The Road to Reaction: Charleston, South Carolina, 1776-1806

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Charleston's role as capital and chief defender of Southern slavery during the period encompassing the nullification controversy and the secession crisis is well established.[1] Historians have located the origins of Charleston's reactionary posture towards slavery, along with that of the South as a whole, in the sectional rivalry over Missouri in 1820 and in a persecution complex engendered by the abolitionist movement, which began in the early 1830s.[2] Other scholars, focusing on local issues, have cited the Denmark Vesey insurrection plot in 1822 as the crucial factor in "a great shift [that] took place in the mind of the Charlestonians"[3] and as "the slave plot that lit a fuse to Fort Sumter."[4] Yet well before the 1820s and 1830s, events within the city and elsewhere threatened Charlestonians' perception of their physical security and of their way of life based on slavery. Economic, social, and ideological changes in the 1780s and 1790s combined to make this earlier period, not the 1820s and 1830s, the critical one in shaping Charleston into the vital center of antebellum conservatism.

For a number of reasons, an early steadfast faith in the institution of slavery came under question during the Revolutionary era. First, imbued with revolutionary zeal, some of Charleston's most prominent leaders questioned the morality of slavery. Economic disruptions also threatened the viability of the institution for the planter class. Furthermore, the economic competition of slave labor, a problem which emerged in pre-revolutionary times, continued to plague the artisans and mechanics of Charleston after the war. And finally, abolitionist sentiments of indigenous religious groups reached new levels during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Indeed the Revolution ushered in an era of liberal thinking that was unprecedented—and short-lived.

This generation of Charlestonians was the first to have serious concerns

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about the moral, social, and economic consequences of slavery, but with these questions arose a defense. The reaction to the radical ideas of the time was bolstered by events outside and inside the city in the 1790s. The excesses of the revolution in France and the brutal revolts of blacks and mulattos in Santo Domingo were the apparent consequences of a philosophy of egalitarianism. At home, an economic resurgence seemed to re-confirm the profitability of slavery in the lowcountry. And recurrent rumors of black insurrections and even invasion by black armies from the French West Indies served to excite the working classes of Charleston who already resented their black competitors.

The two decades following the Revolution offered Charleston unique possibilities.[5] An unquestioned commitment to slavery that had been developed during colonial times was momentarily threatened. And while emancipation was never close to a reality, it was seriously proposed in Charleston for the first time (and the last) during this period. But the consequences of this liberal interlude were ironic. In the 1790s and the first years of the new century, reactionary forces triumphed and Charleston emerged with evermore stringent controls on blacks and with a hostile and defensive attitude toward any anti-slavery pronouncements.

I

In the three-quarters of a century before the Revolution, the colonial planters of the South Carolina low country constructed a remarkably successful rice and indigo culture. Black slaves, through their toil and sweat, formed the backbone of this staple economy. Colonial Charleston, a virtual city-state, rode this slave-based economy to become, in the view of a contemporary engraving, "the fairest and most fruitful Province belonging to Great Britain."[6] The planter aristocracy of Charleston—membership limited only by money and race—reached its zenith of wealth and power in the twenty-five years before the Revolution.[7]

The institution of slavery which undergirded this flourishing culture was rarely questioned. Why should it have been? After all, it was paying tremendous dividends to the planter elite and the merchant traders whose livelihood was in large measure tied to staple production. In the Charleston District white per capita wealth had grown at a remarkable annual compound rate of 2.0 to 2.2 percent between the 1720s and the 1760s.[8] Alice Hanson Jones, in her book *Wealth of a Nation to Be*, found that, at the time of the Revolution, the mean per capita wealth (including slaves) of those inventoried amounted to £ 2,337.7 sterling, equal to $126,844 in 1978 dollars! Charleston led the nation by far in per capita wealth at this time; the next highest area Jones located was Anne Arundel County, Maryland, with £ 660.4 sterling—

less than thirty percent of the Charleston figure.[9] As Henry Laurens noted in 1750, the planters were simply "full of money."

The rice and indigo production on the plantations formed a well-spring for the city's economy. An expanding and diversified urban economy benefitted all classes—planters, merchants, white mechanics, and urban slaves. In fact, opportunities in Charleston's diverse seaport economy were favorable enough for black men to earn wages and purchase freedom. The practice of "self-hire" or "hiring out" in which the slave marketed his own services threw blacks into competition with the lower class whites of the artisan and mechanic trades. Although hiring out had been strictly regulated by a 1740 slave law, the urgencies of a rapidly growing city and flexibility it provided slave owners and employers moved Charlestonians to ignore the law. On one hand, this social and economic latitude extended to the city's blacks helped to soothe potential uneasy feelings between slaves and their masters, and provided blacks a certain stake in the established order;[10] but on the other hand, black economic competition proved to be an ongoing problem for white artisans and mechanics throughout the eighteenth century.

The Revolutionary War put a rapid halt to Charleston's continually growing economy. But the war's impact went far beyond economic realms. In the words of one historian of the city,

> the American Revolution turned Charleston upside down and inside out. Colonial Charleston, its government, and its way of life broke like fragile china. . . . Revolutionary Charlestowne saw it all: political agitation, class conflict, war, mob rule, death, destruction, civil war, military occupation, near starvation, and chaos.[11]

The Revolution also brought questions. Even before the war's destructive impact upon the low country economy had been felt, some of the city's more perceptive—and frank—leaders began to admit the incongruities between the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and their society, which rested upon the labor of enslaved blacks. Henry Laurens is probably the foremost example of the Revolutionary inclination towards conversion to anti-slavery. Laurens, who served as president of the Continental Congress and was one of Charleston's wealthiest and most powerful merchants, had made a fortune as a slave importer in the 1750s. By 1776, the spirit of the age had moved him to favor emancipation. He wrote his son John in that year, "You know, my dear Son, I abhor Slavery. . . . I am devising means for manumitting many of [my Negroes] and for cutting off the Entail of Slavery."[12] In the same letter Laurens seems to admit his complicity and greed, yet hold out hope that the equalitarian zeal sweeping the country at the time would usher in a new era:

> In former Days, there was no combating the Prejudices of Men, supported by Interest. The Day I hope is approaching when from Principles of

> Gratitude and Justice every Man will strive to be foremost in complying with the golden Rule.[13]

In reply, John Laurens, who would later serve with conspicuous valor in the battles of Brandywine, Yorktown, and Charleston, admitted the uphill nature of the battle: "The equitable Conduct which you have resolved upon with respect to your Negroes, will undoubtedly meet with great Opposition from interested Men."[14] Further on in his responses, John, like his father, leaves no doubt about which side of the slavery issue he favors: ". . . but it was easy to perceive that [opponents to your plan] consider'd only their own advantage arising from the Fact, and embarrassed themselves very little about the Right."[15]

Writing in the spring of that same year to a fellow Carolinian with whom he had studied abroad, John hinted that his love of liberty and justice outstripped that of his homeland:

> I think that we Americans at least in the Southern colonies cannot contend with a good grace for liberty, until we have enfranchised our slaves. How can we whose jealousy has been alarmed more at the name of oppression than at the reality reconcile to our spirited assertions of the rights of making the galling abject slavery of our negroes? . . . Let us fly it as a hateful country and say ubi libertus i [paper torn in breaking seal] patria.[16]

The final words—one illegible because of a tear—mean, "Where liberty is, there is my country." But if young Laurens contemplated renouncing Carolina over its practice of slavery, the outbreak of hostilities in Charleston harbor that summer brought out the patriot in him. And though he vowed that "the present State of Affairs seem'd to require the matter [of emancipation] to be a little postpon'd," by 1778 John Laurens had broached a proposal which had truly radical implications for the lowcountry.[17] He petitioned his father, Henry, the President of the Continental Congress, to allow him to form a regiment of lowcountry slaves who would receive their freedom in return for service in the war.[18] Laurens was convinced his plan would in the short run provide the American cause in the South a much-needed boost, and in the long run be an important step in realizing his dream of freedom for the slaves. He wrote to Washington in March of 1779: "Had we arms for three thousands such black men as I could select in Carolina, I should have no doubt of success in driving the British out of Georgia, and subduing East Florida, before the end of July."[19] For the blacks, service in the army would be a stepping stone to freedom—"a proper gradation between abject slavery and perfect liberty."[20] The disparaging response with which the South Carolina legislature receive Laurens's recommendation was relayed by his father: "Your black regiment is blown up with contemptuous huzzas."[21]

If the Laurenses' colleagues were not yet infused with the principles of philosophic liberalism, some at least saw slavery evil for other reasons.

Christopher Gadsden, the leader of the mechanic faction in Charleston and vocal advocate of independence, wrote in 1778 that slavery was "an eternal Thorn in our sides and every Year Worse and Worse." The problem, as Gadsden understood it, was the effect servile labor had on whites. "Those Negroes," Gadsden believed, "hired out by their owners (which I have ever thought excessively impolitick)" would create "a number of loose idle people" unable to find work.[22]

The economic self-interest motives that Gadsden articulated for the white working classes of Charleston are in sharp contrast to the idealism of John and Henry Laurens, yet help explain why the sentiments similar to those held by the Laurenses became more numerous in the '80s and '90s. The deleterious effects of slave labor on the mechanic, artisan, and labor trades had been an ongoing problem since well before mid-century.[23] Yet before the Revolution the middle class of Charleston had been "small, ineffectual, and dependent on the planters."[24] In 1783 and 1784, the mechanics and other workers took their grievances to the streets in anti-aristocratic, anti-nabob, and anti-Tory riots. These democratic stirrings forced the planter and merchant elite to lend an ear to the complaints of the lower class—one of which was the economic competition of slaves. But more importantly, Charleston was incorporated as a city in 1783. The city had, throughout colonial times, been governed by the Upper House and the Assembly. Craftsmen and mechanics were not excluded by law, but custom dictated that the merchants, planters, and professionals served as the lawmakers. With Charleston accorded corporate standing, mechanics succeeded in electing their own assemblymen to the city council, providing another more genteel way of getting redress. The emergence of the mechanic class as a power-wielding group provided a viable audience for an anti-slavery appeal.

But the Revolution in Charleston produced yet another circumstance which helped opened the door to emancipationist proclamations. The devastating effect of the war on the lowcountry economy decreased the stake that the powerful planters and merchants had in slavery which was, of course, the basis of the pre-war ascendancy. Even if the planter class was not ready to embrace anti-slavery, at this time, with their economy on the downturn for the first time in their lives, the planters questioned the continued profitability of slavery. The war had ended the British bounty on indigo, thereby immediately halting the production of one of the area's two staple crops. The fighting of the war itself had drained tremendous capital from the region. The slave population, the single largest capital investment of the lowcountry, suffered as much as a twenty-five percent decline, if we are to believe the estimates of the contemporary historian David Ramsey.[25] Agriculture was crippled by the destruction of equipment, the neglect of land, and the disorganization of labor. Exports, including rice, lagged as Britain cut off trade in American vessels to the British West Indies.[26] Severe droughts in the years 1785–7 further added to

the planter's problems. The dire straits of the planter class are exemplified by the fact that Henry Laurens wrote in 1786 that he was frequently reduced to less than a dollar in cash.[27]

For all the advantages that slavery as a means of production provided during boom times, it was woefully inefficient during a contracting economy. The costs of feeding, housing, and clothing hundreds of slaves continued regardless of production or profits. A letter from Laurens to Edward Rutledge, a former delegate to the first Continental Congress, dated 1786 points out the burden that slave-holding became during the 1780s:

> Your overseer has applied to me for a hundred bushels of corn to feed your negroes. I doubted my ability to spare it. The poor man exclaimed, "The negroes won't have a bite to eat after next Sunday." This affecting stroke moved me to run my own stock low and scrape together a hundred bushels of corn, peas, and rough rice from my Mt. Tacitus plantation to supply your negroes for the rest of the season. The overseer retired with joy.[28]

When a planter finds it no longer profitable to employ slaves and the ones he owns are in danger of starvation, he would tend to be receptive to emancipation programs.

It was no coincidence that slavery began to be attacked publicly for the first time in the mid-1780s. Slavery was sharply criticized in an editorial in the *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser* of April 13, 1785. "The Negro trade cannot be censured in language too severe," the author wrote, since it was a "traffic which as it has hitherto been carried on is shocking to humanity, cruel, wicked and diabolical." Furthermore, the United States was not observing of the liberty for which it contended "for it is self-evident that if there are any men when they have rights to hold in slavery, there may be others who have a right to hold *them* in slavery." The editorial conceded the argument that the emancipation of slaves could not be accomplished at once, but rather should be left to the "effect of time and manner." Nevertheless, the United States could not be excused if it did not "speed the process."[29] In 1786, "Sternic," writing to the *State Gazette of South Carolina,* reminded his readers that in spite of attempts to make it milder, "slavery is still a bitter draught, and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of it,"[30] it was not less bitter on that account. Later that same year "Justice" proclaimed he would like to see slaves treated by their owners as if they were free, "for under no other terms do I think that slavery can be justified."[31]

The eruption of the French Revolution in 1789 rekindled in Charleston some of the ideas that Henry and John Laurens had discussed. Now, however, the portion of the population which had always been receptive to such egalitarian ideals—the mechanics—claimed a larger voice in political affairs. And that portion which had, before the Revolution, staked its economic survival on slavery—the planters and to some extent the merchants—no

longer depended on the peculiar institution to the same extent. Consequently, most Charlestonians, reminded of the spirit of their own revolution, were receptive to the French cause at first.

Republican Clubs affiliated with the Friends of Liberty and Equality, a French revolutionary outfit, were established in Charleston. These groups espoused the Rights of Man and egalitarianism which logically implied freedom for blacks. Citizen Genet, the French consultant for the Republicans, chose Charleston as his port of entry because of the strong pro-French support in the city. Even Robert Goodloe Harper later a prominent Federalist supporter of Britain was swept up in the enthusiasm of times; he headed a local Jacobian Club in the early '90s.

This period of toleration of liberal ideals engendered Charleston's high point of anti-slavery discussion. The early 1790s witnessed an increase in the open attacks on the evil of slavery in the city's newspapers. "Rusticus" writing in 1794 demanded immediate emancipation on grounds of "justice, public safety, and better agriculture."[32] "Philodemus" maintained that "such is the fatal influence of slavery on the human mind, that it almost wholly effaces from it even the boasted characteristics of rationality."[33] In 1791, Charleston's *State Gazette* printed a poem entitled "Stanzas on the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country." Parts of the poem clearly condemn slavery:

> From Europe's proud despotic shrines: Hither the stranger takes his way; And in our new world explores: A happier soil, a milder sway, where no proud despot holds him down; no slaves insult him with a crown.
>
> Forsaking kings and regal state: (A debt that reason deems amiss): The traveller owns, convinced the late; no realm so free, so blest as this; The last is half to slaves consigned, and half to slavery more refin'd.
>
> O come the time and haste the day; when war shall no longer crush; when reason shall enforce his sway; nor their fair region raise our blush; where still the African complains; and mourns his yet unbroken chains.

The author, "Mississippi," chose anonymity.[34]

The 1790s also saw manumissions rise to new heights. The figures will be examined below, but for now some reasons provided by emancipating owners leave no doubt that such liberal principles as natural rights weighed heavily on the owners' minds. John Francis LeHova said that by emancipating his slave Arsenne he was making her "as free as the laws of God, nature and humanity intended she should be." When Thomas Wadsworth freed his sixteen slaves, he was "no more than complying with the common dictates of humanity" by putting "them into that state which the common parent of mankind placed all children in which they came from His divinely benevolent hands." Erasmus Gill prefaced his certificate of manumission for his slave

William with the words: "I am fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all men agreeable to the Bill of Rights Declaration upon which I conceive our present happy constitution is established."[35]

David Ramsey, a noted Charleston Federalist and historian of the American Revolution, openly proclaimed his sympathies for abolition; however, it was largely because of his views on this issue that he met failure in the political realm, losing a 1788 contest for the Charleston seat in Congress and a 1794 race for the United States Senate. Ramsay appears as a throwback to the idealism of the Laurenses. His opposition stemmed not from narrow self interest, but from a love of liberty and sense of fairness. His comments to Thomas Jefferson on reading the latter's *Notes on Virginia* demonstrate his opposition to bondage and suggest his idea on the equality of blacks: "I admire your generous indignation at slavery; but think you have depressed the negroes too low."[36]

The Methodists in the city provided the only cohesive opposition to slavery during the period. As early as 1780, the national conference of the Methodist Church had condemned slavery as "contrary to the laws of God" and "hurtful to society." The church prohibited its members from owning slaves in 1784. This move caused a furor among Charleston's Methodists, who were instrumental in having the measure revoked.[37] Bishop Francis Asbury, however, was adamant on the issue. Despite hearing complaints from lowcountry preachers that their support would dwindle if slaveholders were excluded, Asbury drew up a powerful statement which he proclaimed in Charleston in 1795: "We the Ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church being deeply sensible of the impropriety, and evil of slavery. . . . Do agree that all such persons Who are Now, or may hereafter become the Possessors of Slaves, Ought Immediately to Emancipate them. . . ." Failure to comply with this edict would result in forfeiture of "Letters of Ordination."[38] In 1804 when the Methodists compromised by splitting the denomination into a northern faction and a southern one, the strongest voice in opposition to slavery was removed from Charleston.

Other religious denominations took tentative steps toward challenging the morality of slavery during the 1790s. The Baptists expressed opposition to the buying and selling of slaves for profit. And in 1794 the Rev. W. C. Davis denounced those who owned slaves as un-Christian before the Presbytery of South Carolina.[39] Yet the efficacy of the religious and moral arguments of the 1790s, like that of the ideological reasoning of the 1770s, rose and fell according to Charlestonians' perceptions of their self-interest.

Local and external events in the 1790s influenced those perceptions dramatically. Changes in the economy ended any doubts about the profitability of slavery. The extremism of the French Revolution reminded Charlestonians of the dangers inherent in the excesses of democracy. Reports and rumors of slave revolts elsewhere in the South aroused the fears of city

residents. Most importantly, Charleston received a first hand view of the catastrophic consequences of mixing radical democracy with a black servile majority, when refugees from the Santo Domingan revolt flooded Charleston.

On July 10, 1793, the *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* of Charleston confirmed "the complete annihilation of [the] once beautiful and opulent city" of Cap Francais.[40] That summer and fall, refuges—whites and their slaves as well as blacks—poured into Charleston, bringing with them their fears. Charleston opened her arms to the white victims, and had in fact offered assistance to the white government of Santo Domingo. The blacks, both slave and free, were hardly welcomed. They were seen as a source of contamination for the local blacks. The same "Rusticus" who had demanded emancipation earlier feared that

> an excess of humanity has led us to be totally blind to our interests and that mindful alone of their situation, we have forgot the dangers of our own. . . . From the moment we admitted the St. Domingo Negroes into our Country, security from that source became daily more precarious.[41]

As the decade continued, fears of servile insurrection in Charleston were manifested in other ways. The French, either by the cancerous spread of the egalitarian ideas or by direct subversion, were often implicated. Decrees of the French National Assembly emancipating slaves in the French colonies enflamed the fears of the city. Ralph Izard believed that an alliance with France would "occasion a prodigious number of the lower order of Frenchmen to come to this Country, who would fraternize with our Democratic Clubs, and introduce the same horrid tragedies among our Negroes, which had been so fatally exhibited in the French Island."[42] In 1796 a French West Indian slave was executed as an arsonist, and a year later Charleston's whites "discovered" a plot by "French Negroes" to massacre citizens as they emerged from churches on Christmas Day.[43] And in 1800, despite attempts at press censorship, reports of the Gabriel Prosser revolt in Virginia reached the ears of whites and blacks in Charleston. Rumors that the black Virginians were aware of strained relations between France and the United States and apparently had counted on French assistance further alarmed Charlestonians.

Notwithstanding these anxieties over the consequences of excess of liberty, it was the force of economic change which won the day for reaction. Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793 revitalized the economy of the lowcountry and re-established the region's dependence on slavery. Frederick Jackson Turner has commented, "Never in history, perhaps, was an economic force more influential upon the life of a people."[44] In fact, the long-staple variety of cotton had been a source of income for a few sea island planters around Charleston since 1785; but with Whitney's invention, by the late 1790s, the lowcountry became a major grower of long- and short-staple

cotton and Charleston a major cotton port. By 1800 the expansion of cotton production into the upstate merged the economic interests of the rival sections of the state and effectively silenced a lingering abolitionists contingent in the Piedmont.[45]

By the turn of the century, then, the perception of threats to the city's security and the re-emergence of slavery as a necessary basis of economic survival tipped what had been a teetering scale in the favor of reaction. A law passed in 1800 made manumission more difficult through the requirement of a special deed and the evaluation of a slave's character in a court of law. Until this time there had been no restriction whatever upon the granting of freedom by a master to a slave. But the growing feeling that free blacks would be a dangerous force in their own right as well as an insidious influence on the enslaved prompted the passage of a law "to protect society from even the benevolence of slaveowners, in throwing a great number of stupid, ignorant, and vicious persons, to disturb its peace and to endanger its permanency."[46]

The rapid growth of the free black population was indeed a cause for alarm to many Charlestonians. Figures for emancipations in the city reveal that the practice was becoming increasingly popular. And although the granting freedom could conceivably be attributed to a variety of reasons besides anti-slavery sentiment, the relative numbers of manumissions during the years of the late eighteenth-century indicate a pattern of liberalism followed by reaction. The period 1760–1775 saw 106 slaves freed in Charleston or about seven per year during this period of economic prosperity. During the Revolutionary years of 1776–1782, 103 blacks were granted freedom, an average of seventeen per year. A total of 432 manumissions occurred from 1783–1800, an average of twenty-five per year. And while no precise figures exist for manumissions from 1800 to 1810, there was a tremendous drop in the growth rate of the free black population in Charleston, i.e., from 76 percent between 1790 and 1800 to approximately 30 percent between 1800 and 1810.[47]

In 1806 the city passed a slave code which severely curtailed the economic activities of slaves and free blacks and set up harsh punishments for blacks convicted of overcharging for goods or services. The economic strictures of the bill were a recognition of the continued protests of the mechanics and artisans. But the law also limited social and civil liberties of blacks in any effort to preclude any insurrectionary activities. For example, gatherings of more than seven blacks were prohibited; slaves were not allowed to operate a wagon or a boat, except fishermen; and all blacks had to be off the city streets by 9:00 in the winter and 10:00 in the summer.[48] The 1806 date for this comprehensive city slave law is somewhat enigmatic coming as it does some number of years after the peak of the insurrectionary fears in Charleston; but the General Assembly had, in 1800, passed a measure

making unlawful all gatherings of slaves and free blacks "in a confined or secret place of meeting" or behind "barred, bolted, or locked doors."[49] The Assembly had also, earlier, in 1795, legally prohibited any foreign blacks, slave or free, from entering the state.[50] This act had simply codified the actions of mobs of Charlestonians who had prevented blacks from disembarking in the Port City.[51] The intent of both the mob and the Assembly, of course, had been to stymie the flow of any potentially volatile ideologies.

As the 1790s progressed, the public denunciations of slavery became increasingly muted, and a siege mentality emerged among the pronouncements of prominent Charlestonians. Supporters of slavery were no longer couching their arguments in apologetic tones and justifications of economic necessity. In 1796, in a debate in Congress on an antislavery petition, Charlestonian William Loughton Smith defiantly warned that South Carolina had "entered into this confederation . . . from political, not from moral motives, and I do not think my constituents want to learn morals from the petitioner."[52] In 1803 Smith took to the offensive in applying an argument that would become more familiar in the 1830s and '40s when he claimed Northerners "employ their free blacks in all their drudgery, and obtain their labor on better terms than masters do."[53] Alarmed at persistent abolitionist petitions, Smith that same year called on the South to awaken and rise to its own defense, for he was convinced that "a general emancipation is intended."[54] John Rutledge, member of the Continental Congress and from United States Supreme Court Justice, had described the issue in even more alarming terms in 1800:

> There have been emasaries amongst us in the Southern States. They have begun their war upon us; we have had them meeting in their club rooms, and debating on that subject, and determinations have been made.[55]

Indeed, by the first years of the nineteenth-century, the ideas that gave birth to the American and French revolutions, the democratic societies, and the religious emancipationists came to be feared by Charlestonians. As the full implications of the principles of the Revolutionary era became apparent, a tendency to deny the validity of those very principles arose. The conservative attack often focused on fellow Southerner Thomas Jefferson. One Charlestonian warned of what he saw as the possible results of the new president's policies:

> Mr. Jefferson is known to be a theorist in politics, as well as philosophy and morals. He is a *philosophe* in the modern French sense of the word. In that character he entertains opinions unfriendly to property, which forms the efficient labor of a great part of the Southern States:—the evidences of this are numerous . . . in plain English it means that he wishes the 500,000 blacks in America should be emancipated.[56]

Charles Pinckney, former governor and member of the Constitutional Convention of the United States, wrote of Jefferson that "no man of correct judgment can appropriate the wild theories of this enthusiast."[57] Charlestonian Henry William De Saussure, who later headed the state's Supreme Court, denied that equality was the natural condition of man. He reasoned that if that theory were acted upon then the whites would be forced to "instantly free the unfortunate slaves," thus bringing ruin to both races.[58]

II

As sentiments like these indicate, Charleston's leadership had formed a rigid attachment to slavery by this time. The tolerance with which the city offered to opponents of slavery during the postwar decades was replaced by an atmosphere antagonistic even to discussion of the slavery issue. As Charleston's position of economic pre-eminence returned to pre-Revolutionary levels, the city and the state formed a greater stake in the institution. And as the full implications of the liberal tendencies became apparent, this leadership established a mentality in the city that was to become increasingly hostile toward enlightened ideas about slavery or any threats to that system. In light of this, the path to civil war may begin further back than historians have imagined. After all, by the time of the Vesey plot and the Missouri question, Charleston had been nurturing a reactionary mindset for a full twenty years.

ENDNOTES

1. See Steven A. Channing, *A Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York, 1970); William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York, 1968); Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860* (New York, 1963); Charles S. Snydor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848* (New York, 1948).

2. Ibid.

3. George C. Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman, Okla., 1966), p. 145.

4. John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey's Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, Oh., 1964).

5. If the liberal elements had carried the day, the city's eminent position in the Southern economy and her leaders' powerful voices in national political affairs make for interesting counterfactual suppositions.

6. "Prospect of Charles-town" (1739), found in Rogers, p. 55.

7. Alice Hanson Jones, *Wealth of a Nation to Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1980), p. 357; Robert Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston* (San Francisco, 1982), pp. 21-46.

8. Peter A. Coclanis, "The Rise and Fall of the South Carolina Low Country: An Essay in Economic Interpretation," *Southern Studies* 24 (Summer 1985), p. 151.

9. Jones, p. 357, p. 10.

10. Phillip D. Morgan, "Black Life in Eighteenth Century Charleston," *Perspectives in American History* 1 (1984), pp. 187-232.

11. Rosen, p. 47.

12. Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, in *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 10 (Jan. 1909), p. 49. Referred to hereafter as *SCHM*.

13. Ibid.

14. John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 26 October 1776 in *SCHM* 5 (Oct. 1904), p. 205.

15. Ibid., p. 206.

16. John Laurens to Francis Kinlock, spring of 1776 in Sara Bertha Townsend, *An American Soldier: The Life of John Laurens* (Raleigh, 1958), p. 120.

17. John Laurens to Henry Laurens, Oct. 26, 1776 in *SCHM* 5 (Oct. 1904), p. 206.

18. Black troops had been used in Rhode Island during the war; however, the black majority and persistent fear of insurrections made this a most unpalatable suggestion for South Carolina.

19. John Laurens to George Washington, 16 March 1779 in David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens* (New York, 1915), p. 449.

20. Quoted in Robert M. Weir, "Portrait of a Hero," *American Heritage* 27 (April 1976), p. 18.

21. Henry Laurens quoted in Wallace, p. 450.

22. Gadsden to William Henry Drayton, 1 June 1778 in Richard Walsh, ed., *The Writings of Christopher Gadsden* (Columbia, 1966), p. 49.

23. Richard Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty* (Columbia, 1959); Morgan, pp. 187-232.

24. Rosen, p. 34.

25. Ramsey's figure of 25,000 slaves hauled off by the British is found in David Duncan Wallace, *A History of South Carolina* (New York, 1934), p. 321; for the total slave population see Lewis P. Jones, *South Carolina: A Synoptic History for Laymen* (Lexington, S.C., 1971), p. 76.

26. Jones, p. 116.

27. Wallace, *Henry Laurens*, p. 428.

28. Ibid., p. 429.

29. *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser*, April 13, 1785.

30. *State Gazette of South Carolina*, Sept. 4, 1786.

31. *State Gazette*, Sept. 7, 1786.

32. "Rusticus," South Carolina Historical Society, MSS. Referred to hereafter as SCHS, MSS.

33. "Philodemus," *Political Pamphlet*, SCHS, MSS.

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36. Ramsay to Jefferson, 3 May 1786, quoted in Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968), p. 456.

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38. Francis Asbury, *The Journal of Francis Asbury* (New York, 1821), p. 28, 48.

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43. Izard to Hutchinson, 26 Nov. 1794, in Brady, p. 609.

44. Quoted in Wallace, *A History of South Carolina*, p. 381.

45. Wallace, *A History of South Carolina*, p. 380.

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