most free, white residents along with their ages along with the number of slaves per household.

Using this information, the data could answer several questions, including: Who were the merchants? Where did they live? What was their occupation? While they are an important first step, these inquiries give only an idea of the individual identity of these men. Growing from the basic individual identities and isolating the merchant population, the heart of this study lies in tracking their professional trajectories.

To answer these questions a Charleston Merchant Spreadsheet was compiled, recording all merchants listed between 1790 and 1819. Each entry was tracked through the thirty years this study covers, recording professions and address(es). There was an effort to

correct for minor errors in the recording of the original documents or transcribing into a digital format. With sufficient evidence, separate entries were consolidated to increase the accuracy of the analysis. For instance, Charles Florian Mey was listed at 40 Pinckney St. in 1790 and Florian Mey was listed at the same residence and profession in 1793. Those entries were found to be similar enough to condense, given that no other Mey's were reported in the city. After all merchants listed in Charleston were collected, they were tracked to other professions and the same data were recorded (i.e., name, profession, and address). To ensure accuracy in pairing people across years and reduce redundancies, other evidence such as censuses were consulted. With this, we can determine if there are typical patterns in the professional trajectory of merchants. Are there jobs that the merchant community recruited from more than others? What types of professions did merchants tend to transition into, or did they typically remain merchants for long periods of time?

Observing the population numbers provides a snapshot of what was happening on the macro scale in commerce. Although revealing, the more interesting content is found when delving into the specific characteristics of that population. Most of these men dealt with other nations when it came to their export trade. The French Wars, along with American foreign policy, had drastic effects on merchants all over the world. Indicated in Table 1, the merchant community in Charleston more than doubled from: 129 in 1790 to 266 in 1819. The expansion of rice and indigo, the boom of cotton production within South Carolina, and the expansion westward in both Carolinas explain why the number of merchants in large ports expanded. The French Wars, however, created an amazing mercantile opportunity through re-export trade.

Table 1 Charleston Merchants by Year

| Year | 1790 | 1794 | 1796 | 1801 | 1803 | 1807 | 1809 | 1813 | 1816 | 1819 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| # of Merchants | 129 | 117 | 167 | 213 | 191 | 286 | 252 | 166 | 241 | 266 |

Under the flag of neutrality, American traders were able to capitalize on the open market in Europe and the Caribbean.^{xxviii} Interesting growth comes from the first half of the Early Republic. In 1807 the number of Charleston merchants had already doubled from 1790 and was greater than it would be in 1819. The slave trade boom from 1803 to 1807 was a major factor in the increase of the merchant population by 50%.^{xxix} Together, these events created an atmosphere that made the merchant trade not only lucrative, but easy to break into. What hurt the merchant community within Charleston was passage of the Embargo Act of 1807 and the ensuing war with England. 40% of Charleston merchants in 1807 had left the occupation by 1813. The drop in the merchant population meant that only the most stable and cunning merchants could keep up their trade. Unlike their Northern counterparts, Charleston merchants were unable to effectively invest in industry and were forced to wait out the storm of war.^{xxx} The significant rebound of the merchant population after the end of the War of 1812 indicates the draw of Charleston commerce and the opportunities available.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHARLESTON MERCHANTS

Investigating the ins and outs of movement among to and from the mercantile profession is essential to understanding what the people within commerce were working for and what their opportunities were. There are two main questions that should be asked when looking at this type of data. First and fairly straight forward, what professions did merchants have before becoming merchants? Furthermore, what did merchants do after leaving the mercantile trade? The latter question is more complex, but we will address to the extent allowed by the current data.

The recruitment trends found in Charleston do not match well to those found in northern ports such as Philadelphia. Thomas Doerflinger notes in his book *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, that there were four main routes to become a merchant in Early Republic Philadelphia. His first is what he considers a “young man of fortune”: someone from a wealthy family that becomes a merchant.^{xxxii} This avenue was fairly uncommon in Charleston after the American Revolution. Investigating the families that were involved in the merchant trade for years, there are few examples of this. Thomas Corbett Sr. was a merchant for at least a decade before becoming the President of the South Carolina Insurance Company in 1807. His son became a merchant, though only for a short time. Related to the young men of fortune were those from good families that did not have much money. This avenue is not apparent in Charleston, likely because of the stigma attached to the profession at the time.

The biggest similarity in recruitment between Charleston and Philadelphia is the men from lesser trades that became merchants.^{xxxiii} Shop keepers and grocers were common entrants to the merchant trade in Charleston. From 1790 to 1819, 118 store keepers and

grocers became merchants, which amount to around ten percent of the merchant population. Compare this figure to Doerflinger's findings in 1774: He found that 13.7% of merchants were previously retailers.^{xxxiii} This makes sense because these professions are closely linked. Merchants brought the goods into Charleston from overseas in bulk and sold them to dry goods stores and grocers, depending on the nature of the merchandise. Many times this was done on credit, which meant that the store keepers and grocers had the opportunity to strengthen their professional network and build good reputations among others that worked in commerce. These things are essential for breaking into the mercantile profession. In Philadelphia, merchants were often recruited from artisan professions, which was uncommon in Charleston. There were only twenty such examples in the thirty years studied.

Doerflinger's final category was men with foreign contacts that became merchants. In Charleston, this was the most common transition and happened mostly due to immigration. This group comprised between 40-60% of the men that became merchants from 1790 to 1819. One such immigrant, though not from Europe, was Peter Ayrault. Although he was born in Rhode Island, he took up residence in Charleston during the height of the mercantile boom. He was a merchant from 1803 until his death in 1817, weathering the steep decline in trade during the War of 1812. Ayrault was led a seemingly modest lifestyle and maintained a small household with no record of slaves.^{xxxiv} Like our earlier example, Florian Mey, many immigrants came from Europe. James Burges hailed from Scotland and petitioned naturalization in 1789.^{xxxv} He was a part of a mercantile firm in 1794 and operated as a merchant until his death in 1804. Burges was a man of means; after his debts were paid, he gave large sums of money to several close relatives and friends.^{xxxvi} These men provide a few examples of how immigration shaped the merchant population of Charleston during the

Early Republic. One maintained residency in another state and the other emigrated from Europe. Neither was particularly affluent, but operated as merchants for a significant period of time through tumultuous years. Interestingly, immigration to Charleston mirrors that of immigration to the Northern ports.

This trend in immigration reveals another similarity that Charleston merchants shared with those in northern ports like Philadelphia. The influx of European goods brought with it merchants from all over Europe. In Philadelphia, the British flooded the dry goods market in ways that had not been seen even prior to the revolution.^{xxxvii} They were the main importers. However, they were joined by merchants from continental Europe. In Charleston, the proportion of English and Scottish immigrants was far greater than other nations; although there was still an international character to the community.^{xxxviii} While immigration was a large factor in both Charleston and Philadelphia, there were differences in their methods. The British tended to send their own agents with their goods into Philadelphia.^{xxxix} This meant that they did not have to extend too much credit to foreign merchants. It also meant additional competition for the merchants that already lived in Philadelphia. In Charleston, the “boom years” brought immigrants from Europe, if only for a short time, to make their own fortunes and move on.^{xl} Immigration in northern ports and Charleston indicates that even if their methods were different, the merchant populations were in flux in the Early Republic. The literature on commerce in Charleston during the Early Republic tends to agree that merchants came and went fairly regularly. Jennifer Goloboy states that merchants often “tried their fortunes in the city for a brief time, and then left to retire or try again elsewhere.”^{xli} The immigration patterns of merchants will not be covered here, though just as

understanding their professional trajectory is important to developing a better understanding of Charleston merchants, so too is understanding why they arrive and why they leave.

If most men that entered the mercantile trade were immigrants, shopkeepers and grocers, what jobs did merchants tend to transition into? This is a far more dynamic, complicated and ultimately problematic topic. A discussion about the staying power or lack thereof of Charleston merchants is a topic that deserves far more study, though we shall attempt to draw conclusions as best we can. There are several questions that should be asked when contemplating this issue. Why do merchants leave the trade? Is it because they had a greater goal that required more capital or a larger professional network? If this is the case, it would mean that a statement could be made of the perceived value of merchants within Charleston society as well as the values of the merchants themselves. Did people leave the profession because they found greater opportunities outside of Charleston? This, is a common trend, especially among immigrant groups that enter America in the 19th Century. There is a case to be made of the competitive nature of commerce and many aspiring merchants simply just washed out. One of the final options is that many merchants saw that there was money to be made, felt comfortable with the competition and became established enough to make commerce a lifelong career. Past these options, many of the merchants that disappeared from the records simply died. In this section we will attempt to get an idea of the answers to these questions by looking at the data collected from the Charleston Directories.

Many shop keepers and grocers became merchants, but a sizeable amount of these men went back to being shop keepers and grocers after only a short amount of time. A solid explanation for this transition from merchant to shop keeper is simply lack of risk. The

largest spike for this transition came when 42 of the 286 merchants, approximately 15%, in 1807 were then shop keepers in 1809. In 1808, the importation of foreign slaves was abolished and many merchants that dealt exclusively in the foreign slave trade had to either move to other trading or leave the profession.^{xlii} The U.S. embargo on foreign trade coincided with the flood of merchants into store keeper professions. This was likely an effort to avoid dealing directly in foreign commerce. There also seems to have been the notion of familiarity with some of these merchants. Five out of the eight merchants that became shopkeepers between 1796 and 1801 had been shopkeepers prior to being merchants. Likewise, almost a third of the merchants that became shop keepers between 1807 and 1809 had been shop keepers previously. It is likely that these shop keepers took advantage of a booming mercantile market and when it was over, they went back to what they were comfortable with, being shop keepers. All of the events described here illustrate economic instability and uncertainty, which is not for everyone. What these data indicate is a fluidity that existed between these professions; store keepers and merchants worked so closely together that the boundaries were muddied and easily crossed.

The fluidity of these professions is evident within the Charleston directories. Compiler, Professor James W. Hagy notes that the recording official of 1796 must have had a different idea of what shop keepers and merchants were than previous officials, as there is a spike in the use of the terms.^{xliii} The fluidity of use for the terms “merchant” and “shop keeper” is a tricky problem for this type of analysis. Normally the difference between the professions would have been apparent. Merchants operated on a far larger scale than store keepers. They rented space on ships, bought and sold large amounts of cotton and rice, and imported goods from Europe and the Caribbean. Store keepers and grocers bought goods on

credit from merchants and sold them on a small scale. However, there was nothing stopping a merchant from maintaining a dry goods or grocery store in addition to their mercantile profession. This could explain the perceived connection of the officials that took these records down.

As opposed to those who transition to and from other occupations, what differentiates people who continue on the merchant path? In the mercantile trade of Charleston there is a trend that does much to address that question. Between 30-45% of merchants continued in the profession from year-to-year. The most “stable” period was from 1813-1816, when 45.8% of merchants continued in the trade. These men were clearly the most dedicated to the profession as this was the point when the merchant population began recovering from the War of 1812. This population of merchants likely formed the base of the community. They would have served in the Chamber of Commerce or on boards of directors for banks, topics which will be discussed later. What is remarkable about this “stable” portion of the Charleston merchant community is that it is small in comparison to cities like Philadelphia. Doerflinger shows that Philadelphia’s merchant population has a much larger base of stable merchants. Of the 140 merchants in 1785, a total of 83 had been merchants in 1774, which is 59.3%.^{xliv} That completely overshadows the amount of continuous Charleston merchants within the period covered by this study.

Doerflinger argues that merchants in northern ports had a tremendous amount of adversity to overcome to be successful. He also argues that innovation separated northern merchants from southern merchants due to lack of competition in southern ports. This lack of competition was a result of low opportunities for social mobility in the few large urban areas that there were. What the figures in this study illustrate, however, is that competition

was high during the boom years of Charleston commerce with upwards of 65% of merchants leaving the trade, far more than in Philadelphia. European and Caribbean trade upheaval stemming from the French Wars—along with a steady influx of immigrants—sowed the seeds for steep competition in southern markets. Although immigration accounted for much of the turnover in the merchant population in Charleston, Philadelphia was not left unmarked by new arrivals. Doerflinger points to diversification in manufacturing and similar pursuits as additional evidence of northern merchants’ distinctiveness from southerners; however, that “distinctiveness” is not absolute. A small number of Charleston merchants diversified their interests without manufacturing.

So far we have discussed the major trends of the professional trajectory of merchants, which show dynamics that are comparable to merchants in other cities in this time period. The analysis to this point has comprised roughly 60% of the merchant population, leaving a strong minority unaccounted for. Where does the atypical merchants’ trajectory take them? This line of inquiry abounds with possibilities. One foundational question lies with the definition of success within the merchant community. Does success mean flourishing in foreign commerce while living comfortably in Charleston? What if the definition of success were to leverage wealth to transition into another profession entirely?

There is a notion that merchants were driven towards the goal of becoming planters, rather than simply dealing in the products that planters produced. Sally E. Hadden has a discussion of this in her article on the merchants that formed the Charleston Chamber of Commerce.^{xlv} Her argument firmly relies on the notion that there is a “planter class” and a “middle class” to which merchants belong. In this structure, merchants are keenly aware of the “class divisions” and desire to ascend to the upper tier. Emma Hart contests that notion

by highlighting the opportunities available in the urban economy. Given such opportunities, the middle class, merchants included, did not necessarily seek to become planters.^{xlvi} Hart discusses the urban space of Charleston in the British Atlantic world, but the notion could still be applicable to Early Republic merchants. While it is worth mentioning, the idea of class development in this early period is fraught with debate and is beyond the scope of the current paper. Instead of interclass struggles, we turn to intraclass structure. In a period of time where Charleston merchants came and went frequently, can we identify a core set of unifying values?

The data put together in this study can be used to draw conclusions on the motivations of the merchant community as a whole. From 1790 to 1819, only sixteen merchants became planters within Charleston. What does this mean? In terms of raw numbers, sixteen of the roughly 1200 individual merchants in thirty years are not very many, but the numbers may be misleading. As Emma Hart discussed in her book *Building Charleston*, planters in the low country commonly held residences in Charleston. Charleston was the nexus of commercial activity for the low country that connected the staple export economy of South Carolina's plantations to the finished goods both from Great Britain and Charleston.^{xlvii} The fashionable elites of necessity maintained a residence in the cultural heart of South Carolina. Drawing from Hart's reasoning, merchants later listed as planters in the Charleston Directories likely held land in the South Carolina low country. We know of sixteen merchants who fell into this category. However, there may be more, given that not all relevant data are available or have been analyzed. It has already been stated that a large percentage of merchants are missing from the data. These men most likely left Charleston for better opportunities. It is possible that some of the merchants that are unaccounted for

moved west, where land was cheaper and more plentiful to become planters there. These data indicate that we cannot simply look at population figures to support the merchant/planter transition. Furthermore, we cannot generalize that all merchants desired to become planters based on the careers of a few. More research is necessary to draw further conclusions.

Whether merchants as a whole desired to become planters or not raises the question of ambition and goals. A career in commerce implies the desire to accumulate wealth through trade. Thomas Doerflinger and James R. Fichter argue in their respective books that wealth accumulated in mercantile trade was used to advance industry.^{xlviii} In South Carolina, the planters looked down on merchants as nothing more than glorified shop keepers. If certain merchants internalized that idea, would they seek to improve their perceived standing and further distance themselves from shopkeepers and the like? In his book *The Urban Establishment*, Frederick Cople Jaher concentrated on the elites within major American cities and how they evolved over time. In most cases, the elites were not idle with their wealth and, in the case of Charleston, these men became instrumental in banking.^{xlix} Jaher investigates the upper-crust merchants of Charleston, but they only form a small percentage of the overall profession. The question this raises is: How active are middling merchants in banking? In 1792, the president, Daniel DeSaussure, and half of the directors that ran the Charleston branch of the Bank of the United States (BUS) were merchants; in 1794, eight of the twelve bank directors were merchants.¹

Being active in banking at the local level provided many benefits for the merchants involved. The fact that so many of the officers and directors of BUS were merchants means that the bank would be oriented toward commerce. Simply being active in the bank gave middling or rising merchants the ability to rub shoulders with and form relationships with

men like Daniel DeSaussure or John Splatt Cripps, men that were established in trade. Becoming ingratiated with men such as these certainly had the potential of opening doors for aspiring merchants. Access to credit and the contacts of established and nationally renowned men was invaluable for those in commerce at the turn of the nineteenth century. Being a director within a bank, a merchant could influence the policies of the bank and use it to their advantage. This was the case in 1801, when the policy involving public debt transfers. As Jaher mentions, speculating in public debt was one of the major activities of merchants. The bank announced that it would “receive transfers of the public debt in trust... free of expence(sp).”^{li} The benefits involved in banking were enough for ambitious merchants to participate in and found these institutions.

Using the Charleston Directories and carefully tracking people year to year reveals interesting trends in the merchant population. This research illustrates how much historians do not know about the merchants of the Early Republic. For instance, these data indicate individual merchants were highly mobile which could be due to the volatility of foreign trade, the prices of their handled commodities, or the doors that success in commerce opened. The data show that even though the Atlantic world was in a state of chaos due to the French Wars and American foreign policy, there was a modicum of stability, with many merchants staying in the profession until their deaths. There are still a great number of unanswered questions, however. We need to find if these trends were the result of a general consensus on the ideal profession (i.e. planters) or something else entirely. To accomplish this, historians need to find evidence of the motivations of individuals if only indirectly. These things are well researched in New England, Philadelphia, and New York, but virtually unknown in the Southern colonies.

Beyond indications of professional trends, the Charleston Directories are a valuable resource for investigating settling habits. With the ability to follow people from one year to the next, we can find when and if they move within the city. From this, we can track a correlation between an individual's profession and where they live. We can track if someone changed professions and moved within the same time frame, which could demonstrate the profession's effect on settlement. Moving from an individual level to the level of the city, we can study how the growth of Charleston affects the settlement patterns of people within their professions. In the years between 1790 and 1820, Charleston grew from a space that was mostly situated on the South and East end of the peninsula, to taking over the peninsula and spreading northward. The network of inland rivers and canals was improved upon and the native population was moved or pacified, allowing Charleston to spread inland. The purpose of Charleston merchants was to be the link between the low country in South Carolina with European trade and by extension, the rest of the Atlantic. As canals were built and improved upon, the emphasis of trade shifted from the docks on the Cooper River side, where most of the goods arrived, inland. This shift is illustrated by the movement of merchants' residences, which often acted as their business locations and shows where their focuses lay.

The character of the settlement of Charleston merchants is similar to that of other cities in the North. In Philadelphia, merchants could have easily lived further away from the center of town and walked into their work every day, but overall they preferred to live in the heart of the city.^{lii} Doerflinger found that Philadelphian merchants did not cluster together, but were spread fairly evenly throughout the city.^{liii} Similar to the trend in Philadelphia, Charleston merchants tended to reside at the heart of the commercial sector. What this meant in Charleston is that merchants tended to be far enough away from the wharves to be away

from the seedier elements of town, (e.g., dockworkers, sailors and the like) but near enough to whom they distributed the goods, the shop keepers. It should come as no surprise that Charleston merchants wanted to be close to the markets. Merchants did not settle in clusters per se, but they certainly favored certain streets over others. For instance, in 1794, 67% of merchants lived on one of six streets: Tradd, Broad, Church, Meeting King and East Bay. The rest were scattered throughout the city, generally, but were more often than not in offshoot streets of the main ones. East Bay has several appealing qualities making it a prime location for merchants. It faces north east, allowing cool breezes off of the ocean—albeit with the smell of the wharves. The view of the wharves would have been invaluable, as those merchants were the first to know that their shipments were in. Between 1790 and 1807, 13 to 23% of Charleston merchants resided on East Bay Street. After that point, however, the numbers shoot up to around a quarter of all merchants. It is worth noting that East Bay Street is quite long, and their addresses are spread along the entirety of it. East Bay Street provides an interesting view of the expansion of the city to the north. A majority of the merchants that lived on East Bay Street in 1819 lived far north of where their predecessors resided, with addresses primarily in the 200's. Those that lived toward the south tended to be established merchants that had resided in the area for several years.

King Street is another that runs north to south and shows interesting trends. It was not a popular place for merchants to live in the 1790's, but after around 1800 it becomes increasingly settled. In 1796, the amount of merchants with residences on King Street rapidly increased from 10% to 25%. This coincides with the increase in merchants within the city as well as real estate developments in the urban space. What is truly astonishing is the growth of merchants living on King Street in 1819, as it rose to 36% of the total population.

Similar to the settlement of East Bay Street, those that lived on King Street tended to live well north of their predecessors, occupying addresses in the 200's and 300's.

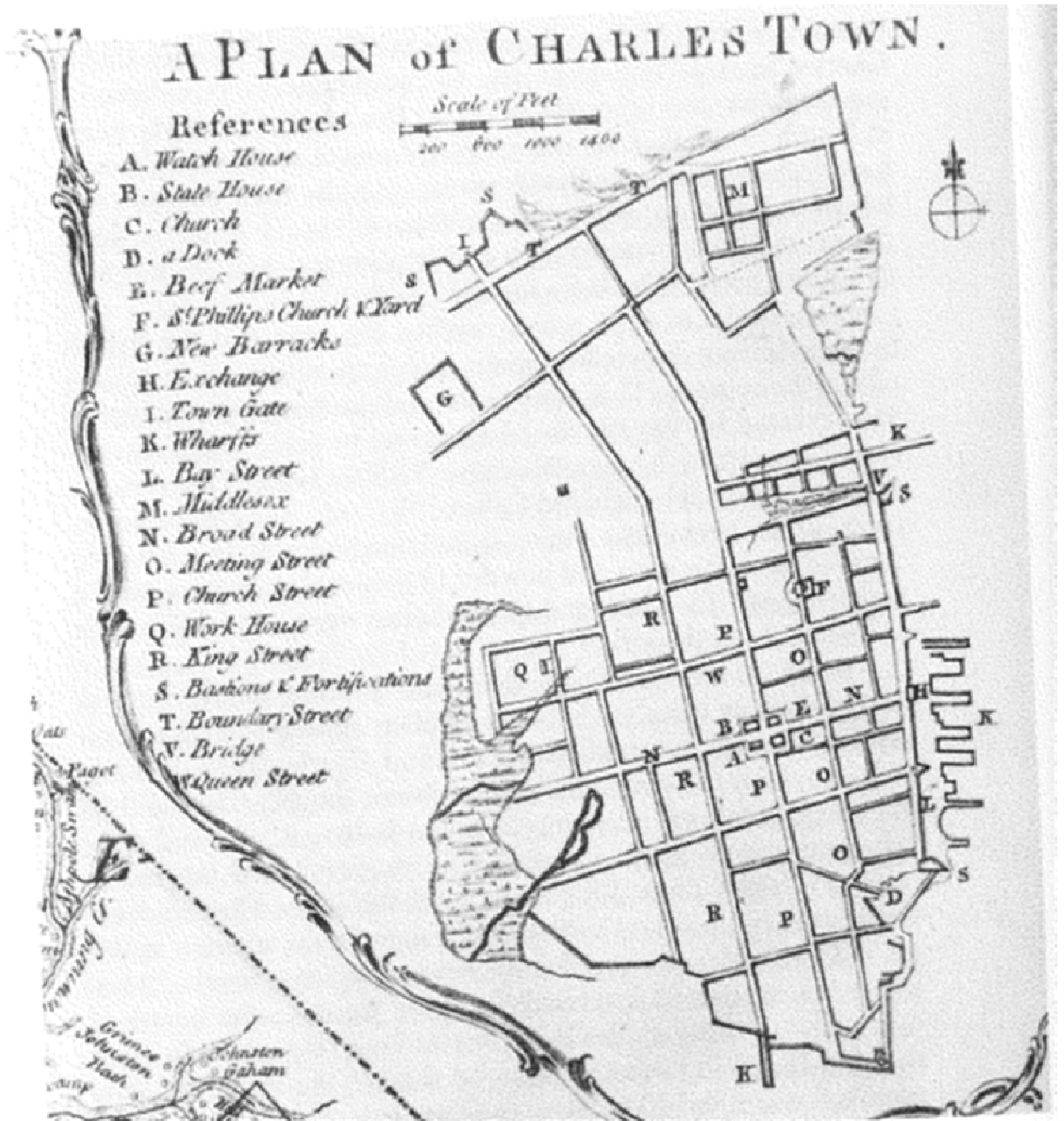


Figure 1 "A plan of Charles Town." Inset from "A Map of the Province of South Carolina..." by James Cook (London, 1773).

A decent litmus test for status at the turn of the 19th Century was the amount of property a person owned. People that were able to afford property in the city commonly operated their business in the same building in which they lived. For Charleston merchants, this was no different, with many listed as having only one address. Between 1803 and 1807 there was a significant shift in this trend. In 1807 approximately 17% of merchants had two properties listed under their names. This percentage dropped to 10% in 1813--indicating economic turmoil caused by the War of 1812--but rose again after that. In 1819 over a fifth of the Charleston merchants were listed with two properties. One of these two addresses was likely their home. Many merchants with two properties owned a “counting house,” where they would have kept their financial and business records. The numbers of people with two addresses follows the general population trends, indicating that mercantile success was closely tied to the rise and fall of Charleston as a whole.

Table 2 Street with Largest Percentage of Merchant Population by Year

| 1790 | 1794 | 1796 | 1801 | 1803 | 1807 | 1809 | 1813 | 1816 | 1819 |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| East Bay 18% | East Bay/Broad 21% | King St. 25% | King St. 20% | Broad St. 14% | King St. 17% | East Bay 23% | East Bay 25% | East Bay 27% | King St. 37% |

The rise of merchants listed with two residences correlates with the increase of those conducting business directly on the wharves. Prior to 1803, a small proportion of merchants had addresses on wharves. That proportion increases dramatically to 21% of merchants in 1819. There are several possible explanations for an increase in using wharves as a base of operations. The first and simplest explanation is the number of wharves grew, creating more options for aspiring merchants to conduct business. This is evident by the variety of owners with their names attached to wharves. Wharf space would lend a comparative advantage for

merchants dealing predominantly in inland trading. Locating themselves on the water meant that those merchants were the first to get news and products from upriver, giving them a slight advantage over competition. Furthermore, this trend is highlighted within the dual address merchant group. Half of that population had one of their two addresses listed on a wharf. Having separate work and residence locations was a luxury, one that indicated success. Furthermore, renting a stall on a wharf helped to both secure and convey that successful status without the hassle of outright ownership of a second property.

Investigating the settling habits of merchants reveals that they tended to expand toward the interior at a similar pace as the rest of Charleston. Many merchants lived within a block or two of their economic lifeline, the wharves. As the city spread north so did the merchants. The explanation for this change over time is two-fold. First, the expansion of Charleston is evident in maps from colonial times into the Early Republican period. The city had begun to grow out of the bounds of the colonial fortifications in the mid-1700s.^{liv} The land development in the 1790's was mainly focused on expansion into the "Neck" of Charleston. Although merchants spread into these new areas, they were still quite close to the commercial center of Charleston. Along with that expansion was the improvement of inland travel, primarily by river. The more goods that came down river, the more profitable it was to move business away from the ports and business district and closer to the inland river network.

The settlement pattern of Charleston merchants in many ways is similar to the merchants of Philadelphia. Doerflinger suggests that Philadelphian merchants started predominantly at the waterfront, but eventually spread from the river and moved inland. He also remarks on how these men chose their neighborhoods with purpose and rarely resided in

alleys.^{lv} In Charleston, we see that merchants primarily reside on main thoroughfares, not too far from the wharves and within a short distance to the commercial heart of Charleston. Unlike those in Philadelphia, the merchants of Charleston seemed to place more importance on being close to the busy markets and less on being on main streets. It was not uncommon to see merchants with residences on Bedon's Alley or other small streets. This does not necessarily mean a great difference in the culture between merchants of these two cities, simply a difference of context. The lifeblood of Philadelphia was the Delaware River, which its merchants settled close to. In Charleston, the lifeblood came from the wharves where cotton and rice was exchanged for European imports.

CONCLUSION

Many studies on trade in Early Republic America tend to focus on the large northern ports of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. A main reason for this focus is the effect of the French Wars on the mercantile economies of northern ports; however, these European wars have a drastic effect on Charleston as well. The French Wars opened opportunities to merchants along the Atlantic coast for the re-export trade that James Fichter discusses in *So Great a Proffit*.^{lvi} Fichter's concentrates on northern and mid-Atlantic ports, though Charleston also benefitted. American merchants were allowed to ship goods from the Caribbean to Europe "as long as the captain stopped at an American port."^{lvii} Charleston merchants were in the best position among the American merchants to take advantage of this due to their close proximity to the Caribbean. Northern merchants availed themselves of opening markets in India and the East Indies. Likewise, Charleston merchants capitalized on the Caribbean during the French Wars, yet little has been written on it.

There is little doubt that overseas trade was incredibly risky to those that participated in it, regardless of the city they hailed from. In Philadelphia, Doerflinger suggests that the atmosphere of competition fueled merchants' entrepreneurial spirit and ensured that the most diligent and intelligent merchants were poised to generate the most wealth. He also contests that even the most successful had to deal with adversity and hardship, which set them apart from the southern merchants. Contrary to that supposition, competition in business was not unique to just some ports. Earlier, this study showed that the merchant trade in Charleston was anything but stable and lacking competition, given seeming erratic fluctuation in numbers of merchants from year-to-year. Doerflinger states that urban areas in the south

were not appealing to immigrants or enterprising businessmen due to the lack of social mobility.^{lviii} New scholarship in this area shows this to be mistaken. Immigration was a major factor in Charleston and most likely was in other ports as well. Trade in the northern ports was more varied than in Charleston, which focused on the agricultural staples cotton and rice, but that does not equate to less competitive southern markets.

When it came to diversifying outside of trade, the main difference between northern and southern merchants was that northern merchants were heavily involved in manufacturing after 1815.^{lix} The South was not a great hub of investment for manufacturing, but that did not stop merchants from other entrepreneurial pursuits. Merchants in both Philadelphia and Charleston were involved in speculating government securities. In Charleston, nearly 27% of the accounts for securities were made up of merchants.^{lx} Banking tied Charleston merchants to many of their northern counterparts. As was discussed earlier, Charleston merchants were heavily involved in banking. Charleston in turn dominated banking in South Carolina, which made these merchants highly influential throughout the state.^{lxi} The relationship between merchants and banking is echoed in New York and Boston.^{lxii}

Comparatively investigating northern and southern merchants in the Early Republic and Antebellum periods of American history reveals interesting and not well-studied similarities. The question remains: Why pursue this? Rampant in the literature on Early Republic commerce is the notion that northern merchants, specifically those in Philadelphia, Boston and New York, were vitally important to the development of the American industrial economy. To say that those men specifically were important excludes southern merchants and implies that merchants from ports like Charleston were not relevant to economic development. It is doubtful that many historians would outright state that studying southern

merchants is pointless, due to this regional divide in importance, but the scholarship seems to suggest as much. Scholars of northern merchants and trade at best ignore southern merchants; at worst they view southern merchants as inferior to their northern counterparts. As a counterpoint to this northern-centric approach, new scholarship has started to show the dynamics of southern merchants and tradesmen.^{lxiii}

With how volatile the world of trade was: Why take the gamble and become a merchant? The majority of Charleston merchants were new arrival to the city. Trade with Britain was tenuous in The Early Republic and immigrants brought the potential for new markets and trade partners. Florian Mey immigrated to Charleston from Danzig and with his partner, primarily traded Delftware tiles from Amsterdam.^{lxiv} Successful merchants kept these ties and expanded upon them in America. Most did not give the merchant trade that much of a chance. The little that scholars know about Charleston merchants is that they frequently give up and move elsewhere. Merchants had to provide something new or convenient to be competitive. They resided closer to the markets and closer to shipping routes. The movement to wharves and the inland rivers shows this. This competition gave Charleston merchants a single chance. There are almost no examples of men leaving the mercantile trade to try again later. If they left the trade, they left Charleston or chose another career. These factors are ingredients that make a successful Charleston merchant: foreign contacts, ability to compete and business skills. It was not enough to have entrepreneurial spirit and work hard. Men who possessed that spirit and carefully managed their business thrived.

We have just begun to scratch the surface of the complex merchant community of Charleston, South Carolina during the Early Republic. Illustrating this complexity is the

professional trajectories of merchants. In the course of thirty years almost 2,000 men were listed as merchants. In that same time was a period of tremendous expansion in the mercantile profession due to the French Wars in Europe, the revival of the slave trade, and the expansion of cotton production. As quickly as that expansion came, it fell away. Peace was reached in Europe, the foreign slave trade ended, and cotton prices began their ultimate decline. The fortunes of many were made and lost in such a short period of time and yet it has been largely ignored. Through their professional trajectories, the merchants of South Carolina show that they were just as dynamic as their more well-studied northern counterparts.

Men like Florian Charles Mey were vital in the export trade of Charleston and therefore South Carolina, but they are eclipsed by studies of plantations and the slaves that worked them. Understanding the mercantile community of Charleston, South Carolina around the turn of the nineteenth century is the missing link to better understanding how the antebellum southern economy came to be. They did not involve themselves in manufacturing as much as northern merchants, but they did expand their economic activity beyond trade. The influence of Charleston merchants on banking, urban development, insurance and transportation shows that these men were far more active in the economy than simply exporting cotton for plantation owners. The southern merchant of past scholarship is one-dimensional, taking a passive role in the economy dominated by cotton. To overturn this notion, we need to understand the nuance of their professional lives. Figuring out their professional development and trajectory as well as their settlement patterns is just the beginning. The southern merchant of future scholarship will be a complex character that took an active role in the fate of the American economy.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ Will of Florian Charles Mey, 27 February 1819, Transcript of Will Books, Charleston District, Records of the Ordinary/Probate Judge, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.
- ⁱⁱ Helene M. Riley, "Michael Kalteisen and the Founding of the German Friendly Society in Charleston," South Carolina Historical Magazine 100, (1999): 47.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Josslyn K. Stiner, "Piecing It Together: The Introduction of Delftware Tiles to North America and Their Enduring Legacy in Charleston, South Carolina". (M.S. Thesis. Clemson University and the College of Charleston. 2010), 66.
- ^{iv} Michael J. Crawford, Naval Documents of the American Revolution: 12 Vols. (Washington D.C.: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2013), 12: 28.
- ^v Bobby Gilmer Ross, Roster of South Carolina Patriots in the American Revolution: Volume 2: K-Z. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1983), 675.
- ^{vi} Jennifer L. Goloboy, "Strangers in the South: Charleston's Merchants and Middle Class Values in the Early Republic," in *Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells and Jennifer R. Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 44.
- ^{vii} George C. Rogers Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980).
- ^{viii} Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).
- ^{ix} Emma Hart, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).
- ^x Frederick Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
- ^{xi} James R Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- ^{xii} Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).
- ^{xiii} Examples of this "traditional" scholarship of the South are William W. Freehling's *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina 1816-1836* and Eugene D. Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery*.
- ^{xiv} Hart, 9.
- ^{xv} Hart, 131.
- ^{xvi} J. H. Easterby, *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 373.
- ^{xvii} Easterby, 365.

^{xviii} Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990) 45.

^{xix} Woodman, 46.

^{xx} Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the American Revolution*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934) 64.

^{xxi} Sellers, 49.

^{xxii} Fraser, 169.

^{xxiii} Jaher, 336.

^{xxiv} Ibid, 337.

^{xxv} Ibid, 337.

^{xxvi} Ibid, 338.

^{xxvii} Goloboy, 45.

^{xxviii} Fichter, 57.

^{xxix} Ibid, 57.

^{xxx} Ibid, 265.

^{xxxi} Doerflinger, 47.

^{xxxii} Ibid, 49.

^{xxxiii} Ibid, 51.

^{xxxiv} Schedule of Free Inhabitants, Charleston District, South Carolina, Third (1810) Census of The United States, RG29: Records of The Bureau of the Census, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

^{xxxv} Brent H. Holcomb, *South Carolina Naturalizations: 1783-1850*. (Baltimore: Clearfield Company, Inc., 1985) 78.

^{xxxvi} Will of James Burges, 17 March 1804, Transcript of Will Books, Charleston District, Records of the Ordinary/Probate Judge, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

^{xxxvii} Doerflinger, 244.

^{xxxviii} Jaher, 337.

^{xxxix} Doerflinger, 244.

^{xl} Goloboy, 45.

^{xli} Ibid, 45.

^{xlii} Goloboy, 44.

^{xliii} James W. Hagy. *People and Professions of Charleston, South Carolina, 1782-1802*. Baltimore, MD, USA: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999.

^{xliv} Doerflinger, 51.

^{xlv} Sally E. Hadden, "The Business of Justice: Merchants in the Charleston Chamber of Commerce and Arbitration in the 1780's and 1790's," in *Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells and Jennifer R. Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 22.

^{xlvi} Hart, 8.

^{xlvii} *Ibid*, 40.

^{xlviii} Specifically, Doerflinger has a discussion about the Philadelphia merchants' response to economic adversity and their attempts to diversify into other areas such as: public securities, land speculation, banking and manufacturing. Fichter discusses the impact of Great Britain's blockade during the War of 1812 and that merchants in northern states turned attention away from trade to banking, real estate and manufacturing. Both authors emphasize the accumulation of capital and its use in this diversification.

^{xlix} Jaher, 345.

^l W. A. Clark, *The History of the Banking Institutions Organized in South Carolina prior to 1860*. (Columbia: The State Company, 1922) 40.

^{li} Clark, 43

^{lii} Doerflinger, 39.

^{liii} *Ibid*, 40.

^{liv} Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) 63.

^{lv} Doerflinger, 40.

^{lvi} Fichter, 82.

^{lvii} Goloboy, 43.

^{lviii} Doerflinger, 347.

^{lix} Fichter, 252.

^{lx} Goloboy, 43.

^{lxi} Jaher, 347.

^{lxii} *Ibid*, 347.

^{lxiii} *Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells and Jennifer R. Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

^{lxiv} Stiner, 66.