

THE ECONOMIC-POLITICAL MACHINE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
DURING THE 18TH CENTURY

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Following the American War for Independence, the United States and the British Empire entered something like a cold war and fought in the economic trenches. From the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the frontiers in between, the two sides strived to attain, preserve, or regain sources of revenue, trade, commodities, and, occasionally, ego. A primary battleground developed specifically because of this in the fledgling state of South Carolina and emanated outwards toward their economic destinations. This battleground did not just involve the British Navy but also French civilian and military forces. In these particular incidents pertaining to South Carolina and its trade, the American Navy did not exist in force, as the French played the role of protector of South Carolinian economic interests. The motivation behind this extranational effort was, at the purest level, greed. The elite of South Carolina were extremely interested in obtaining and keeping the wealth that their political and economic machine produced for them. The British obviously valued this system highly as they risked, or perhaps intentionally attempted to provoke, another war with their former colonies.

The ultimate financial motive of South Carolina produced, or at least significantly fostered, the cold war during the early republican period between the United States and Great Britain. This state, all by itself, could do so because of the highly concentrated political and economic strength of the colony and later South Carolina. Additionally, the ruling elite held a romanticized belief in their own extranational capacity to pursue its own interests typically created by the revolution and other crises. Finally, the leaders of South Carolina pursued policies to preserve their financial status and stability. These elements did not manifest themselves out of thin air or by a concerted effort of the colonists independently, but slowly formed over the entire eighteenth century due to cultural molding and shaping of Great Britain, making this a beast of their own creation.

Since this is an extremely complex issue stretching over a century with many different players that in the end seem to have no consequence individually but instead blend into a world built to guarantee individual repression, a few abstract ground rules need to be established. Due to a heavy dependency on mercantilism, conflict in South Carolina and the wider British Empire tended to send the economy spiraling quickly. Efforts from within, especially from the self-glorifying perspective of the South Carolina elite, always seemed to fix the problem. Self-isolation in economics, politics, and culture from the other colonies and later states, does not seem to have been overtly intentional but rather reactionary. This, however, changed in the ensuing century during the escalation to the American Civil War. Finally, disregard political identity, faction, party, or allegiance declared or popular within the state government at a specific time as motivating factors. Like the isolation they practiced, it was reactionary, temporary, or whatever seemed to work best for the elite at the time economically. As soon as its usefulness expired, they threw it out. This topic can seem very esoteric, broad, and too abstract. The evidence is spread to the ends of academia, across several disciplines, and over a very expansive stretch but is plentiful. Only research undertaken since the late 1990s, starting with Joyce Chaplin, has uncovered this aspect of Anglo-American relations of the early republican period, but the themes and events have always been present. To combat this abstractness, this research anchors itself on key events and time periods within South Carolina's colonial history and then expands back into the broad, thematic underpinnings.

For this young colony, stretching only back to the 1660s, to become an influential player in the age of Atlantic revolutions took deliberate and intentional action from the British empire, the colonial political elite, merchants, and other economic players. The connections and solidarity between these parties developed quickly because they often were the same people, or,

at the very least, somehow related to each other. This solidarity produced the overall political and economic strength necessary to unify the colony, and later state, of South Carolina throughout the eighteenth century and into the next one, before and then after the revolution.

This story of strength and unity began at the very foundation of the colony, centered around the budding trade port of Charles Town in the 1660s and '70s. The colony's Fundamental Constitutions strictly defined the philosophical intentions of the colony and therefore its future. The Lords Proprietor, made of only eight wealthy men, spearheaded by Anthony Ashley Cooper, founded the colony purely in their own image. The Enlightenment ideals of John Locke influenced this unofficial oligarchy, as the philosopher directly collaborated on the primary political structure of the young colony's government. His ideas that political eligibility and enfranchisement should be based on land held defined the local colonial government.

While the Lords Proprietor rarely visited South Carolina in person, a small nobility granted land by the crown, in theory, represented their interests. While this nobility pursued primarily economic interests, they held de facto political power. They governed over counties in which they held land with a maximum of sixteen individuals who could own land. This theoretically structured class of nobility flexed only when real estate changed hands, whether through death, sale or rarely incorporation. The most senior of this class of nobles, known as the palatine, supervised the nobility in the place of the Lords Proprietor.

Due to the absence of the oligarchical proprietor group and the mismanagement of their successors back in England, this little class of nobility in reality did not form into the well-structured political society envisioned and began acting on their own accord by refusing to pay commerce taxes of the Navigation Acts. This caused the Crown, in 1729, to step in to take direct

control of the colony, while keeping the local landholders in place.¹ From the onset of the proprietor's management issues, the local populace aimed for greater legal autonomy under the Crown. In the meantime, the nobility declared independence from the proprietors in 1719, cementing their authority as a cultural reality not just a political theory. As a Crown colony, with greater political and economic autonomy, trade boomed.²

Two commodities fueled this prosperity, rice and indigo, but for two distinct reasons. Rice became the first staple crop of the South Carolina economy, gradually rising in prominence within the region under the "independent" elite government, then booming on the world stage immediately following the transfer to Crown colony status.³ Carolina rice became a staple in British-allied markets in the 1730s as the cereal grain of the urban poor. Rice became a substitute for increasingly expensive wheat-based staples due to irregular supply shortages across Western Europe.⁴ Due to its proximity to European consumers, Carolina rice became the commodity of choice for British merchants, providing a steadily increasing stable source of revenue and profit.⁵ Rice remained steady through the end of the American Revolution except during times of conflict, when markets became more restricted, and depressions ensued.

Indigo, specifically because of imperial wars, boomed to fill this deficit. In the 1740s, due to the depression in trade created by the Wars of Jenkin's Ear and Austrian Succession, rice collapsed, and indigo filled the need for a staple. When empires officially declared war on each other, an exponential rise in demand occurred due to the increased need for additional textile products, specifically uniforms. By the next decade, Carolina indigo served the vast majority of

¹ Cole Blease Graham, Jr., "The Evolving South Carolina Constitution," *Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (1996): 13, <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol24/iss1/2>.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ R.C. Nash, "South Carolina and the Atlantic Economy in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *The Economic History Review* 45, no. 4 (Nov. 1992): 680, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2597414>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 683.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 682.

European markets, saving the South Carolina economy from “the brink of ruin.”⁶ Moreover, during the 1750s, British manufacturing capacity began to increase due to the Industrial Revolution. The general demand for indigo-based products needed to be fulfilled by a cheaper product, Carolina indigo exceedingly fit this bill over far more expensive French and Spanish products despite them being superior quality products.⁷

These two staple crops not only made the elite planters much profit but cemented the demographic hierarchical regime in South Carolina. This cash crop society attracted a massive influx of poor whites and enslaved Africans to be the manual labor of the economic machine. This pattern was intentionally highly similar to the well-established system of the British West Indies, specifically in Barbados. By the mid-eighteenth century, rice accounted for at least seventy-five percent of the colonial workforce. This workforce accounted for ninety percent of the general population, exacerbating the disparity between the extreme elite, controlling all the wealth and political power, and the rest of the population.⁸ Despite this disparity, the planter class stayed in South Carolina to directly control the political and social institutions, consequently, they significantly contributed to the domestic economy, extremely uncommon in staple crop colonies.⁹ While other colonies, such as Virginia, had a similar classes of landed gentry, political power became increasingly deconcentrated on the British-controlled continent. This in turn established a cohesively prosperous political and economic unit primed for independence.¹⁰

⁶ R.C. Nash, “South Carolina indigo, European textiles, and the British Atlantic economy in the eighteenth century,” *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 2 (May 2010): 387, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27771617>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁸ John J. McCusker & Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-4.

From a British mercantilist perspective, South Carolina was the poster child of economic prosperity, as national economic policy was of utmost importance. In reward, British merchants were encouraged to heavily invest in and purchase plantations across South Carolina, which translated into political representation as, by 1775, over eighty percent of planters who served in the South Carolina legislature started as merchant investors before owning land.¹¹ This culminated in 1775, as profit peaked in direct result of British merchant investment across the South Atlantic seaboard.¹² Before the revolution, all this economic and political development resulted in a concentration of wealth and power in the elite planter class with its roots in British mercantilism, land-based oligarchy, and demographic superiority. With the colony in the hands of the “responsible elite,”¹³ who shared a common goal of economic dominance, the colonial overseers back in London allowed massive investment with little oversight.¹⁴ Along with avoiding large tariffs, the political-economic machine established itself just in time for the American Revolution, an obvious turning point for the colony.¹⁵

The American War for Independence produced several results for the new state of South Carolina, both politically and economically. In general, more autonomy in both sectors but without the consistent British mercantilist market to support this. During and after the war, rice and indigo prices declined yet demand did not stay at wartime highs as markets became restricted once again. Cotton, however, in the upcountry began to fill a similar role that Indigo

¹¹ R.C. Nash, “The Organization of Trade and Finance in the Atlantic Economy,” in *Money, Trade, and Power: The Evolution of Colonial South Carolina’s Plantation Society*, edited by Rosemary Brana-Shute, Jack P. Greene, and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 95.

¹² Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 9.

¹³ James Haw, “Political Representation in South Carolina, 1669-1794: Evolution of a Lowcountry Tradition,” *The South Carolina Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (Apr. 2002): 109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27570562>.

¹⁴ Nash, “The Organization of Trade,” 87.

¹⁵ Gary L. Hewitt, “The State in the Planters’ Service,” in *Money, Trade, and Power: The Evolution of Colonial South Carolina’s Plantation Society*, edited by Rosemary Brana-Shute, Jack P. Greene, and Randy J. Sparks, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 50.

did a few decades prior. Eventually, this became commercialized in the lowcountry but did not become dominant enough immediately to completely fill the gaps.¹⁶ On the political side of things, rumblings began within the rebelling colony of ultimate financial independence, completely free from regulation such as the Stamp Act of 1765.¹⁷ This did not fully manifest, however, until after the war and into the nineteenth century against the United States federal government concerning anti-instruction.¹⁸ In the meantime, the British were the main obstacle to South Carolinian prosperity, and they were the most vocal in Congress about drastic actions against them.¹⁹ At the same time, South Carolina began to isolate themselves within the federal system. To start, the Constitution of South Carolina, ratified in 1790, cemented virtual representation across the entire state with a rubber stamp executive position until after the civil war²⁰, as opposed to a mixed or actual representation throughout the rest of the states and federal government.²¹ Enfranchisement, also, within the state and in federal elections strictly comprised of white, landowning adult males.²² So those advocating for radical financial measures against Great Britain in the U.S. House of Representatives were a part of the same planter gentry that had been in power for a century.

Isolationism is not unfamiliar in American politics, but South Carolina's isolation did not constitute non-interaction with foreign powers, in fact quite the opposite. Not only did the state isolate itself in politics, economics, and culture from the rest of the United States of America, it

¹⁶ Joyce E. Chaplin, "Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina, 1760-1815," *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 2 (May 1991): 185. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2210413>.

¹⁷ Kenneth S. Greenberg, "Representation and the Isolation of South Carolina, 1776-1860," *The Journal of American History* 64, no. 3 (Dec. 1977): 723, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1887238>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 731.

¹⁹ Thomas Hart Benton, *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, vol. I. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1857; Project Gutenberg, August 18, 2012), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/40499>.

²⁰ Graham, Jr., "The Evolving South Carolina Constitution," 16-7.

²¹ Greenberg, "Representation and the Isolation of South Carolina, 1776-1860," 727.

²² South Carolina Constitution, art. 1, sec. 4.

began to actively pursue its own agenda outside the framework mandated by the federal government in accordance with Alexander Hamilton's "Report on Public Credit" in 1790.²³ This can best be coined as extranationalism, or a legitimate, established political unit within a nation assuming the role of the larger nation to protect its own interests. As stated, following the American Revolutionary War, Great Britain, specifically its navy led by the soon-to-be-famous Captain Horatio Nelson, stood as the primary obstacle to South Carolina's prosperity.²⁴ Before the war, merchants expected a return to normal trade specifically to and through British West Indies and then to Europe. This did not occur.²⁵ Ports in the British West Indies not only remained closed to American ships, but the British fleet also harassed American merchant ships en route to other markets in the Caribbean and elsewhere.²⁶ This attempt at trade obviously flowed through Charleston, the last significant American southern port before reaching the Caribbean.

Now before discussing the extranational events that took place to rectify this, three sources of self-confidence to act in such a way needs to be addressed. The first can be found in the general economic freedom exercised before and after the Revolution. Next, the geographical, cultural, and economic distance and isolation, both on the continent and from the British homeland. Finally, the foreign influence and encouragement throughout the development of South Carolina's political-economic machine concocted this attitude. As the colony made the transition to Crown control in the 1720s, trade, ironically, coming from South Carolina became increasingly unsupervised by imperial authorities.

²³ Alexander Hamilton, "Report Relative to a Provision for the Support of Public Credit, [9 January 1790]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-06-02-0076-0002-0001>.

²⁴ Alice B. Keith, "Relaxations in the British Restrictions on the American Trade with the British West Indies, 1783 - 1802," *The Journal of Modern History* 20, no. 1 (Mar. 1948): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1876454>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

Trade, specifically rice, no longer required to be passed through the regulators associated with the Lords Proprietor group in London. Instead, most merchants leaving Charleston's final destination typically ended up being various southern and western ports in England, with several stops in the British Caribbean along the way. South Carolina trade became so unsupervised that frequently the listed destination upon leaving Charleston began stating only "market." In actuality, these merchant ships typically ended up in places such as Holland, Germany, and Scandinavia.²⁷ This certainly instilled a sense of confidence and independence in all economic players in Charleston, from merchants operating the ships to the policymakers in the colonial legislature, that they could do whatever made them the most profit.

Despite this unsupervised diversification of rice customers, the non-importation of goods coming from the colonies into British territory that began with the revolution in 1775 hit the South Carolina economy hard. Of the total revenue from trade, seventy percent came from exporting to British ports excluding the other continental colonies.²⁸ This, obviously, forced the South Carolina elite to seek other destinations for their exports, finding the French to be more than satisfied customers.

Physical distance and political isolation from the governments on the continent significantly contributed to the growth of extranationalism politically. To begin, South Carolina had a special lobbying relationship with Great Britain before the war due to their economic importance above the rest of the continental colonies. This conditioned South Carolinian political actors to promote and secure political unity, exercising pragmatism at the expense of theory and ideology.²⁹ This practicality in distance, in turn, presented the only real political divide

²⁷ Nash, "The Organization of Trade and Finance in the Atlantic Economy," 87.

²⁸ McCusker & Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789*, 174.

²⁹ Haw, "Political Representation in South Carolina, 1669-1794," 111.

between South Carolina and Great Britain. This was then reflected in Continental Congress meetings throughout the war when faced with the problems of nonexportation. Only rice ended up being saved, albeit limited, from the nonexportation policy. For everything else, the elites were left to their own devices to find alternative customers.³⁰ To continue this political isolation within the states following the war, especially concerning virtual representation³¹ and federal intervention.³²

Foreign encouragement, from the British and the French, also played a significant factor in the development of extranationalism in South Carolina. This encouragement came more from British merchants than the British officials, as they tended to invest in traders who pursued more ambitious and alternative sources of goods. The French, on the other hand, were the most overt. In the early 1790s, pro-revolutionary Jacobins began to find refuge in the well-established Huguenot community in Charleston. This group, comprised mostly of merchants and other economic players, formed the French Popular Society along with other South Carolinian elites. This group pushed the trade community in the port to fully support French efforts against the British by 1794.³³ It needs to be stressed that these club members were not intellectual radicals but profit-seeking ones.³⁴ A core group of these radicals were militant privateers, hiding from the War of the First Coalition.³⁵ The character of Citizen Genet influenced this cause quite greatly, as he served as the ideological catalyst to defy Washington's neutrality.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., 114.

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, 265.

³³ Michael L. Kennedy, "A French Jacobin Club in Charleston, South Carolina, 1792-1795," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 91, no. 1 (Jan. 1990): 6-7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27568108>.

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 10.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

Defying Washington's neutrality and further federal party lines to pursue their own economic interest manifested in several ways throughout the 1790s, most notably in Congress and on the high seas, leaving a mess for the U.S. State Department to clean up. During the Third Congress, specifically during the House session of March 27, 1794, tensions flared over the general repayment of debt to Great Britain since the beginning of the revolution. While a bipartisan majority, Federalists and Jeffersonians, agreed upon a method for this to be done, or at least to postpone respectively, South Carolina representatives, on the other hand, vehemently opposed everything agreed upon by the majority. Speaking for the state on this, William L. Smith, stated that South Carolina carried far more of this debt than any other state, especially from contracts with the British government and subjects during the war.³⁷ Aside from this being in violation of the spirit of the nonintercourse during the revolution, South Carolina made it clear that they would not repay, hinting at strengthening ties with France and keeping an eye on the war in Europe.³⁸

Surrounding this Congressional tension, a greater conflict loomed off the southeastern seaboard concerning trade between South Carolina and the Caribbean. As already established, the British closed their ports to American ships in the Caribbean and elsewhere following the revolution. Also, the War of the First Coalition started between France and Great Britain in 1792, so the British navy began blockading French ports throughout the Caribbean and harassed any ships in the area, especially Americans. Finally, South Carolina merchants and elites hired French privateers to escort their trade fleets to their French destinations in the Caribbean and Europe. This caught the eye of the British, as their navy intercepted several French privateers in

³⁷ Benton, *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, vol. I, 485.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 486.

the Atlantic in the summer of 1793, half of them being outfitted and contracted by Charleston.³⁹ In Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson's response to British Minister to the United States George Hammond's demand for compensation for injury and damage, Jefferson acknowledged the privateers, and their relationship with the South Carolina elite, and confirmed the compensation.⁴⁰ Both sides intended to solve this problem a year later with Article XII of the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, better known as Jay's Treaty, by allowing the reopening of limited trade between the U.S. and the British West Indies. This article was later suspended, however, so the actual effectiveness of it is questionable.⁴¹ This culture of extranationalism created many problems for the United States federal government moving forward. It is no coincidence that the leader of the war hawks during the War of 1812, John C. Calhoun, represented the South Carolina elite and that the state began multiple political crises in the first half of the 1800s, culminating with the instigation of the American Civil War.⁴²

After all of this, one might ask, why the need? The answer is greed, power, and profit. The constant effort to preserve these dictates the need for drastic action, specifically proactively. Well, the South Carolina elites did this reactively, plowing up political turmoil if the machine kept running. Three interconnected causes produced these reactive measures that could have been prevented by the previous cause. The primary cause is the little diversification of commodity exports and destinations.

As already discussed, South Carolina became extremely dependent on British mercantilism for exporting the staple crops of rice and indigo to fuel their entire economy

³⁹ George Hammond to Thomas Jefferson, 30 August 1793, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School-Lillian Goldman Law Library, New Haven, CT, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jaylett2.asp.

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson to George Hammond, 5 September 1793, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School-Lillian Goldman Law Library, New Haven, CT, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jeffjay.asp.

⁴¹ Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation; U.S.-Great Britain, art. 12, November 9, 1794, 8 Stat.

⁴² Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, 265.

without nearly any stable domestic economy outside naval stores.⁴³ While some historians will argue that South Carolina is just a product of the complex economic, social, and political system of a mercantilist empire⁴⁴, the fact that they at least attempted to break the British mold disproves this. Again, South Carolina did this without the intention of proactive diversification, but the relentless pursuit of profit. This reliance on mercantilism left the colony vulnerable to the boom-and-bust cycles of conflict. As already discussed, rice collapsed just to be replaced by indigo in the 1740s, and indigo then collapsed during the revolution with cotton to replace it. This new commodity, however, did not immediately account for the significant deficit, as cotton at that was still restricted to the low-level domestic economy in the upcountry, not on a plantation scale in the lowcountry yet.⁴⁵ So during this gap in economic and political stability, the elites reactively and recklessly turned to their only perceived option left, the French, with little foreign influence. All of this makes it clear that these elites have no allegiance to anyone except themselves and their pocketbooks. To further support this, the elites were extremely comfortable with reactive measures to keep the machine running as founding father and South Carolinian planter Henry Laurens noted: “‘twas intirely owing to last War that we became an Indigo country and we hope a new War will learn us how to propagate some other usefull Articles...whilst the Planter can find his Account in continuing in the old Track.” If not for Eli Whitney’s cotton gin⁴⁶, the Industrial Revolution’s need for cheap indigo, and the globalization of canal engineering⁴⁷ feeding racial-economic-political self-glory, and federal diplomacy, the machine would not have survived to the 1860s and this cycle of destruction could have been avoided.

⁴³ McCusker & Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789*, 174, 179-80)

⁴⁴ Steve Pincus, “Rethinking Mercantilism: Political Economy, the British Empire, and the Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.69.1.0003>.

⁴⁵ Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, 208-9.

⁴⁶ Chaplin, “Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina, 1760-1815,” 185.

⁴⁷ Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, 264.

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