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“An Amazing Aptness for Learning Trades:”

The Role of Enslaved Craftsmen in Charleston Cabinetmaking Shops

A thesis submitted in partial requirements for the degree of Master of History at Virginia  
Commonwealth University.

by

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# “AN AMAZING APTNESS FOR LEARNING TRADES:” THE ROLE OF ENSLAVED CRAFTSMEN IN CHARLESTON CABINETMAKING SHOPS

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A thesis submitted in partial requirements for the degree of Master of History at Virginia Commonwealth University. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Dr. Sarah H. Meacham, Associate Professor, Department of History, Virginia Commonwealth University.

This paper examines the role of enslaved craftsmen in Charleston cabinetmaking shops during the late-eighteenth century and how wealthy Charlestonians' desire fashionable goods fueled the demand for this labor force. The first chapter examines the rise of the wealthy Charlestonians and the origins of their taste for fashionable goods. The second chapter explores the increased use of enslaved craftsmen in Charleston cabinetmaking shops during the last half of the eighteenth century and how they effected the production of fashionable cabinet goods.

## Introduction

Situated in the Charleston parlor at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) is a collection of objects that speaks to the Ball family, a family of prominence in Lowcountry South Carolina from the late-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. This group consists of a 1788 plat of the Ball family property along the Copper River, a rice fanning basket, a portrait of Elias Ball II -painted by Jeremiah Theus *circa* 1770-, and, perhaps the less noticed, 1775 mahogany teaboard (Figure 1) that belonged to Elias Ball II. Scholars typically approach the history of this teaboard, and other objects of material culture, by assessing the significance of the Ball family and how the teaboard reflects the craftsmanship of Thomas Elfe's shop. This item, however, has the potential to convey a powerful story of wealth, race, and culture in understanding the Lowcountry South during the eighteenth century.

In combing through object files and studying the development of the Charleston Lowcountry it becomes more evident that there was more to the creation of a piece of material culture than just the master of a certain shop. Research into the Ball family teaboard reveals the names of enslaved Africans who could be associated with the teaboard from 1775, when it was made, well into the nineteenth century.

The Elfe teaboard bridges production and consumption. Elfe recorded the sale of "a large Tea board" on 2 September 1775 to Elias Ball II. Elfe charged Ball £2.10.0 for

the teaboard. This teaboard remained in the Ball family until its sale to MESDA. This is the first piece made in Elfe's shop that can be traced back to his 1768 account book.<sup>1</sup>

By the time of the American Revolution Charleston stood alone as the wealthiest city in British North America. Relative to other British cities in North America, Charleston was a cosmopolitan epicenter.<sup>2</sup> Driven by the growth and popularity of the southern cash crops rice and indigo, Charleston plantation owners gained tremendous wealth that they, in turn, spent emulating the British elite. From lavish goods to expensive English educations, wealthy Charlestonians sought to live and influence their society just as their counterparts in Great Britain.

Throughout South Carolina, particularly in Charleston, many wealthy families and individuals influenced facets of daily life. Families such as the Pinckneys, Middletons, Draytons, Manigaults, and Balls contributed in numerous social, cultural, and political aspects across the Lowcountry, some families in one arena more than others. For example, the Middletons and Pinckneys were leading political figures, particularly around the time of the American Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Although politically active, the Draytons

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society; the teaboard passed from Elias Ball II to his son Elias Ball III. His nephew, Isaac Ball, inherited it next and left it to his son, William James Ball. Family records in the MESDA object file provide the names and relations of the four remaining owners before the museum acquired the teaboard.

<sup>2</sup> Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Pinckney served in the South Carolina colonial government, signed the Declaration of Independence, served as governor, and represented South Carolina under the Articles of Confederation, at the Constitutional Convention, and as a Representative in Congress. Arthur Middleton represented South Carolina at the Continental Congress and served as president of that body following the death of Peyton Randolph of Virginia; Vincent Wilson, Jr. *The Book of the Founding Fathers* (Maryland: American History Research Associates, 2001), 60.



offered more cultural and social influence in the region. This paper, broadly speaking, looks at social and cultural influences on Charleston's economy.

Specifically, this paper takes a material culture perspective to examine how elite Charleston families contributed to the market landscape of the city and the subsequent effect they had on the surrounding community, particularly the increased use of enslaved craftsmen.<sup>4</sup> Whereas previous scholarship examined either the production or the consumption of material culture, this paper looks at both and how they vastly effected the market landscape. Further, this paper argues that wealthy Charlestonians, such as the Balls and Middletons, closely imitated the English in their desire for fashionable goods that it effected local cabinetmakers to the point that they resorted to enslaved craftsmen in order to meet the demand for the quantity of fashionable goods that replicated English goods in English aristocratic homes.

A few definitions of material culture are necessary. Scholar Maurie McInnis defined material culture as examining material possessions of individuals or families in order to yield insight of the cultural authority and enthusiastic refinement of the owners. More broadly speaking, material culture refers to any object made by a person and how it affected daily life. The definition of market landscape for this encompasses the ideas of conspicuous consumption and consumer culture. The former was driven by the elite's desire to own and display fashionable goods. High demand for fashionable goods coupled with capitalism the people of the British Atlantic owned such goods at an

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<sup>4</sup>Maurie D. McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6; Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 5.

affordable rate. This, in turn, led to the use of enslaved labor to meet the growing demand for goods.

Further examination reveals that Charleston cabinetmakers relied upon English training and design influences, yet employed enslaved Africans to help complete the work. With a large demand for “English goods” at an affordable price, Charleston cabinetmakers supplied this demand by producing large quantities of handcrafted goods every year. For example, Thomas Elfe’s shop, Charleston’s most prestigious cabinetmaker, produced 537 chairs alone over a seven-year period.<sup>5</sup> The Lowcountry planter elite, a population that relied heavily upon enslaved labor to produce their wealth, fueled the demands on the marketplace. Not only did planters rely upon enslaved Africans to meet the demand for agricultural goods, but so did the shopkeepers of colonial Charleston in order to meet the demand for fashionable, material goods.

## Sources

Paramount to this study are the primary sources that pertain to cabinetmaking shops and the prominent families of Charleston. Due to the Ball family’s large land holdings and extensive wealth, detailed inventories still remain to provide evidence of those items considered necessary for the lavish lowcountry lifestyle. As this study focuses on the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, the inventories and wills of

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society; John Christian Kolbe, *Thomas Elfe, Eighteenth Century Charleston Cabinetmaker* (MA Thesis: University of South Carolina, 1980), 120; Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furniture: 1680-1830* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997), 138.

these generations are at the heart of the paper. Thomas Elfe's account book, dated January 1768 to late 1775, connects prominent families to Elfe.<sup>6</sup> These documents also include the names, and in some cases the jobs, of slaves on the Ball family properties.

Of particular interest to the latter part of this study is the account book of Thomas Elfe, master cabinetmaker in Charleston. Elfe's account book detailed the sales and repairs made by his cabinetry shop between January 1768 until he passed in November 1775. Thomas Elfe was born in London at the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century. He likely came to Charleston sometime after he reached his maturity. According to family tradition, Elfe received training from an excellent master before he sailed to South Carolina.<sup>7</sup> Elfe's name did not come up in Charleston until he was about 28 years old when he was listed in a city court record.<sup>8</sup> Over the years he rose to prominence and wealth. Between 1758 and 1765 Elfe purchased numerous acres of land in the country, lots in the city, and a pew in St. Michael's Church.<sup>9</sup> Elfe's craftsmen, according to his account book, created approximately 1,502 pieces of furniture. Until his death in November 1775 Elfe employed a number of apprentices, journeymen, and enslaved Africans in an effort to meet the demand of his Charleston clientele for fashionable furniture at the height of his career.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Elias Ball's first recorded purchase from Elfe is dated 21 July 1772. On this date Ball paid for "1 Mahogany Bedstead & Casters [£]27," "A Set of screw rods [£]5," and "2 Mahogany Dining Tables [£] 32." Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup> E. Milby Burton, *Thomas Elfe: Charleston Cabinet-Maker* (Charleston: The Charleston Museum, 1970), 5.

<sup>8</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 28 September 1747.

<sup>9</sup> E. Milby Burton, *Charleston Furniture, 1700-1825* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1955), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Burton, *Charleston Furniture*, 89.

Included in Elfe's account book are the names and jobs of his enslaved African workmen as well as the record of Elfe's sale and purchase of the enslaved Africans in his household. These slaves, unlike many of those on the surrounding plantations, occasionally received monetary compensation for completed work. Elfe recorded on 23 February 1775 that he "paid Liverpool for his work."<sup>11</sup> Such recordings allude to a different master-slave relation in these shops compared to those on the plantations. Elfe appears to have compensate some of his enslaved laborers for the work they completed, whereas enslaved laborers on plantations did not always expect such treatment. As the use of enslaved Africans as a profitable labor force appeared very prominent throughout the city this paper aims to reveal the extent to which this practice was utilized.

Newspaper advertisements and local statutes contextualize the role of enslaved Africans in cabinetmaking shops. These sources address matters regarding the frequency with which enslaved craftsmen were utilized by cabinetmakers that most other scholars have not included. What is particularly important about these two primary source areas is that, though they do not specifically document the extent to which enslaved craftsmen were used in cabinetmaking shops, they offer supporting evidence that alludes to the widespread use of enslaved labor by Charleston cabinetmakers, along with other important trades.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Elfe, Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775, South Carolina Historical Society, 23 February 1775.

The primary method of this paper is that of cultural history, while the secondary methods uses social history and cliometrics. As this paper examines the role of different cultural influences on the market for fashionable goods it seems only natural that this paper leans to the cultural and social history methods more. This paper explores the role of the enslaved craftsmen in Charleston trade shops and the extent to which such individuals were utilized to fulfill the demand for fashionable goods. Statistical analysis of this tendency in Charleston reveals that cabinetmakers increasingly used enslaved craftsmen to meet the demand for fashionable goods.

Thomas Elfe's account book references four sawyers and five cabinetmakers and joiners. The combined monetary value of these slaves was calculated to be £3550.<sup>12</sup> While these numbers seem rather low considering the popularity of Thomas Elfe's work, figures for the region tell a broader story. Charleston and the surrounding region was the home to approximately 50,000 enslaved Africans. It was estimated that 3,324 enslaved Africans worked as tradesmen in the Charleston region between 1760 and 1800. Of this figure, approximately 25 percent, or 831, worked in trades that were associated with cabinetmaking.<sup>13</sup> The examination of such records and references to enslaved craftsmen proves Charleston cabinetmakers regularly used enslaved labor over the last half of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society; E. Milby Burton, *Thomas Elfe: Charleston Cabinet-Maker* (Charleston: The Charleston Museum, 1970), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Allison Carll, *The Role of the Black Artisan in the Building and Decorative Arts in South Carolina's Charleston District, 1760-1800* (Ph.D. dissertation: The University of Tennessee, 1982), 28.

The wills and inventories for Elias Ball II and his son, Elias Ball III, reference enslaved craftsmen, such as “Plenty (a Carpenter).”<sup>14</sup> These references speak to the importance of enslaved Africans not only in the trade shops of Charleston but also to the plantation owners who hired out these slaves as a supplemental income source. These personal records support the claim that enslaved craftsmen were highly valued economically.

Lastly, this paper examines the role and influence of the wealthy families on the local marketplace. This paper looks at the influences of the larger society (i.e. Great Britain) on the local society (i.e. Charleston). Aspects of polite society desired to emulate the elite of Great Britain, which drove the wealthy Charlestonians’ desire for fashionable good in the colonies. This, in turn, proves that the local craftsmen, particularly cabinetmakers, sought to meet these needs through enslaved craftsmen.

## **Chapters**

This paper is broken up into two chapters that examine what influenced wealthy Charlestonians to purchased fashionable goods and how Charleston cabinetmakers used enslaved craftsmen to keep up with the demand for fashionable goods.

The first chapter of this paper examines the rise of the elite planter class and how their desire to emulate the British aristocracy fueled and molded the market for fashionable goods in Charleston. Benefitting from the success of southern cash crops, Charleston’s elite could afford a lifestyle like their counterparts in England. Following tours of the country houses of England’s gentry and peerage, as well as greater Europe,

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<sup>14</sup> Last Will and Testament of Elias Ball III, dated 12 January 1810.

wealthy Charlestonians built their houses and purchased furniture much more in the vein of the British elite.

The second chapter explores the effects of the increased demand for fashionable goods on Charleston cabinetmakers, especially the increased use of enslaved craftsmen in cabinetmaking shops in order to keep up with the growing demand. The growth in the number of cabinetmaking shops in Charleston rose in the last half of the eighteenth century and coincided with the rise of the planter class. Likewise, a growth in the use of enslaved labor in Charleston's trade shops took place over these same years. The extent to which enslaved labor was used in these shops is evident in the legal code of the city as well as newspapers and personal records. In exploring these sources, one can begin to paint a picture of how extensively enslaved cabinetmakers were used in Charleston and how important they were to the free population.

The last chapter of this paper synthesizes the findings of the previous two chapters. It also evaluates the findings by previous scholars and how this paper contributes to the larger conversation regarding the use of enslaved craftsmen in Charleston cabinetmaking shops. Several scholarly views on cabinetmaking and collecting in Charleston have been the subject of historical and decorative arts research over the decades. This paper contributes a view that combines several perspectives and introduces a new narrative on role of the enslaved African community in Charleston during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century.



Figure 1- Teaboard, Thomas Elfe, Charleston, South Carolina, 1775, Mahogany (Courtesy of MESDA)



## Chapter 1

### On Being Elite in Charleston and South Carolina's Lowcountry

In loftiness of head-dress these ladies stoop to the daughters of the North; in richness of dress surpass them...The gentlemen many of them dressed with richness and elegance was common with us- many with swords on. We had two Macaronis present- just arrived from London.

Josiah Quincy Jr., 3 March 1773<sup>15</sup>

During Josiah Quincy Jr.'s 1773 travel to the Lowcountry, the Massachusetts native recounted his interactions with many of the region's eminent figures, including Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Miles Brewton. His journal detailed his interactions with these individuals, the places he toured, and the conversations held around dinner. Quincy's above description of the elite ladies and gentlemen he met in Charleston is the typical image one thinks of when picturing colonial Charleston society at its peak.

American artist Benjamin West's 1770 portrait of the Middleton family best exemplifies visually what it meant to be elite in eighteenth-century Charleston (Figure 1). At the left-hand third of this landscape portrait stands Arthur Laurens Middleton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and wealthy landowner in Charleston's Lowcountry. The patriarch is comfortably reaching toward the center of the portrait in order to grasp the outstretched arm of his newborn son, Henry. Holding Henry, in the right-hand third of the portrait, is Arthur's wife, Mary Izard Middleton. Mary is seated on

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<sup>15</sup> Jennie Holton Fant, *The Travelers' Charleston: Accounts of Charleston and Lowcountry, South Carolina, 1666-1861* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 26.

a sofa and looks toward Arthur, with Henry grabbing the collar of her robe. The style of the portrait is nearly identical to that of Renaissance painter Raphael, an artist known to Charlestonian elite.<sup>16</sup> The setting appears to be indoors with fine tapestry hanging on the wall in front of a classical stone column. Behind Arthur is an outdoor scene consisting largely of a vast sky of clouds. Henry is seated on his mother's lap while she is seated on a fine green sofa. None of the furnishings are simple, common place items. Rather, they are expensive goods that overtly convey an understanding of the family's wealth and status; a perception that the Middletons desired to achieve while in London and take back to Charleston with them.

Every part of the family portrait is intended to convey a message of where the Middletons stand without needing to know them intimately. The sofa is upholstered in a rich green patterned silk and finished with brass furniture pins. Perched on the back of the sofa and looking down at the excess of Mary's flowing red silk robe is a blue parrot, a sign of wealth and interest in the natural world. Their status was further conveyed in their attire. Arthur and Mary both wear long, silk robes that hint at a life of leisure and luxury. Mary exhibits her attention to modern fashion by revealing a red slipper from under her long robe. Arthur's robe lies loosely over his upright torso as the white collar of his more classical costume show through. Benjamin West blended elements from Anthony van Dyke (Figure 2) and Raphael (Figure 3) to create a modern portrait of a family that appears to have a more established ancestry than their colonial South Carolina situation could convey.

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<sup>16</sup> Maurie D. McInnis, "In Pursuit of Refinement: Charlestonians Abroad, 1740-1860" ed. Maurie McInnis (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 106.

The Middleton family portrait epitomizes the desired perception and ambition of Charleston's planter elite, and of those who sought to be in the upper echelon of society. Charlestonians saw themselves as English citizens, merely removed from the English mother country, and created a society within the Lowcountry that resembled that which they witnessed in England. The rise of the Charlestonian planter class is distinguished by its rapid growth from the success of rice and indigo cultivation and the socio-economic gap between them and the middle and lower-class members of Lowcountry society. This chapter will examine the causes that influenced the rise of the planter elite in the Lowcountry and why wealthy Charlestonians sought fashionable goods for their homes. Through agricultural prosperity, education, economic connections, and economic boom elite Charleston planters shaped the market landscape and developed a taste for fashionable goods because of their ambitions to appear like their English counterparts. By looking at the factors that gave rise to this noted class of Carolinians one will be able to better understand why a rise in the enslaved craftsmen population between 1760 and 1800 took place. This chapter will look at the contributions of wealthy families to the Charleston marketplace through family wills, probate inventories, and account books.

The ability for wealthy Charlestonians to afford fashionable goods can be explained by their rise to affluence during the first half of the eighteenth century. The Province of Carolina was created after the restoration of the monarch in 1662 in which King Charles II reclaimed the English throne. Under royal charter, eight proprietors were granted land that today consists of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. The proprietors established a working government for the colony and campaigned for

settlers to populate the region, that was then called Carolina.<sup>17</sup> The proprietors faced some difficulties in attracting new settlers, allowing more non-Anglican migrants to the colony, and failed to elect a governor between 1708 and 1710 which resulted in a number of changes to the constitution of the province. Despite their efforts to succeed, seven of the eight proprietors sold their stake in the colony to King Charles.<sup>18</sup> The proprietors faced difficulties during the early eighteenth century, which included: attracting new settlers; conflict with Carolinians over the allowance of more non-Anglicans into the region; and failure to elect a governor to the colony between 1708 and 1710, all of which slowed economic growth.

Charleston was by no means a small, provincial village, even for a British North American colony. Naturalist and scientist John Lawson visited Charleston in the early 1700s and wrote of his experiences:

the inhabitants, by their wise management and industry, have improv'd the country, which is in as thriving circumstances at this time, as any colony on the continent of English America<sup>19</sup>

Lawson chalked this up to the fact that Charleston was first settled by “genteel people who were acquainted with trade.” Later, this benefitted Charlestonians as the city and Lowcountry region developed over the eighteenth century. As will be discussed more at

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<sup>17</sup> *Charter of Carolina - March 24, 1663*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th\\_century/nc01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc01.asp), *Avalon Law*. Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. Retrieved 10 May 2017.

<sup>18</sup> The sole proprietor not to sell his stake was Sir George Carteret, 1<sup>st</sup> Baronet. This portion of North Carolina remained in the family until the revolutionary government of North Carolina took it during the American Revolution.

<sup>19</sup> Fant, *The Travelers' Charleston*, 11.

length later, Charlestonians relied upon business connections in England in order to build upon their agricultural success.

After a number of wars with Native Americans and the fall of the proprietary government in 1729 the colonists of South Carolina took greater control of their government.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after this governmental switch, rice cultivation took off in the Lowcountry. By mid-century planters used reservoirs across the countryside to cultivate rice.<sup>21</sup> Early Carolinians found that tobacco cultivation was not feasible, or profitable for that matter, for the region. After early success with rice, planters expanded rice fields east, closer to the coast.

Agricultural success led to great wealth for Lowcountry planters. Rice production was particularly lucrative. Between 1760 and 1770 alone, more than 587 million pounds of rice was exported from Carolina.<sup>22</sup> With such success, Lowcountry planter elites built large country estates and purchased lots in Charleston for urban residences.

Elias Ball II was the heir to a family fortune dating back to 1682, which was established in rice and timber cultivation.<sup>23</sup> In Elias's 1784 last will and testament he divided his properties amongst his three surviving children, Elias III, John, and Lydia. The eldest son, Elias Ball III, received Comingtee and Limerick plantations in

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<sup>20</sup> M. Eugene Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina: A Political History, 1663-1763* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 125; M. Eugene Sirmans, "Politics in Colonial South Carolina: The Failure of Proprietary Reform, 1682-1694," *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 23, no. 1 (1966): 33.

<sup>21</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), 481.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Ballentine Publishing Group, 1999), 27.

Charleston County, St. John's Parish. John received Kensington, Hyde Park, and Soboy plantations in Charleston County, St. John's Parish. Lydia received his "Lot of Land situate[d] on the Bay of Charleston."<sup>24</sup> Elias's sons managed their portion of their inheritance so well that they each added to their land holdings by the turn of the century.<sup>25</sup> Such successful management led to enormous wealth, which resulted in more outward displays of status mirroring the British aristocracy.

The Middletons afforded their elaborate family portrait and sophisticated lifestyle largely from successful plantation management and inheritance, too. The Middletons' extensive land holdings grew to comprise 28 plantations throughout South Carolina and covered more than 63,000 acres, all of which was worked by the more than 3,500 enslaved.<sup>26</sup> As scholars have noted, many of the slaves brought to the Carolina Lowcountry were already familiar with rice cultivation because of their region of Africa.<sup>27</sup> By exploiting this labor force the Middletons further profited from rice cultivation. Successive generations of well managed plantations, fruitful harvests, and wealth from inheritance and marriage produced the income that allowed Arthur Middleton's family the luxury of leisure.

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<sup>24</sup> Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 448; Last Will for Elias Ball II of Kensington, 1784. By the early nineteenth century, the extended Ball family owned numerous other plantations along the Cooper River. For more on the plantations and slave history of the Ball family of Charleston see, Cheryll Ann Cody, *Slave Demography and Family Formation: A Community Study of the Ball Family Plantation, 1720-1896* (PhD dissertation: University of Minnesota, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Cheryll Ann Cody, *Slave Demography and Family Formation: A Community Study of the Ball Family Plantation, 1720-1896* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Minnesota, 1982), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Doyle, *Beyond the Fields: Slavery at Middleton Place* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 65.

In order to live a fashionable lifestyle like their aristocratic English counterparts, Charlestonians needed a source of income to afford it. Charlestonians gained their wealth primarily through agricultural production. Their economic success was due in part to the use of enslaved labor throughout the eighteenth century. As production demands and profits increased so too did labor demands. The total enslaved population in South Carolina in 1700 is estimated to be at approximately 2,400 individuals.<sup>28</sup> By 1740, the enslaved population boomed and surpassed the white population for the first time in the colony.<sup>29</sup> The total enslaved population as of 1740 is estimated to be at approximately 39,000 enslaved individuals.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the century, the total enslaved population for South Carolina reached over 146,000, with only about eight percent of these slaves being new arrivals from Africa. The use of enslaved African labor throughout the eighteenth century granted wealthy Charlestonians the ability to live a more leisurely life because they were not tied to jobs like other professions. Some wealthy Charlestonians could afford to be absentee planters.

For the Middletons, as well as the Balls and other wealthy Charleston families, a life of leisure included travel to Europe. Historian George C. Rogers argued that by the 1740s it was commonplace for families to “go home once a fortune was made.”<sup>31</sup> For the most part, this meant England, and specifically places like London and Bath were particularly popular among the aristocracy.

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<sup>28</sup> Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> [www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/3rice/3facts1.htm](http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/3rice/3facts1.htm), accessed 25 March 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> George C. Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 14.

As in England, Charleston experienced social seasons.<sup>32</sup> English aristocracy traveled from the countryside to major metropolises, such as London, at certain times of the year for social occasions. The same became true in Charleston. Wealthy Charlestonians from the surrounding countryside converged on Charleston for social gatherings and leisurely activities. German botanist Johann David Schoepf described visiting Charleston and thought it “inferior to none...vastly more cheerful and pleasing...it may deserve first place.”<sup>33</sup>

Travel in England was almost necessary to become a member of fashionable society. Travel allowed wealthy Charlestonians the opportunity to be “schooled in the importance of dress, objects, and possessions for confirming one’s place in society.”<sup>34</sup> As Peter Manigault learned during his four-and-a-half-year study in London a fine suit was necessary even for a Sunday sermon:

For one Sunday Evening, I went with Billy [William Henry] Drayton to hear the celebrated Mr. Foster. I was drest quite plain, my Friend had a Laced Waistcoat and hat. He, or rather his Laced Waistcoat, was introduced to a pew, while I, that is, my plain Clothes, were forced to stand up, during the whole time of divine Service, in the Isle.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Rogers, *Age of the Pinckneys*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Jennie Holton Fant, *The Travelers’ Charleston: Accounts of Charleston and Lowcountry, South Carolina, 1666-1861* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Maurie McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Manigault to Anne Ashby Manigault, London, 20 February 1775, in Mabel L. Webber, “Peter Manigault’s Letters,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 32 (1931): 121; McInnis, *Politics of Taste*, 5.



Later in the eighteenth century, European travel extended to the continent, particularly Paris and Rome. The Middletons, Rutledges, and Horrys traveled to Paris in the 1790s and did much of their sight-seeing together. Travel to such metropolises allowed these established and wealthy families to understand the fashion and tastes of their European counterparts. These fashions tastes returned to Charleston with the traveling Charlestonians.<sup>36</sup>

Another benefit of being a wealthy Charlestonian was education. Education furthered the influence of the Charleston planter elite. Due to the financial success of Lowcountry rice plantations, wealthy Charlestonians could afford to send their sons to England for higher education.<sup>37</sup> Prior to the American Revolution, majority of Charleston's elite sent their sons to England for school. Wealthy Charlestonians of previous generations completed their education at such prestigious institutions as Oxford and Cambridge and desired that their offspring do the same in order to have the best possible and most successful life when they returned to Charleston. However, by the end of the eighteenth century fewer and fewer Charlestonians sent their sons to England for their education. Reputable schools in Geneva or Italy were became more desirable, both financially and intellectually. Also, schools within the United States were viewed as more desirable following the American Revolution. More often than not, the education provided by the university prepared the pupil for a life of public service in careers related to law or politics. Education, particularly education abroad, provided an

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<sup>36</sup> Angela D. Mack and Thomas J. Savage, "Reflections of Refinement: Portraits of Charlestonians at Home and Abroad" in *In Pursuit of Refinement: Charlestonians Abroad, 1740-1860*, ed. Maurie D. McInnis (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>37</sup> Mack and Savage, *Reflections of Refinement*, 11.

opportunity for a more financially successful career, which led to one's ability to afford fashionable goods.

The importance of education to eighteenth-century Charlestonians is evident in the advertisements for schools and school masters in Charleston. Scholar Sharon Sundue highlights the correlation between the growth in the white population and increased number of schoolmasters.<sup>38</sup> Sundue noted that schoolmasters were proud of the increase in students over the years. In 1723, schoolmaster Thomas Murrith complained of the “difficulties and inconveniences” in attracting students. However, the next year Murrith found himself with 46 students, up from three, declaring the school was “in a flourishing condition.”<sup>39</sup> Charlestonians viewed education highly, as is evident in the number of schoolmasters who advertised in Charleston. In 1735, five schoolmasters advertised their services and 30 years later that number grew to 31 schoolmasters.<sup>40</sup>

These private schools in Charleston prepared wealthy students for the higher education that met them in London. Indeed, this was the hope of one anonymous contributor to the *South Carolina Gazette* who attempted to persuade more individuals to enroll their sons into these schools. By completing an education locally, students were sent off to England where they continued their education, with the end goal being

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<sup>38</sup> Sharon Braslaw Sundue, *Industrious in Their Stations: Young People at Work in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston, 1735-1785* (Ph.D. dissertation: Harvard University, 2001), 133.

<sup>39</sup> Sundue, *Industrious in Their Stations*, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Sundue, *Industrious in Their Stations*, 136.

that the “Bar, Bench, and Pulpit [be] honourably fill’d with the produce of this our own Province.”<sup>41</sup>

Both the Draytons and Pinckneys sent their sons to schools in England in 1753. John Drayton’s two eldest sons, William Henry and Charles, were nine and ten years old, respectively, when their parents sent them “home” to London for schooling. Thomas and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney were seven and three years old, respectively, when their father, Charles, took his family to London so that his sons could attend school.<sup>42</sup> Charles Cotesworth attended Middle Temple, where he studied law, eventually he was called to the bar in 1769. When Charles Cotesworth returned to Charleston in the 1770s he practiced law and was elected to the state legislature, until the outbreak of the American Revolution. Similarly, the Drayton brothers, who were accompanied to London by the Pinckneys, also studied law. William Henry Drayton attended Westminster School before being accepted to Balliol College, Oxford. Upon returning to Charleston, William Henry was admitted to the bar and served as a delegate to the Continental Congress for South Carolina. The importance of education that both families stressed led their sons to successful careers which offered them the chance for a life of leisure, much like previous generations of their families.

While studying abroad Charlestonians mixed and mingled with fellow colonists studying away from home, but more importantly to them, and they socialized with the sons of English aristocracy. These connections between the wealthy Charlestonian and the English aristocracy were especially sought after because it meant that once one’s

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<sup>41</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 15 April 1732.

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Gail Griffin, *The Eighteenth Century Draytons of Drayton Hall* (Ph.D. dissertation: Emory University, 1985), 172.

education was complete there were established lines of communication to England that remained. The connections between the colonists and the English aristocracy assisted with business transactions, provided political clout, and supplied the latest European fashions to America. These English classmates also provided a model that their Charlestonian counterparts mimicked. Being able to visit the homes of the English aristocracy and frequent the same taverns and coffeehouses allowed Charlestonians abroad the opportunity to see first-hand how their English brethren lived. Upon their return to Charleston, these newly enlightened men built or expanded estates of their own and created their own version of the English-based class system.<sup>43</sup>

These associations were essential to the success of the Lowcountry planter elite. The network of merchants in London and Charleston were crucial to the buying and selling of fashionable goods in British North America's wealthiest city.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, this network allowed for the sale of rice in England. Charlestonians were strongly linked to Britain through the transatlantic trade, where British merchants purchased the harvests of the Lowcountry and, in return, sold luxury items back to the aristocratic Charlestonians. Connections made abroad helped establish credit, a fundamental aspect of the transatlantic trade. The success of the British Empire laid in the success of its system of trade and credit. In order for Charleston planters to become successful and wealthy they relied upon fruitful rice and indigo harvests. The harvest of a crop

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<sup>43</sup> Wendell Garrett, "Introduction," in *In Pursuit of Refinement: Charlestonians Abroad, 1740-1860*, ed. Maurie D. McInnis (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>44</sup> J. Thomas Savage and Robert A. Leath, "Buying British: Merchants, Taste, and Charleston Consumerism" in *In Pursuit of Refinement: Charlestonians Abroad, 1740-1860*, ed. Maurie D. McInnis (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 55.

varied each year, which led to inconsistent cash flow. Thus, Charleston planters relied on credit to maintain their farms and their lifestyles. Merchants, too, relied on the credit of Charleston planters, which allowed for transactions of goods to continually take place between the two regions.

One of the outcomes that came about from wealthy Charlestonians' attempts to maintain a fashionable lifestyle that reflected the lifestyle of the English was the success of skilled artists, such as Thomas Sully, Henry Benbridge, and Jeremiah Theus.<sup>45</sup> As was seen earlier, Charlestonians sought to convey their wealth and status through visual representations of themselves. While traveling abroad Charlestonians sought reputable portrait artists for whom to sit. The Middletons employed the services of American painter Benjamin West while in London. Other noted British artists Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Allan Ramsay were sought out by both British and Charleston aristocracy. Charlestonian Peter Manigault selected Ramsay to paint his portrait while attending college in London in 1751 (Figure 5). "Tis done by one of the best hands in England," wrote Manigault to his family in Charleston, "and is accounted by all Judges here, not only an Exceeding good Likeness, but a very good Piece of Painting."<sup>46</sup>

Others sought the talents of European trained American artists. American artists, likewise, found ample clients in colonial America setup shops in large cities, such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Jeremiah Theus was one of the few artists who worked in colonial America and was successful enough to settle in one

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<sup>45</sup> Mack and Savage, *Reflections of Refinement*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> "Peter Manigault's Letters," Mabel L. Webber, ed., *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, No. 31 (1930); 277.

place, Charleston. Theus's early work mirrored similar styles found in Britain and attracted Charlestonians to his studio (Figure 6). In a letter from Charles Willson Peale to Henry Benbridge in 1773, Peale wrote of the success that Benbridge found in Charleston. Peale wrote that "It give[s] me pleasure to hear you find such encouragers of the Art, men that don't want to be courted to patronize merit."<sup>47</sup> The efforts of the wealthy Charlestonians to maintain a fashionable lifestyle similar to their British counterparts had a ripple-effect that subsequently benefitted those in the working and middle class in Charleston.

Charleston architecture, too, mimicked that of the British. When Charleston expanded between 1767 and 1771 new public buildings took up spaces along the waterfront. The construction of some of these buildings was overseen by Peter and John Adam Horlbeck, beginning in 1764. The brothers secured materials from England and their designs are believed to come from notable English cities such as Bristol, Liverpool, and London.<sup>48</sup> Some of these buildings undoubtedly looked familiar to wealthy Charlestonians from their travels abroad and symbolized their hopes of appearing more English.

English country houses underwent a transformation in the eighteenth century, shifting from a formal retreat to a more open and social home. The great houses of the British nobility became entertaining spaces that welcomed British elites more than in previous generations. This new era witnessed the mixing of certain social classes while still maintaining class distinctions. Wealthy Charlestonians visiting England starting in

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<sup>47</sup> Letter from Charles Willson Peale to Henry Benbridge, 1 May 1773.

<sup>48</sup> Rogers, *Age of the Pinckneys*, 61.

the first quarter of the eighteenth century experienced first-hand how members of the peerage entertained English aristocrats in their country homes, and vice versa. For wealthy Charlestonians visiting England, this meant that they had the opportunity to interact with members of different social spheres and evaluate how members of different spheres lived.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence of how wealthy Charlestonians mirrored cultural customs observed during their time in England included the gendering of spaces and dining customs. According to historian Mark Girouard, in the large English country houses “the dining room began to be thought of as a mainly masculine, and the drawing room as a mainly feminine, room.”<sup>50</sup> This same distinction of masculine verses feminine spaces made its way to the Charleston Lowcountry, too, as can be seen in the circa 1760 drawing (Figure 7) by George Roupell titled “Peter Manigault and His Friends.” In this drawing from the Winterthur Museum collection wealthy Charleston planter Peter Manigault is seated at the head of the table and is joined by seven other men of polite society. All of the men are well dressed and their hair or wigs are long and curled, another indicator of current fashion. Each man has a wine glass in front of them and around the table are four bottles of wine and a large punch bowl. In the window to Manigault’s left is an exotic bird in a bird cage and a young enslaved African boy who is likely Manigault’s footman. It is not known what brought the men together that day or what events took place at Manigault’s house, but what can be observed is how these members of Charleston society were well aware of English dining etiquette and their interest in

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 182.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Girouard, *English Country House*, 205.

imitating them in South Carolina. According to *The Honours of the Table, or, Rules for Behaviour During Meals*, first printed in London in 1790, men customarily remained in the dining room after dinner and enjoyed more libations. “Habit having made a pint of wine after dinner almost necessary to a man who eats freely,” it states, “...it is customary...for the ladies to retire and leave the men to themselves.”<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, Philadelphians also mimicked the fashion and customs of the English elite. Work done by Philadelphia cabinetmaker Benjamin Randolph exhibited design elements that could be found in furniture design books published in England. Randolph and other Philadelphia cabinetmakers used Thomas Johnson’s *One Hundred & Fifty New Designs*, which was published in London in 1761.<sup>52</sup>

Other customs made their way across the Atlantic due in large part to the social changes that took place in England. As it pertained to the household and the increased entertaining that took place in English country houses and on the plantations of the Lowcountry, the advent of the housekeeper came about in the eighteenth century. In England, the abundant need of “gentlewomen” to wait on the lady of the household was no longer necessary. The role of the housekeeper grew to be the female equivalent of the butler or steward of a household. The housekeeper saw to the need of the mistress of a household and managed the growing staff of house maids needed to keep a cleaned and operating.<sup>53</sup> In the Charleston Lowcountry this equated to the use of

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<sup>51</sup> *The Honours of the Table, or, Rules for Behaviour During Meals, Second Edition* (London: Literary-Press, 1791), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Luke Beckerdite, “Thomas Johnson, Hercules Courtney, and the Dissemination of London Rococo Design,” in *American Furniture*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2016), 28.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Girouard, *English Country House*, 208.



enslaved Africans for house work. The enslaved African population grew at a tremendous rate during the eighteenth century. While the demand for enslaved labor was largely to meet the pursuit of rice cultivation, domestic slaves were also sought after for roles in the house similar to those found in the English country houses of the landed gentry.

The Ball family was another of the English gentry that became part of the Lowcountry planter elite during the eighteenth century. Documentation over four successive generations of the Ball family reveals how the family exhibited their economic standing through the home furnishings they purchased and acquisition of property. It is not known if the Ball purchased more goods from abroad or locally, but surviving records shine a light on the quality of goods they purchased in a society deeply immersed in the marketplace. Looking at probate inventories, wills, and account books allows researchers to understand how one family could have an impact on the local marketplace with their desire for fashionable goods.

Elias Ball was the first member of the Ball family who immigrated to North America. Elias was born in Stokeinteignhead, England, in 1676.<sup>54</sup> In 1697, Elias's older brother, William, was offered an inheritance in Charleston from their half-uncle, John Coming. William was an established tailor in London and did not desire to go to Carolina and, thus, passed the inheritance on to his younger brother, Elias. The following year 22-year-old Elias set sail for Charleston and his new home at Coming T (later spelled Comingtee).<sup>55</sup> Elias, today referred to as "Red Cap" for the red cap he wore for his

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<sup>54</sup> Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 22.

<sup>55</sup> Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 40.

portrait sitting (Figure 4), successfully managed the plantation and began a family of his own. With his first wife, Elizabeth Harleston, Elias fathered five children. Among them was Elias Ball II, sometimes referred to as Second Elias, who was the eldest son and later inherited the family's wealth. Like other wealthy Charlestonians, Red Cap accumulated enough wealth to provide for the next generation of Balls and to allow for a leisurely lifestyle like their British counterparts.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Red Cap's buying habits, since copies of his will and probate inventory no longer exist. What Red Cap can contribute to this analysis are his property holdings, namely, a sizeable estate which he eventually passed along to his children, Second Elias and John. Second Elias bequeathed property "originally granted to my Father Elias Ball" to both of his children and to his brother.<sup>56</sup> It is also likely that Red Cap left Second Elias some of the furnishings at these estates. However, like his father's will and inventory, no inventory of Second Elias's estate remains. To begin putting together a picture of the furnishings held by Red Cap one could look at the probate inventory of Second Elias's other son, John, which will be discussed below.

Second Elias added to the family estate when he purchased land surrounding Comingtee and built more houses, namely Kensington, Strawberry, and Limerick.<sup>57</sup> By the 1770s Second Elias established himself as one of the wealthy planter elite of Charleston, acquiring six plantation tracts and five additional tracts of land totaling 5,872

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<sup>56</sup> Last Will and Testament of Elias Ball II, 20 June 1788.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Simons Deas, *Recollections of the Ball Family of South Carolina and The Comingtee Plantation* (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 68.

acres.<sup>58</sup> The Ball family, like many of the other wealthy Charlestonians looked to their British counterparts for inspiration. Of the six plantation tracts, two names came from estates in England: Kensington and Hyde Park. Even some of the names of the enslaved bore resemblance to English names, such as “Charlotte...Julius...Hannah...Lucy...[and] Rachel.”<sup>59</sup> To furnish these homes Second Elias sought the work of cabinetmaker Thomas Elfe. Between 1772 and 1775 Elias purchased £191.10.0 worth of items, including “2 Mahogany Dining Tables £32... A Slab Table £15... A Doz. Mahogany Chairs Scrole Back £85.”<sup>60</sup>

Second Elias’s son, John, filled his eight households with both new and old furnishings. His Marshland Plantation was home to “1 Secretary, Book Case, [and] Books” appraised at 400 dollars. At his East Bay Street residence, he furnished his more than eight rooms with “1 Piano Forte \$100... 1 [Mahogany] Secretary Book Case [and] Books \$120... 2 Large Mahogany Dining Tables [and] Ends \$70... 1 old Mahogany Desk \$3... 1 old Mahogany Sideboard \$5... 2 Large Mirrors \$200.”<sup>61</sup> The presence of two particular items, the sideboard and the piano forte, highlight John’s efforts to find his place among polite society. These items were relatively new to Charlestonians, and all British North American colonists for that matter, around the middle of the eighteenth century. The sideboard, specifically, was new at the time of John’s death in 1817. These items had only made their way over from Europe in the past 50 to 60 years and became part of the polite Charleston household due in large

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<sup>58</sup> Last Will and Testament of Elias Ball II, 20 June 1788.

<sup>59</sup> Inventory of Elias Ball III estate, 5 April 1810.

<sup>60</sup> Account Book of Thomas Elfe, 1768-1775.

<sup>61</sup> Probate Inventory for John Ball estate, 14 November 1817.

part to the design books of Thomas Chippendale and Thomas Sheraton.<sup>62</sup> As for the piano forte, such an item was a staple in elite households by the end of the eighteenth century, symbolizing not only wealth but also gentility and refinement. For example, a young woman was taught proper etiquette and how to entertain, and a piano forte was a necessary element in her education. As a member of polite society, it was important for a young woman to know how to take care of guest of equal or similar social status. The presence of a piano forte in John's 1817 probate inventory speaks to his desire to prepare his family for fulfilling their societal obligations, and to maintain his family's position among wealthy Charlestonians.

The total monetary valuation of John's East Bay Street residence, in 1817, was \$13,643.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, when John's son, John Ball Jr., passed away and his property inventoried, the total sum did not come close to that of his father: after all of the household goods, personal property, and enslaved Africans were calculated, John Jr.'s Charleston estate totaled \$1,141.<sup>64</sup> This stark difference in property holding suggests that the earlier generation of Ball family members placed more emphasis on the personal property and household furnishings that conveyed their status in Charleston society. This may also be due in part to the extensive size of the elder John Ball's family. By the time of his death he had married twice and fathered 16 children, nine of whom reached adulthood.

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 51.

<sup>63</sup> Probate Inventory for John Ball estate, 14 November 1817.

<sup>64</sup> Probate Inventory for John Ball Junior estate, 6 April 1826.

Whether through their landholdings or material goods, each member of the Ball family copied aspects of English culture. The Balls, like other wealthy Charlestonians, sought to emulate English aristocracy and did so when they purchased fashionable goods or created large country estates. These moves mirrored the lifestyle choices seen by Charlestonians who visited the English countryside or the streets of London.

Charlestonians went to every length in order to create a culture in the Lowcountry that mirrored that of England. With the success of rice and indigo cultivation in the early decades of the eighteenth century, wealthy Charlestonians could afford a lifestyle that began to mimic that of their English counterparts. Their affluence allowed for long periods of leisure and travel time. Wealthy families such as the Balls, Manigaults, Middletons, and Draytons were able to travel to England and other parts of Europe for months and even years on end. There they participated in the English educational system and observed how the elite and nobility of England lived and entertained. From these visits Charlestonians studied the customs and class distinctions that defined English society, which they brought back to the Lowcountry.

Their desire to imitate the lifestyles and customs of the landed English elite gave way to the Charlestonian desire for fashionable goods and contemporary architecture. What Charlestonians created upon their return to the Lowcountry was a society and culture reminiscent of England. From class distinctions to individual possessions, travelers to the Lowcountry regularly noted how cosmopolitan Charleston was compared to other British North American metropolises. By the end of the eighteenth century, Charleston and the Lowcountry became so much like London and the English countryside that both regions were seen as economically valuable parts to the British

Empire. In order to achieve this level of grandeur wealthy Charlestonians filled their houses with the fashionable goods that they witnessed in England. In order to acquire these goods these Charlestonians looked to cabinetmakers not only in London but in Charleston, who, in turn, looked to enslaved craftsmen in order to meet the demand for fashionable goods fit for the English home.



Figure 2- Benjamin West, *The Middleton Family*, 1770, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Middleton Place.



Figure 3- Anthony Van Dyke, *Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke, with his Family*, c. 1635, Oil on Canvas, Courtesy of Wilton House.



Figure 4 Raphael, *Niccolini-Cowper Madonna*, 1508, Oil on board, Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Figure 5- Jeremiah Theus, *Elias Ball "Red Cap"*, c. 1750, Courtesy of the Charleston Museum.





Figure 6- Allan Ramsay, *Peter Manigault*, 1751, Oil on Canvas, Courtesy of the Gibbs Museum of Art, Current Location Unknown

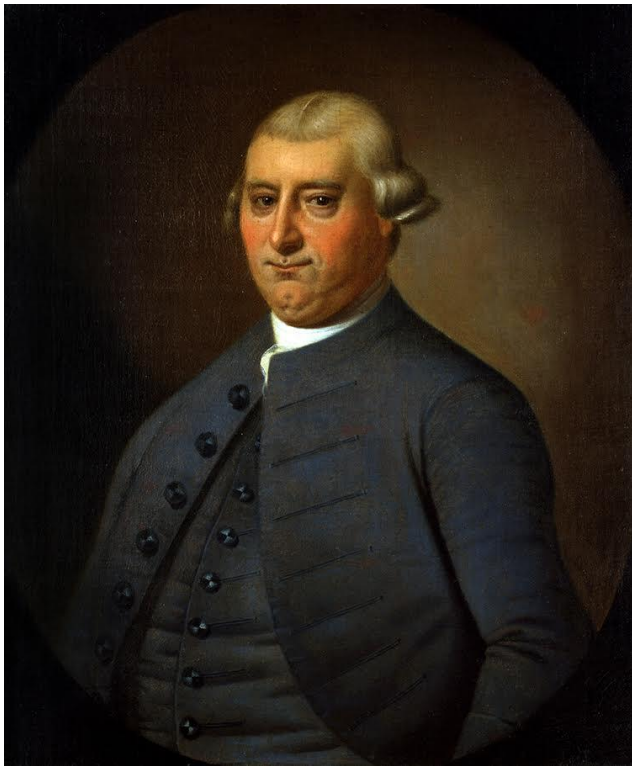


Figure 7- Jeremiah Theus, *Elias Ball II*, 1770, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.



Figure 8-George Roupell, Peter Manigault and His Friends, circa 1760, Pencil on paper, Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.

## Chapter 2

### African American Labor and the Cabinetmaking Shops of Charleston

Their intercourse and communication with Britain being easy and frequent, all novelties in fashion dress and ornament are quickly introduced; and even the spirit of luxury and extravagance, too common in England was beginning to creep into Carolina.<sup>65</sup>

Alexander Hewatt, 1779

Alexander Hewatt's description of Charlestonians' desire for fashionable goods could not have been truer. Charlestonians sought to live a lifestyle like their English brethren. William Henry Toms' 1740s engraving *An Exact Prospect of Charles Town* (Figure 1), originally painted by Bishop Roberts, depicts what many Carolinians wanted the rest of the British Empire to think of their prosperous Charleston. Charleston harbor teems with activity as 15 vessels, both naval and commercial, and industrious fishers and merchants stand in the foreground conducting business. The cityscape is lined with churches, civic buildings, businesses, and private residences, their chimneys billowing with smoke from their steadily supplied fireboxes. A lush landscape of raw materials and untapped nature peek through the built landscape and beg for exploration and settlement. Advertising the civility and productivity of Charleston, this print gives viewers the impression that Charleston, and Charlestonians for that matter, were not far removed from other metropolises such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or even

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<sup>65</sup> Alexander Hewatt, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia*, Volume 2 (London: 1779), 293.

London itself.<sup>66</sup> Landscape prints of these cities bear striking similarities, not the least of which was the subtle emphasis on commerce. While London was the undisputed center of polite society in the British Atlantic, Charlestonians sought to place themselves in league with their European counterparts in London. Like Toms' print of Charleston, imitation was the objective but slavery was their choice strategy.

To better imitate the British aristocracy, Charlestonians built large houses on plantations and within the city and furnished them with the expensive goods expected of polite society. Both the houses and the furnishings were distinctively English, but with an intentional hint of the South Carolina Lowcountry.<sup>67</sup> At a time when commodities were increasingly available and credit was easily accessible to elites, wealthier Charlestonians used their wealth to bring themselves one step closer to being fully English, through the furnishing of their estates with the finest goods. Four-poster beds, sideboards, armchairs, chests of drawers, and teaboard filled these houses for the express purposes of entertaining. When the Charlestonians sought to entertain, they did so as if their English brethren were watching.

This chapter will look at the increasing number of white craftsman and the use of enslaved craftsmen in the cabinetmaking shops of Charleston in order to keep up with growing demand for fine home goods. I will demonstrate that the use of enslaved craftsmen by cabinetmakers in cabinetmaking shops increased in Charleston. The

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<sup>66</sup> See Samuel and Nathaniel Buck's *Panorama of the Thames from Westminster Bridge to London Bridge* (1749) or *The West Prospect of His Majesty's Dock-Yard, At Chatham* (1738) for examples of how the English portrayed their metropolitan landscapes.

<sup>67</sup> This region is generally defined as consisting of the present-day counties of Beaufort, Jasper, Colleton, Charleston, Dorchester, Berkeley, Georgetown, Williamsburg, Horry, Marion, Dillon, Florence, Clarendon, Bamberg, Hampton, Allendale, and Barnwell as well as portions of Orangeburg, Calhoun, Sumter, Lee, Darlington, and Marlboro Counties.

primary focal period of this chapter will be 1760 to 1800. The rise in South Carolina's population serves as the other bookend to this period. The American Revolution, which serves as a bookend to this discussion, had a significant effect on the craftsmen of the city and the years following attest to their efforts to restore their businesses to their former status.

Scholars have debated for decades as to where Charlestonian elites purchased the bulk of their fine furnishings.<sup>68</sup> With the amount of wealth coming in to Charleston from the cultivation and exportation of rice and indigo the city's elite purchased imported and locally crafted, fine goods in large numbers. The extent to which the elite bought their goods from England has long been debated. Five leading scholars of Charleston furniture argue various answers to this question.

E. Milby Burton, former director of the Charleston Museum and author of numerous publications on Charleston material culture, claimed in the 1950s that a "comparatively small amount of English furniture was brought into Charleston." Burton's primary reasoning for this statement was purely economics. He claimed that it was too cost prohibitive for mahogany to be shipped from the West Indies or South America to England where the wood was taxed by the English government before sawed into lumber. English cabinetmakers turned the lumber into furniture and paid a higher rate than their American counterparts, before the finished furniture pieces were shipped to

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<sup>68</sup> M. Allison Carll, "An Assessment of English Furniture Imports Into Charleston, South Carolina, 1760-1800," *Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts Journal* (November, 1985), 6.

America for sale. Burton asserts that the cost of shipping mahogany and furniture alone added greatly to the cost of any one item.<sup>69</sup>

Burton further argued that cargo space on ships from England was limited and, therefore, restricted the size and quantity of furnishings shipped to North America. While other items such as textiles were more easily stored away large pieces of furniture, such as case pieces and large seats, were more difficult for which to find room. He pointed out that the shallow port of Charleston did not allow for large numbers of furnishings to be imported at one time due to the weight they added to the ship. This does not mean that such pieces were not imported to Charleston at all. Citing personal letters and shipping records, Burton made the argument that local cabinetmakers were a more practical and equally desired source of fashionable goods.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast, arguing that Charlestonians were more inclined to purchase English-made goods John T. Kirk claimed, in 1972, that Charlestonians patronized British cabinetmakers more because of their “superior craftsmanship.” He also made the claim that Charleston cabinetmakers were not truly economically successful compared to British cabinetmakers until after the American Revolution. Kirk, however, does not cite reliable sources to support his claims and based his claims primarily on speculation from available research of the time.<sup>71</sup>

More recent research, however, reveals that both of these points have some semblance of truth. Mary Allison Carll’s research on the importation of English furniture

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<sup>69</sup> E. Milby Burton, *Charleston Furniture: 1700-1825* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1955), 7.

<sup>70</sup> Burton, *Charleston Furniture*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Carll, “An Assessment of English Furniture,” 6; John T. Kirk, *American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 58.

into Charleston between 1760 and 1800, published in 1985, suggested that Charlestonians imported considerably more cabinetwares than other North American colonies prior to the American Revolution.<sup>72</sup> After 1783, Charleston's rate of importation compared to other colonies dropped significantly lower. Most cabinetwares exported from Britain prior to 1784 were shipped to the Caribbean or ports in Virginia and Maryland.<sup>73</sup> While it appears that Charleston once was a leading importer of English-made goods it is difficult to truly know where these items were destined. While Charlestonians imported a large number of items from London prior to the American Revolution, Carll believes that many items were quickly carted off to other nearby cities such as Georgetown or Savannah, Georgia as well as further inland. Carll's findings, based on eighteenth century customs records published by the Public Records Office in London, seem to favor Kirk's argument that Charlestonians more frequently purchased goods from Britain.<sup>74</sup> She also made the point that importing British-made goods did not last, declining after the American Revolution.

In *Southern Furniture 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, published in 1997, Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown came to a similar conclusion as Carll, but with some caveats. First, Hurst and Prown are in agreement with Carll in that Charlestonians preferred British-made goods over locally-made ones both before and after the American Revolution. Where they differ from Carll is in Hurst and Prown's observation that Charleston cabinetmakers increased their production during the second half of the eighteenth century. Hurst and Prown reference the account book for

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<sup>72</sup> Carll, "An Assessment of English Furniture," 9; Kirk, *American Chairs*, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Carll, "An Assessment of English Furniture," 13.

<sup>74</sup> Carll, "An Assessment of English Furniture," 7.

the cabinetmaking shop of Thomas Elfe. Between 1768 and 1775, Elfe's cabinetmaking shop produced more than 500 chairs, a sizeable quantity considering the 147 cabinetmakers in the last four decades of the eighteenth century in the third largest city in British North America.<sup>75</sup> The extensive work produced in Elfe's shop reveals the magnitude to which Charlestonians yearned for finely crafted furniture pieces and alludes to the necessity of local craftsmen to fulfill that demand. This paper highlights cabinetmakers' need for enslaved craftsmen to meet the demand for fashionable goods that wealthy Charlestonians sought in order to emulate the English elite. While wealthy Charlestonians favored English-made goods there remained a steady demand for locally-made fashionable good.

Period accounts of Charleston's material culture offerings create a split perception as to whether Charlestonians chose to purchase local goods or goods imported from England. German-immigrant Johann Martin Bolzius wrote in his diary in 1751, 18 years after he immigrated from Salzburg, that "Everything is to be found here for reasonable money." He cautioned that the risk of breaking household goods during the shipping process was not worth the cost of importing these goods for individuals. Bolzius's tastes, however, may not be comparable to other Lowcountry residents as he was a protestant minister who came to North America from Germany. Also, it is not known if Bolzius was familiar with shipping and packing methods of the time period, therefore his opinion on the matter may not be entirely accurate.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile,

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<sup>75</sup> Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furniture: 1680-1830* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997), 138.

<sup>76</sup> Bolzius immigrated to Georgia in 1733 with a group of Salzburg refugees and made trips to Charleston. For more on Bolzius see: Klaus G. Loewald, Beverly Starika, and



Philadelphia merchant Pelatiah Webster, who was more familiar with the transporting and selling of furniture pieces, wrote in his journal in 1765 of his travel to Charleston that, “very few mechanic arts [such as cabinetmakers or silversmiths] of any sort, & very great quantities of mechanic utensils [such as carving tools and mallets] are imported from England & the North[ern] Colonies.” Charleston elite John Drayton supported Webster’s remarks when writing in 1802 that most consumers in the Lowcountry preferred to purchase their fine cabinet pieces from England and had them shipped to North America.<sup>77</sup> John Drayton purchased some of his own finest goods from cabinetmakers in London.

What can be uncovered in this research are Charlestonians’ increased demand for fashionable furniture, resulting in the number of enslaved craftsmen working in cabinetmaking shops to increase over the period of 1760 to 1800 to meet the demand for fashionable goods. Based upon census records, newspaper advertisements, account books, and court records, over the last 40 years of the eighteenth century more than 147 white cabinetmakers worked in Charleston, increasing as the population grew.<sup>78</sup> This figure attests to the lively market for fashionable home goods in the Charleston area.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, some 3,324 enslaved craftsmen worked in the Charleston District between 1760 and 1800. Of this figure, approximately 25 percent, or 831, worked in a trade that cabinetmakers employed in their shops, rather than the

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Paul S. Taylor, “Johann Martin Bolzius Answers a Questionnaire on Carolina and Georgia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 14 (April, 1957); 218-222.

<sup>77</sup> Carll, “An Assessment of English Furniture,” 6.

<sup>78</sup> Carll, “An Assessment of English Furniture,” 15.

<sup>79</sup> It is not known how many cabinetmakers worked in London over this same 40-year period. However, in 1831 there were an estimated 6,610 cabinetmakers and upholsters working in London; Pat Kirkman, “The London Furniture Trade: 700-1870,” in *Furniture History*, Vol. 24 (London: The Furniture History Society, 1988), 4.

building trades (i.e. carpenters and shipwrights).<sup>80</sup> These enslaved cabinetmakers were all males working in their trade. I will demonstrate that Charlestonians purchased both British and locally-made goods even if the number of Charleston-made goods did not surpass those being imported from Britain.

Recognizing the demand for home goods in the Charleston market, entrepreneurial cabinetmakers increasingly set up shops in the city to cater to the needs of the growing population. Advertisements for items made and sold in the Charleston cabinetmaking shops speak to the business acumen of the shop owners. Numerous advertisements can be found in the *South Carolina Gazette* and other such newspapers in the late-eighteenth century for people such as “PETER HALL, Cabinet-Maker, from London...where gentlemen and ladies of taste may have made, and be supplied with *Chinese* tables of all sorts... being at present the most elegant and admired fashion in London” who advertised both their wares and their connections to England.<sup>81</sup> Charleston cabinetmakers sought to take advantage of the elite’s desire to be as English as possible, despite being in America.

Charleston businessmen used their training and contacts in England in order to compete with the same. Richard Magrath, a London-trained cabinetmaker in Charleston, made sure that the people of the city knew that they would receive the finest quality English goods from his shop when he advertised in 1767 of his intention “to quit the Province, for a few months, early in the Spring, and go to *England*, in order to engage some experienced Workmen, who will enable him to turn out work not in the

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<sup>80</sup> Mary Allison Carll, *The Role of the Black Artisan in the Building Trades and the Decorative Arts in South Carolina’s Charleston District, 1760-1800* (PhD diss., The University of Tennessee, 1982), 28.

<sup>81</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 12 December 1761.

least inferior to the first Cabinet Shop in *London*.” Magrath reiterated his direct association with England when he advertised again in 1771 that he was “Lately from London.” Magrath did not stop there, stating that “from his Connection in London, [he] will always be supplied with the newest Fashions,” underscoring the appetite for English goods in the South Carolina Lowcountry. This further underscores the fact that Charleston elites were willing to pay for the finest goods and that the top competition was London, hands down.<sup>82</sup>

One of the most well-known and arguably the most successful cabinetmakers in Charleston was Thomas Elfe. Between 1768 and 1775, Elfe kept an account book that documented every financial transaction in his shop. Listed was every item sold, to whom it was sold, and for how much. Elfe recorded minute details pertaining to his shop including the purchase and cost for all of his materials and the enslaved laborers who sawed and prepared the raw woods that later became Elfe’s finished furniture pieces. A large part of Elfe’s business was mending and repairing furniture pieces, which he also documented along with those who undertook the work. Needless to say, Thomas Elfe’s account book is a treasure-trove of information that can throw light upon how important the cabinetmaker was in society, or at least how important certain ones were to their society.<sup>83</sup> Thomas Elfe’s shop, Charleston’s most prestigious cabinetmaking shop, produced 537 chairs alone over a seven-year period. It is estimated that in the final eight years of his life, Elfe’s shop produced close to 2,500 individual pieces, and as many as 5,000 over his 28-year career. It is difficult to compare the quantity of work

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<sup>82</sup> Hurst and Prown, *Southern Furniture*, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society, Vols. 35-42.

produced in Elfe's shop to other shops because most shop account books do not survive. An inventory of his estate and shop after his passing total £38,243 in 1776, placing Elfe among the top four percent in terms of wealth of those inventories filed in South Carolina during the previous decade.<sup>84</sup>

Thomas Elfe was active in Charleston between 1747 and 1775, as were approximately 80 other cabinetmakers.<sup>85</sup> Elfe's great success and abundance of cabinetmaking shops proves that this growth in the demand for fashionable goods created a competitive market in Charleston for locally-made goods and not merely imports. It was estimated that there was an average of 60 cabinetmakers working in Charleston by the 1790s.<sup>86</sup> Elfe's success also hints to a dependence on enslaved labor so as to keep up with orders. Charlestonians purchased both British and locally-made cabinetwares, however, the great demand put upon the cabinetmakers necessitated the use of enslaved laborers. "Many negroes discovered great capacities, and an amazing aptness for learning trades, where dangerous tools are used and many owners from motives of profit and advantage, breed them to be coopers, carpenters, bricklayers, smiths, and other trades," observed Hewatt in his 1779 memoir.<sup>87</sup> Elfe used enslaved Africans in his shop. At the time of Elfe's death he owned and listed nine enslaved craftsmen in his account book. Of these nine, four were sawyers and valued at £1400,

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<sup>84</sup> Samuel A. Humphrey, *Thomas Elfe: Cabinetmaker* (Charleston: Wyrick and Company, 1995), xi. The estimated average for a field slave "free of blemishes" was between £100-200 sterling.

<sup>85</sup> Carll, *Black Artisan*, 221.

<sup>86</sup> Burton, *Charleston Furniture*, 133.

<sup>87</sup> Alexander Hewatt, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia*, Volume 2 (London: 1779), 97.

or £350 each. Elfe listed the remaining five as “Joyners & Cabinet Makers” and valued at £2250, or £450 each.<sup>88</sup>

This trend of cabinetmakers using enslaved labor to fulfill orders and meet the growing needs for fashionable goods for wealthy Charlestonians during the second half of the eighteenth century is noticeable in newspaper advertisements. John Nutt, a Charleston cabinetmaker, sought a “handy Negro Fellow” from a local slave owner who could help with his cabinetmaking business. Nutt also wanted to hire this “Fellow” by the month or the year.<sup>89</sup> Nutt’s advertisement was by no means a unique request. In fact, this became so commonplace that travelers to the area noted the prevalence of the practice, such as Timothy Ford in 1785:

I have seen tradesmen go through the city followed by a negro carrying their tools—Barbers who are supported in idleness & easy by their negroes who do the business; & in fact many of the mechaniks bear nothing more of their trades than the name.<sup>90</sup>

Slave traders brought shiploads of new enslaved Africans from Gambia during the late-eighteenth century. Between March and June of 1769, 17 known ships delivered slaves directly from Africa to South Carolina. Potential buyers of these enslaved Africans likely stayed in Charleston before taking these new arrivals into the Lowcountry.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mabel L. Webber, “The Thomas Elfe *Account Book*, 1768-1775,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, Vol. 35 (January, 1934), 18.

<sup>89</sup> *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, 9 marches 1770.

<sup>90</sup> Timothy Ford, “Diary of Timothy Ford, 1785-1786,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 13 (July 1912): 142.

<sup>91</sup> Gregory O’Malley, “Slavery’s Converging Ground: Charleston’s Slave Trade as the Black Heart of the Lowcountry,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (April 2017): 271.

The extent to which Charlestonians used enslaved craftsmen can be found in the abundant legislation passed by the Charleston City Council beginning at the end of the seventeenth century. One aspect that many scholars neglect to cite when debating the role of the enslaved community in cabinetmaking shops is how the legal system effected the marketplace for enslaved craftsmen, especially between 1764 and 1800. The people of Charleston and Charleston's City Council made it more difficult for enslaved laborers to find work on their own and for slave owners to hire out multiple enslaved craftsmen at any one time. Charleston City Council also passed these laws in order to limit the movement of enslaved Africans in the city.

Charlestonians attempted to gain control of the number of enslaved craftsmen openly working and moving throughout the city. During this 36-year period the city experienced a rollercoaster of legal actions that pertained to the use of enslaved and free Africans in Charleston. Each legislative act was an effort to reduce the field of competition between white craftsmen and the enslaved craftsmen that shop owners increasingly relied upon.

While four different acts were passed during this time they were not the first for the colony. The earliest Carolina legislation, that from 1690, required slave owners to purchase a ticket for any slave leaving the plantation or heading outside of the owner's shop for the purposes of work or self-employment.

This legislation was renewed by the city council in 1712 with additional requirements on purchasing licenses for slaves and the fines imposed for breaking the law.<sup>92</sup> The law stated

*Whereas* several owners of slaves used to suffer their said slaves to do what and go whither they will, and work where they please, upon condition that their said slaves do bring aforesaid masters so much money as...is agreed upon... *Be it enacted* that no owner or master or mistress of any family, after the ratification of this Act, shall suffer or permit any slave to do what, go wither, or where, they please upon condition aforesaid under the penalty of the forfeiture of five shillings for every day he, she, or they shall suffer any slave to do aforesaid. *Provided nevertheless*, that nothing in this Act shall be construed or intended to hinder any person from letting their negroes or slaves to hire, by the year, or for any lesser time, or by the day, so as such negro or slave is under the care and direction of his master, or some other person by his order instructed with the slave, and that the master is to receive the whole of what the slave shall earn.<sup>93</sup>

This revised act included a penalty for not purchasing proper licenses and stipulated that all income earned by the enslaved African must be given to the owner. The latter, coupled with the clause that the enslaved must be under the direction of a white individual, points to the efforts of white Charlestonians to undermine efforts by the

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<sup>92</sup> Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., "The Statues at Large of South Carolina" (Columbia: A. S. Johnston, 1836), Vol. 7, 343. For a complete history of the slave badge and slave-hire system in Charleston, see Harlan Greene, Harry S. Hutchins, Jr., and Brian E. Hutchins, *Slave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston, South Carolina: 1783-1865* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> Cooper and McCord, eds., "The Statues at Large," Vol. 7, 363.

enslaved community to seek some form of freedom. For the owner of an enslaved craftsman this meant that their already profitable skilled laborer could remain working for hire, but had to return all earnings to the owner.

Charleston cabinetmakers continued to rely upon enslaved craftsmen to meet the demand for fashionable goods despite these laws, as shop owners appear to have ignored the laws. An update in 1722 reveals the city's attempts to encourage more informers to turn in those enslaved individuals who were breaking the law by rewarding the informant with the five-shilling per day penalty. Charleston cabinetmakers and slave owners appear to be willing to risk the penalty in order to earn additional income from enslaved craftsmen and keep up with the demand for fashionable goods. By March of 1733 the law was clearly being disregarded and enslaved craftsmen were again hired out by their owners, as evident in the *South Carolina Gazette*,

that it is a common practice by several Persons in *Charles Town*, to suffer their Negroes to work out by the Week, and oblige them to bring in a certain Hire, which is not only contrary to the Law now subsisting, but a great Inlet to Idleness, Drunkenness, and other Enormities.<sup>94</sup>

When the law was reprinted in 1734 it reiterated the authority of the local law enforcers and warned that all offenders would "be prosecuted as the Law directs."<sup>95</sup> By 1744, notices sprang up in newspaper advertisements warning individuals not to hire out enslaved Africans who were already being let out to other individuals or those seeking

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<sup>94</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 30 March 1733.

<sup>95</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 27 April 1734.



work during their free time, showing that wealthy Charlestonians were not adhering to these laws.<sup>96</sup>

In 1751, additional legislation prohibited any enslaved laborer living outside of the Charleston city limits from being hired within the city. Many of the statutes passed by the Charleston City Council in the middle of the eighteenth century were done so in an effort to regulate the number of slaves imported into the colony and to increase revenue for the city.<sup>97</sup> By limiting the number of enslaved Africans, Charleston City Council hoped that skilled white laborers would be able to find work in the city and that this would further stimulate economic growth. This one, in particular, attempted to curb the number of enslaved and free African hiring themselves out within the city limits. It specifically limited the hiring out of “Porters, Laborers, Fishermen, and Handicraftsmen,” for hire by owners living within the city.<sup>98</sup> By specifying “Handicraftsmen” Charlestonians argued that the increased number of enslaved craftsmen were making it difficult for white craftsmen to find work because employers choose enslaved labor over free, white labor. The abundance of enslaved labor for hire in the city, approximately 831 enslaved craftsmen trained in skilled used in cabinetmaking shops, created an issue for lower class white workers resulting in a job shortage for free laborers and preference was given to the hiring of enslaved workers. Some Charlestonians feared that the use of enslaved and free Africans at a lower rate hindered the colony’s ability to attract white

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<sup>96</sup> Harlan Greene, Harry S. Hutchins, Jr., and Brian E. Hutchins, *Slave Badges and the Slave-Hire System in Charleston, South Carolina: 1783-1865* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2004), 16.

<sup>97</sup> Carll, “An Assessment of English Furniture,” 20.

<sup>98</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 6 May 1751.

immigrants, thus making it more difficult for white people to find jobs.<sup>99</sup> The limitation on the number of enslaved Africans an individual could hire out at a time put a damper on the individual's ability to garner as much possible side income. This was very likely the motivation behind why the law was quickly ignored by wealthy Charlestonians.

1764 marked a significant year for the use of enslaved craftsmen by Charleston cabinetmakers. In 1764 the slave-hire system was again legislated and regulations made stricter by Charleston's city officials. For the first time, the city required badges and licenses be carried by the enslaved African hired out and the individual responsible was required to produce paperwork for their service. What is especially important about this version of the law was the requirement that the enslaved must wear the badge. Previously, licenses were purchased by the slave owner but there was no requirement that they be visible on the person and only necessary for viewing when asked. City officials limited the number of slaves permitted to be hired out by one individual and if violators were caught by these officials they faced a penalty of five pounds per day they exceeded the limitation. This same set of regulations also directed where enslaved laborers could go to find work on their own and how much they were paid for certain jobs. It was no longer legal for any one of color, free or enslaved, to go out seeking work as they pleased.<sup>100</sup>

The 1764 law lacked some important details, however. Most importantly, it did not specify the valid duration of the badge or license. It was not stated whether these documents, once purchased, were valid for the duration of a job, a week, month, year,

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<sup>99</sup> The colonists, like the proprietors before them, wanted more immigrants to populate the colony in order to make it more successful.

<sup>100</sup> Cooper and McCord, eds., "The Statues at Large," Vol. 9, 704.

or longer. It can be assumed that there were no limits on their duration based on condition of the streets of Charleston. Funds from the sale of licenses and badges were to fund the cleaning and maintaining of the city streets. According to contemporary accounts the city's streets were "fouled and often impassible" after the law went into effect. This suggests that city officials did not strictly enforce the new law and, therefore, did not garner the revenue necessary to clean and maintain the city's streets.<sup>101</sup>

An English traveler, who called himself "The Stranger," recorded in 1772 the extent to which the 1764 law lacked enforcement. In August, he wrote:

What regard is paid to this regulation may almost every day be observed in and near the lower Market, where... constantly resort a great number of loose, idle, disorderly negro women, who are seated from morn 'til night, and buy and sell on their own accounts... for their owners care little, how their slaves get the money, so [long as] they are paid.<sup>102</sup>

By ignoring the law, cabinetmakers and slave owners allowed enslaved craftsmen to work on jobs that white craftsmen were competing for, too. Two months later, a band of Charlestonians advertised that they were going to take matters into their own hands by putting a "stop to this pilfering Trade by Seizing whatever we shall find in the Possession of any Slaves, not having Tickets."<sup>103</sup> Citing the 1764 Negro Act, these men, presumably individuals who could not find work because employers chose enslaved labor over free, white laborer, felt it within their power to operate as law enforcers. The rampant disobedience of the law further proves that demand for fashionable goods was

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<sup>101</sup> Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 19.

<sup>102</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 24 September 1772.

<sup>103</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, 10 October 1772.

high at this time period and that cabinetmakers met that demand by hiring enslaved craftsmen.

The 1764 Negro Act also outlined restrictions that ed enslaved craftsmen. It specified that it was not “lawful for the master or owner of any negro or other slave whatever...to carry on any mechanic if handicraft trade of themselves, in any shop... in Charleston.” This law also restricted any enslaved African from learning a trade from another enslaved craftsman of Charleston. To mitigate the potential financial harm this could do to the wealthy slave owners in the city the code stipulated that shop owners “have and constantly employ one white apprentice or journeyman for every two negroes or other slaves they shall teach and thenceforth employ.”<sup>104</sup> But, the trend of not following the letter of the law remained intact for enslaved craftsmen continued to be hired out and other enslaved Africans continued to be apprenticed to a trade.

The 1764 Negro Law remained in effect, so to speak, until the outbreak of the American Revolution. While Charleston witnessed little military presence until late in the war the laws governing the city would not see drastic change until after the American victory at Yorktown and the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1783. That same year, Charleston was incorporated as a city and new laws were enacted, including new, stricter laws pertaining to the use and hire of enslaved craftsmen. Enslaved craftsmen were again required to wear badges and their owners risked a penalty of three pounds for not properly licensing. Any individual who employed an unlicensed enslaved craftsman faced fine of 20 shillings, or one pound, each day the enslaved craftsman was employed. Further, the law set forth the fee to be paid yearly for the license of an

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<sup>104</sup> Cooper and McCord, eds., “The Statues at Large,” Vol. 9, 704.

enslaved craftsman based on the particular trade. For cabinetmakers the yearly fee for licensing an enslaved cabinetmaker was 40 shillings, or about two pounds.<sup>105</sup>

Other parts of the new legal code limited an enslaved craftsmen's ability to move about the city freely. Particularly, "No Negroes or slaves... could presume on their own account to sell any goods or wares, etc." This meant that no enslaved and free African craftsmen were permitted go about on their own time selling items for personal gain. It also meant that free blacks were now more strictly regulated. According to the law, free blacks were now required to register with the city, purchase a license, and wear their badge like their enslaved counterparts. According to the code, however, free blacks were not required to renew their licenses every year. What is most telling about this new code of law is how uneasy with competition enslaved and free black craftsmen made white tradesmen. These new laws were stricter on who could and could not sell goods within the city and city officials increased the fees for licensing and penalties for violations.<sup>106</sup>

By 1785, Charleston cabinetmakers continued to use enslaved craftsmen and slave owners continued to hire out their enslaved craftsmen without regard to the laws. The 23 February 1785, edition of the *South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser* published the following advertisement:

WHEREAS many person in this City have neglected to renew their  
BADGES FOR NEGROS, which they hire out—This is to acquaint them,  
and others who, contrary to the Ordinance of the City Council, hire out  
Negroes, without Badges, that unless they call and take out new ones, on

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<sup>105</sup> *South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 28 November 1783.

<sup>106</sup> Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 22.

or before the 1st day of March next, the law will be strictly put in force against them by P. Bounetheau, *City Clerk*<sup>107</sup>

In 1786 a new provision to the law strengthened the severity and process of the punishment for enslaved violators and their owners. Offending owners now risked losing their enslaved craftsman altogether if found guilty of operating outside of the law. The need to republish this law further proves that the need to meet the demand for fashionable cabinetwares was still met by cabinetmakers hiring enslaved craftsmen, despite the threat of legal action. Few additional changes were made to the law between this 1786 provision and the close of the decade. That is, until 1789 when restrictions on the hiring out of enslaved craftsmen, the requirements on badges, and the limitation on training slaves based on a ratio of blacks-to-whites were lifted.<sup>108</sup>

This rocky regulating of slaves for hire in order to create more jobs for white craftsmen and control enslaved Africans' movements continued into the final decade of the eighteenth century, when effective on January 1, 1790, the negro acts from 1783 and 1786 were repealed.<sup>109</sup> For the first time since before the 1783 Negro Act badges were no longer required. Attempts to regulate and enforce the hiring of enslaved and free African craftsmen by city officials failed. The hiring of enslaved and free African craftsmen continued through these decades and into the 1790s. In 1791, county officials established a "Universal City and County Register Office" from where enslaved and free African craftsmen could be registered and hired out for work. Such a registry is proof that the demand for skilled enslaved labor was strong in Charleston leading up to the

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<sup>107</sup> *South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 25 February 1785.

<sup>108</sup> Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 27.

<sup>109</sup> Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 28.

nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup> This, like most aspects relating to the regulating of slaves-for-hire, was slightly hampered only five years later, when a 1796 regulation made it unlawful for enslaved craftsmen to hire themselves out for work and enslaved craftsmen were prohibited from teaching their trade to another enslaved individual.

The final set of regulations that pertained to the hiring of enslaved craftsmen by Charleston cabinetmakers, in the scope of this study, came in 1800. In that year the city passed “An Ordinance for the better regulation of Slaves, and for other purposes therein mentioned,” which prohibited “any such slave, whether male or female, to be employed on hire...without a ticket or badge...under a penalty of forfeiting a sum not exceeding ten dollars.” Only eleven years after badges were abolished, a law to regulate enslaved craftsmen from being hired on their own time was back on the books. This change was likely due to the success that wealthy Charlestonians found in cotton production in the last decade of the eighteenth century. With their success came the ability to afford more fashionable goods, which meant that local cabinetmakers were looking for enslaved labor to meet the new demand.<sup>111</sup> The fee for registering an enslaved craftsman skilled in cabinetmaking was set at three dollars per year. The law specifically required all registered enslaved laborers to “wear the badge received from the city treasurer, on some visible part of their dress” and it was now lawful for anyone to approach enslaved laborers and request to see their badge. This new law also limited the number of enslaved laborers in the city by prohibiting any one from outside the city limits from

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<sup>110</sup> *City Gazette*, 16 August 1791; Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 28.

<sup>111</sup> Bradford Rauschenberg and John Bivins, Jr., *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680-1820* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 2003), 2:909.

acquiring a badge.<sup>112</sup> To date the earliest extant slave badge or tag dates to 1800, the year the law was reestablished.<sup>113</sup>

Enslaved craftsmen were hired out by their owners to undertake jobs based on their skill set. Thomas Elfe's account book provides a look at the roles of enslaved tradesmen in his shop. Included in Elfe's account book are the names and jobs of Elfe's enslaved African workmen as well as the record of Elfe's sale and purchase of his enslaved Africans. These enslaved tradesmen brought occasional income for completed work as hired out laborers. For example, Elfe recorded on 23 February 1775 that he was paid for the work done by his slave Liverpool to the sum of £144.<sup>114</sup> Many shop owners in Charleston hired out their enslaved tradesmen for weeks, months, and years on end, despite the changing regulations.

This practice was so commonplace that it reveals a different master-slave relation in these shops compared to those on plantations. While field slaves on plantations were restricted to the plantation, enslaved craftsmen, particularly those who were enslaved to shop owners, were permitted a bit more liberty. Slaves on Lowcountry rice plantations saw a relief in their workload between August and September. During this time plantation owners might allow some of their enslaved tradesmen to hire themselves out for work, but required that they be back in time for the labor-intensive

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<sup>112</sup> Alexander Edwards, *Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston* (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1802), 193.

<sup>113</sup> For a comprehensive timeline of the slave badge system in Charleston, between 1690 and 1866, see: Greene and Hutchins, *Slave Badges*, 65.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society, 23 February 1775.



autumn.<sup>115</sup> According to Bolzius, slaves were granted Sundays off from their usual labor and permitted to conduct business on their own, away from their home.<sup>116</sup>

When permitted by their owners enslaved tradesmen could use their free time to hire themselves out to earn additional income. While the code required that all earned income be given to the enslaved tradesman's master, there is some indication that the enslaved were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings. Research suggests that slaves turned over more than 60 percent of their earnings to their masters and retained the remaining 40 percent.<sup>117</sup> This level of freedom allowed some entrepreneurial independence for economic gain, but the restriction on earnings made it more difficult for the enslaved to make financial strides. With a majority of the tradesman's earnings going to his owner, the ability to earn enough to purchase one's freedom continually remained just out of reach.

Despite what seems to be less arduous working conditions compared to field slaves' work, albeit still slavery, slave owners still advertised for runaway enslaved cabinetmakers. In 1785, George Holmes offered a reward of two guineas for "SIMON, a good carpenter and cabinet-maker...32 or 33 years of age, a smart sensible fellow..." who ran away. Simon was purchased by Holmes only a year earlier.<sup>118</sup>

Like white craftsmen, enslaved craftsmen completed an apprenticeship in a specific trade before they practiced their trade. Both white craftsmen and large

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<sup>115</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 151.

<sup>116</sup> William D. Smyth, "Travelers in South Carolina in the Early Eighteenth Century" in *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 79, no. 2 (April, 1978): 123.

<sup>117</sup> Robert E. Perdue, *Black Laborers and Black Professionals in Early America, 1750-1830* (New York: Vantage Press, 1975), 151.

<sup>118</sup> *The Columbian Herald or the Patriotic Courier of North-America*, 27 June 1785.

landowners bound out their enslaved Africans for apprenticeships, knowing how lucrative having a skilled craftsman was for their purse. It was unlawful for enslaved craftsmen to keep other enslaved Africans as apprentices at various times throughout the eighteenth century. White craftsmen were paid a fee for instructing the enslaved in a trade, not to mention they were able to use the apprentice to complete work in their shops. Fees paid to a craftsman for taking an apprentice ranged from £30 to £100 for the length of the apprenticeship. Contracts usually laid out other stipulations, such as the apprentice's clothing, food, and housing being covered by the white craftsman.<sup>119</sup> The average length of the apprenticeship for enslaved Africans was about four years. This is notably shorter than the traditional length of an apprenticeship for a white craftsman in the European guild system, which was seven years. This reiterated the desire to get trained slaves on the market. Such training durations may also allude to one group's ability to learn the trade faster than the other or that master craftsmen knew that enslaved craftsmen were only going to be used for less important parts of a project (i.e. an enslaved craftsman would never become a journeyman or master craftsman).

Hugh Jones noted in 1724 that "a good Negro" was "sometimes worth three (or four) Score Pounds Sterling, if he be a Tradesman...they are by nature cut out for hard Labor and Fatigue, and will perform tolerably well."<sup>120</sup> Enslaved Africans were often introduced to the various trades as apprentices at a younger age than whites.

Approximately 25 percent of those enslaved tradesmen whose ages are known are

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<sup>119</sup> Carll, *Black Artisan*, 38.

<sup>120</sup> Marcus Wilson Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607-1783: Studies of the Economics, Educational, and Social Significance of Slaves, Servants, Apprentices and Poor Folk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 11.

believed to be of the age of the typical white apprentice or younger.<sup>121</sup> Newspaper advertisements and apprenticeship contracts used terminology that suggest a younger than normal age, such as “boy,” “lad,” and “youth.”<sup>122</sup> Because younger enslaved Africans could spend more of their lives working, they were considered by their owners to be more profitable, and therefore more economically valuable. Likewise, an enslaved African who began an apprenticeship sooner began to earn for his owner that much faster. Further, enslaved tradesmen were considered to be more economically valuable than field slaves, because the former was able to earn more independently than the latter. As it pertains to this study, white craftsmen could afford to purchase enslaved Africans and begin their apprenticeship, or formal training in a trade, in order to use the enslaved to accomplish work at an early age. Younger enslaved Africans, those who were still children rather than those in later adolescence, were more affordable. One advertisement from 1779 made the pitch that, “TWO SMART BLACK BOYS” apprenticed in house, ship, and cabinet carving could “when free their profits will be great to their owner.”<sup>123</sup>

White artisans could also profit from training enslaved tradesmen because of the contracts that were part of the apprenticeship. Craftsmen were contracted by slave owners to instruct apprentices in the ways of the trade. In return, the craftsmen received annual compensation for their time and training. Carpenter John Fullerton agreed to train John Cordes’s slave “Boy Dick” the skills of the carpenter for the sum of £100.<sup>124</sup> The apprenticeship could also include terms that provided for the well-being of the

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<sup>121</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 32.

<sup>122</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 40.

<sup>123</sup> *South Carolina State Gazette and Timothy’s Daily Advertiser*, 1 May 1799.

<sup>124</sup> John Cordes, *Account Book of John Cordes*, 17 May 1772, College of Charleston.

enslaved while in the craftsmen's training. Such was the case between Thomas Farr and Philip Miller, a carpenter contracted to teach Farr's slave Ellick carpentry. Among the terms were the conditions that Miller provided "sufficient victuals and Cloths" for Ellick and if Miller did not make the enslaved complete the apprenticeship within three year he would pay Cordes "£50 sterling."<sup>125</sup>

Thomas Elfe documented that at least one of his enslaved craftsmen received formal training as an apprentice. Lake, recorded as a carpenter in Elfe's account book, was "allowed [William Patterson] for Lake when he was an apprentice £5.16."<sup>126</sup> Elfe likely trained, or had trained enslaved craftsmen, based on the frequent references to handicraft slaved listed in his account book. Elfe regularly hired out enslaved craftsmen Oxford, George, Liverpool, and Portsmouth to other cabinetmakers for various tasks, such as sawing, carpentry, moving and assembling furniture, and painting, to name a few tasks.<sup>127</sup>

Newspaper advertisements suggest that some enslaved tradesmen overstepped the liberty granted them by their shop owners in order to earn a greater amount of side income. When John Moncrieff's enslaved painter and glazier Simon completed work for others, they were supposed to pay Moncrieff directly. Moncrieff noted in an advertisement that Simon was "working out without leave," meaning that Simon did not have permission to hire himself out and that potential employers should take added precaution to ensure that Simon could not over extend his liberty.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Apprenticeship Agreement, 1 October 1804, Jeanne Gadsden Family Papers (1703-1950), South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book*, 31 December 1771; Kolbe, *Thomas Elfe*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> Kolbe, *Thomas Elfe*, 19.

<sup>128</sup> *Charleston Advertiser and Daily Gazette*, 156 November 1800.

The work of cabinetmakers did not always consist of creating new fashionable goods in a shop. Their work also included repairing and assembling furniture pieces for customers. Elfe's account book provides evidence that his enslaved tradesmen provided a substantial source of added income outside the cabinet shop while still working for the shop owner. In 1768, for example, he supplemented his income by hiring out his tradesmen and earning £632.16.2 and £405.19.0 in the following year for their various projects and contracts.<sup>129</sup>

The use of enslaved labor in trade shops was not a new phenomenon by the time of the American Revolution in Charleston. South Carolina's slave population was estimated to be approximately 11,868 by 1720. Bolzius observed in 1733 that "there are more Black than White People here."<sup>130</sup> By 1760 this population was thought to be around 56,730, of which 45,116 were in Charleston alone.<sup>131</sup> Historians further estimated that the population grew at an average annual rate of approximately five percent, so that by the time of the 1790 census the enslaved African population for South Carolina was 107,094.<sup>132</sup> Of this figure, nearly half, approximately 47 percent, lived in Charleston. A sizeable increase in the number of enslaved Africans being imported into South Carolina took place between 1760 and 1774. On average, more

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Elfe, *Account Book of Thomas Elfe: 1768-1775*, South Carolina Historical Society, 27.

<sup>130</sup> Smyth, "Travelers in South Carolina," 122.

<sup>131</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 17; Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1974), 146.

<sup>132</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 19; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, South Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908).

than 3,221 enslaved Africans arrived in Charleston each year over this 14-year period.<sup>133</sup>

While wealthy Charlestonians largely imported Africans to the Lowcountry for agricultural reasons, the African population growth in the decorative arts manufacturing sector can also be seen at this time. One contemporary observer noted that “Many negroes discover great capacities, and an amazing aptness for learning trades, where dangerous tools are used, and many owners from motives of profit and advantage, breed them to be coopers, carpenters, bricklayers, smiths, and other trades.”<sup>134</sup> Scholar Mary Allison Carll found that, “The total number of notations or references [in newspapers, personal records, or otherwise] to slaves who worked skillfully with their hands was 3,324” between 1760 and 1800 in Charleston. She cautioned that this figure was conservative, however, due to the fact that some historical references were vague in their language. Where historical documentation referred to multiple enslaved craftsmen but not a specific figure, Carll counted each notation as one enslaved craftsman.<sup>135</sup> It must be noted that the majority of these enslaved craftsmen were working in the building trades, and only 17 percent were trained in decorative arts

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<sup>133</sup> Morgan, *Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760-1810*, 133; Jennifer L. Goloboy, *Charleston and the Emergence of Middle-Class Culture in the Revolutionary Era* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2016), 18.

<sup>134</sup> Hewatt, *The Rise and Progress of South Carolina and Georgia, Volume 2* (London: 1779), 97.

<sup>135</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 28. Carll’s calculations include 470 references to multiple enslaved artisans without a specific figure. Each of these references she counts as a single enslaved artisan. However, if each were to be counted as at least two enslaved artisans the total number of enslaved artisans in Charleston between 1760 and 1800 increases from 3,324 to 3,794, an increase of 14.14 percent. This figure could be even high if more accurate figures were available.

trades. Of this 17 percent, only one percent are cabinetmakers.<sup>136</sup> The number of notations for enslaved craftsmen in Carll's study highlights how sought after enslaved craftsmen were for the success of local cabinetmakers.

Charleston newspapers were ripe with evidence of the pivotal role in creating fashionable goods the enslaved community had on the market for tradesmen. Regular advertisements showed the need and want for enslaved craftsmen for hire. Craftsmen hired enslaved tradesmen skilled in cabinetmaking, carpentry, and sawing in order to meet growing demands. Cabinetmakers sought to purchase enslaved craftsmen to work in their shops while still others looked to sell or hire their enslaved tradesmen out. White craftsmen could afford to purchase and apprentice slaves in their trade. A number of Charleston craftsmen used multiple enslaved tradesmen to earn additional revenue for their business. Painter and glazier Mark Morris owned an astounding 14 slaves that took part in his business including some that served as bricklayers, carpenters, and boatmen. Of blacksmith David Thomson's eight slaves, five worked alongside of him.<sup>137</sup>

The process by which wealthy Charlestonians imported fashionable goods into Charleston in the eighteenth-century followed strict British regulations. Raw materials such as mahogany were imported from the West Indies, taxed, sawed into lumber, made into furniture, and shipped to America. The tax levied by the British government on the imported raw materials and the cost of shipping made the final product more

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<sup>136</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 30. Carll also notes that there is a noticeable contrast here to the role of white artisans. While the majority of enslaved and white artisans follow the same trends in the building trades they do not do the same in the decorative art trades. A sizeable number of whites worked as cabinetmakers and silversmiths, unlike the enslaved artisans.

<sup>137</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 46.

expensive for the buyer in North America.<sup>138</sup> Further, local cabinetmakers were able to sell their goods at a more affordable rate because they did not have to pay the fees associated with shipping. Cabinetmaker Charles Watts advertised that he would hire and pay journeymen based on the prices listed in 1793 edition of *The Cabinet-Makers' London Book of Prices*.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, Charleston cabinetmakers believed their goods to be of equal quality compared to those made by English cabinetmakers.

Wealthy Charlestonians' desire for fashionable goods in the English style grew in the late-eighteenth century. Leading figures and legislators attempted to stimulate local production and economic growth, largely by way of increased taxation on imported goods.

Where scholars continue to debate the use of enslaved craftsmen in cabinetmaking shops is how the American Revolution affected the marketplace for fashionable goods in Charleston. As Charlestonians looked to England for trends related to fashionable goods, the American Revolution created a disconnect between the two regions. The full extent of wartime on furniture production is still relatively unknown. By the time of the American Revolution enslaved African-Americans worked in every trade possible in South Carolina. From the outbreak of war to the signing of the Treaty of Paris, 1776 to 1783, Charlestonians witnessed a great change in the market for fashionable goods. Leading up to this point a number of taxes levied on American colonists limited the goods that came into the colonies or made regular goods more expensive to purchase. In response, colonists boycotted British goods in favor of local

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<sup>138</sup> Burton, *Charleston Furniture*, 7.

<sup>139</sup> Hurst and Prown, *Southern Furniture*, 608; Morris H. Heckscher, "English Furniture Pattern Books," in Luke Beckerdite, ed. *American Furniture 1994* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Chipstone Foundation, 1994), 198.



ones. Similar boycotts took place throughout the colonies. In Virginia, members of the House of Burgesses created an association for the non-importation of English goods that boycotted English imports and found support from citizens throughout the Commonwealth.<sup>140</sup> As in places like Virginia, citizens boycotted in order to send a message to Britain by affecting its merchants and craftsmen. These acts, particularly the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts, were of particular concern to the painters, glaziers, carpenters, and cabinetmakers that dealt with paint and lead, as they were among the items highly taxed by the crown. These individuals were also the ones led the charge to boycott English goods.<sup>141</sup>

This boycott benefitted the Charleston craftsmen in two ways. First, it encouraged Charlestonians not to purchase English goods, in hopes that demand for local products would increase.<sup>142</sup> This business tactic had a “trickle-down” effect wherein the correlating demand for enslaved labor increased with the demand for goods. This could account for the regular disregard for the laws pertaining to enslaved craftsmen. For those cabinetmakers, and other master craftsmen for that matter, who owned a number of enslaved tradesmen who were hired out this meant that there was an opportunity to further profit from these taxes. It should also be noted that not included in the boycotts were tools and books that were instrumental to the craftsmen of the city. This allowed them to continue their businesses with all of the necessary tools to complete jobs and produce up-to-date goods.<sup>143</sup> Second, the restrictions on the

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<sup>140</sup> *Virginia Gazette*, Rind, 27 July 1769, pg. 2.

<sup>141</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 101.

<sup>142</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 21.

<sup>143</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 102.

importation of more enslaved Africans meant that there was less competition for work with those skilled in a trade.

While the boycotts appeared to benefit Charleston craftsmen the Revolutionary War, however, was not as generous to them. With Charleston under British and loyalist occupation for the majority of the war trade and currency were hard to come by. According to customs data, Carolina did not receive any exports from England between 1775 and 1779.<sup>144</sup> From 1780 to 1783, Charleston was the only major city in America that received shipments of home goods from England.<sup>145</sup>

Forces on both sides of the Revolution affected the enslaved craftsmen of Charleston, for better or for worse, by providing opportunities for emancipation. It has been estimated that approximately 25,000 enslaved individuals were taken by British and American forces or fled their homes from across South Carolina during the occupation of Charleston.<sup>146</sup> With promises and hopes for emancipation under British rule those enslaved who fled sought a new beginning following their desertion. Not all of these enslaved individuals remained in South Carolina once they ran away. British traders capitalized on the demand for enslaved labor in the West Indies and sold runaway slaves further south.<sup>147</sup>

After the American Revolution, Charleston began to re-establish its economic standing. Trade with Great Britain resumed, but it does not appear to be at quite the

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<sup>144</sup> Carll, "An Assessment of English Furniture," 11.

<sup>145</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 168.

<sup>146</sup> Alexander R. Stoesen, "The British Occupation of Charleston, 1780-1782," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 63 (April, 1962): 80.

<sup>147</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 104.

same level as before the war.<sup>148</sup> As scholar Jennifer Goloboy points out, slaves were once again imported into the city, as roughly a quarter of the enslaved population was lost during the war. Depreciation of South Carolina currency during the war years, along with the lack of ready currency created a major setback for Charleston merchants and craftsmen, not to mention independent laborers.<sup>149</sup> This, coupled with Negro Act, which Charleston City Council enacted in order to limit the movement of and the ability for slave owners to hire out enslaved craftsmen in Charleston, suggests that Charlestonians had a difficult time recovering from the hardships of the American Revolution.

Mary Allison Carll, however, argues that this may not be the case. Based on the examination of period daybooks and newspapers, Carll argues that Charlestonians may not have had as rough of a time selling goods locally as may be perceived. In looking at advertisements from after the war it appears that Charleston cabinetmakers were still producing fashionable goods to compete with imports, although a different set of imports. Imports from Britain were down following the War but Charlestonians increasingly imported from other states. Andrew Redmond advertised in 1784 that he produced “Philadelphia Windsor Chairs, armed or unarmed, as neat as any imported.”<sup>150</sup> Carll argued that the local cabinetmaker’s ability to produce fashionable goods and better utilize local infrastructure in order to gain business remained strong.<sup>151</sup>

In conclusion, the second half of the eighteenth century in Charleston witnessed tremendous economic growth, along with a series of cultural and legal ups and downs.

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<sup>148</sup> Carll, *Black Artisans*, 169.

<sup>149</sup> Goloboy, *Charleston Middle Class*, 48.

<sup>150</sup> *South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 13 January 1784.

<sup>151</sup> Carll, “An Assessment of English Furniture,” 14.

The rise of the white, planter elite resulted in a demand for more home goods, not least among which were fashionable furniture pieces. Thus, cabinetmakers experienced a growth in demand, which resulted in the increased use of enslaved craftsmen in cabinetmaking shops. With the burgeoning of the African slave trade in the middle of the eighteenth century came a rise in the use of enslaved tradesmen in Charleston cabinetmaking shops. Like what happened on the surrounding Lowcountry plantations, shop owners capitalized on this form of labor in order to maximize profits. This also allowed for cabinetmakers to accomplish more work out of one shop, which made shop owners all the more financially stable.

The practice of hiring enslaved labor experienced rocky periods over the last four decades of the eighteenth century. Charleston City Council enacted laws that restricted the places an enslaved tradesman could work and how much he could earn at times, which made it more difficult to buy one's freedom. With mounting discontent from white tradesmen and from residents of Charleston, the laws enacted by the City Council were intended to curb the prosperity of the growing number of enslaved laborers in the city. But what is undeniable is that this practice is evidence of the booming economy of Charleston and cabinetmakers' need for enslaved labor to affordably keep up with demands. Through account books, newspapers, and personal records from travelers it is apparent, how important enslaved craftsmen were to the local economy, despite the fact that the hiring of enslaved craftsmen to keep up with the demand for fashionable goods perpetuated the institution of slavery.

While it is unclear to what extent enslaved craftsmen filled their roles in Charleston cabinetmaking shops it can be stated that they were viewed as a necessary

contributor to a shop with a high demand for fashionable goods. Working in a cabinetmaking shop was not a one-man operation, but took a team of skilled craftsmen to complete projects. It is very likely that many of the goods that came from Charleston cabinetmaking shops have, in some way, been touched by the hands of an enslaved tradesman. Knowing this, objects begin to undergo a change in their meaning. A double chest of drawers made in Charleston between 1765 and 1780 (figure 3) may no longer be credited to the work of one man, but, rather, as the work of many hands. It also becomes more than an object of craftsmanship, but, rather, becomes part of African American history, economic history, southern history. What is revealed in studying the role of enslaved Africans in the cabinetmaking shops of Charleston is the extent to which enslaved Africans were essential contributors to the culture and history of this region.

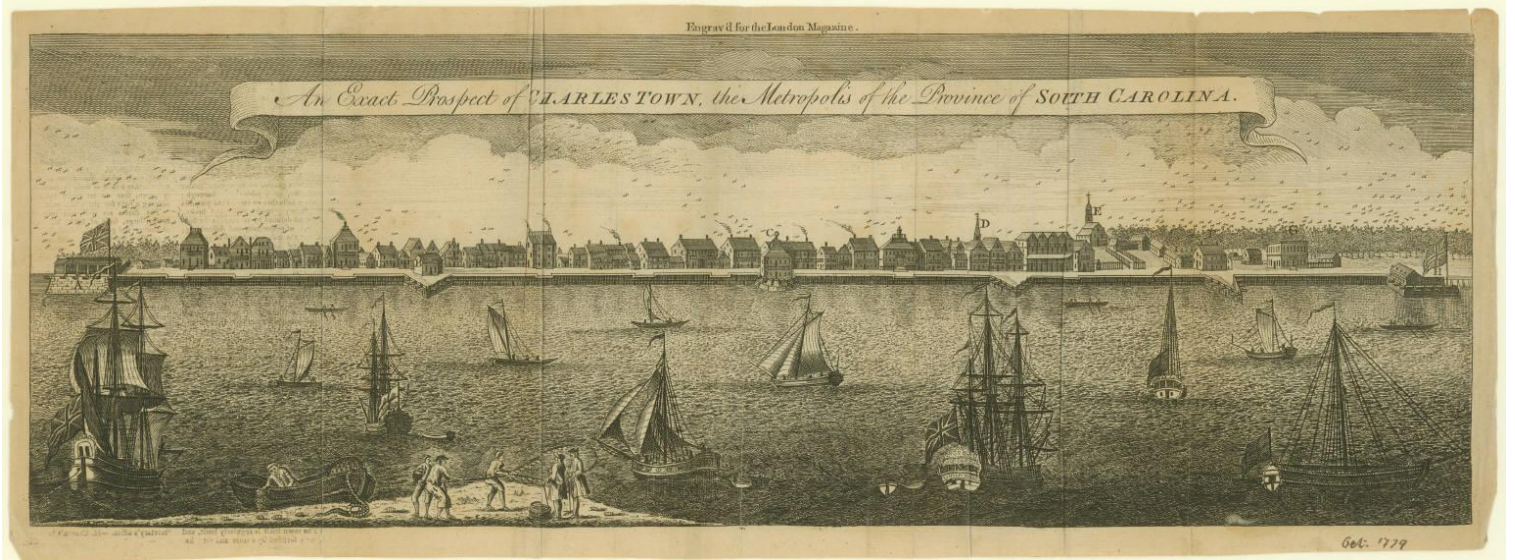


Figure 1- William Henry Toms, *An Exact Prospect of Charles Town, the Metropolis of the Province of South Carolina*, London, c. 1740 Courtesy of Brown University.



Figure 2- Slave Badge, Charleston, South Carolina, 1823, Copper, Courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. The earliest known Charleston slave badge is stamped with the date "1800." Badges were required at points over the previous four decades, but none from this time period have surfaced.

## Conclusion

English artist Marcellus Laroon's circa 1740 painting titled *A Musical Tea Party* (Figure 1) might best exemplify the desired perception of eighteenth-century wealthy Charlestonians. In this oil painting, the setting is elaborate and detailed, despite Laroon's light brush application. The walls of the large room are covered with ornaments of a lavish lifestyle. Taking up the majority of the back wall is an oversized portrait of the gentleman of the house on horseback. He is dressed much like Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, in his portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds (Figure 2). In front of the painting is a tall chest with various sized jars on top. A house servant opens the curtains of a large window with a decorative cornice that matches that of the main doorway, sans Cupid figure. The overall size of the room is very large and holds at least 15 people and seven pieces of furniture.

At the center of the image is a female figure, presumably the mistress of the house. She is seated at a table set for tea and oversees this ritual as one of her daughters pours the popular beverage. All around her are finely dressed members of polite society. In the foreground a couple sits on a finely carved rococo bench with a stack of music books to their left and a member of the company plays a harpsicord in front of the window. Standing next to the mistress of the house is a young, black servant dressed in the type of livery typical of an elite gentry's household. He is dressed in a red coat and turban with a feather sticking out of the top.

The mood in the room is jovial and easy going. Those in attendance at this tea service appear to be enjoying themselves and their fellow guests as they converse and

partake in their refreshments. To the viewer's right two musicians entertain the group, one with a violin and the other on a harpsicord. Several members of the party make eye contact with the viewer, appearing to welcome on lookers into their festivities and conveying a sense that anyone could find a place amongst the company. The mood, much like the setting, leaves the viewer wanting to partake in this lifestyle of ease. The atmosphere of the party is indicative of the English aristocratic lifestyle, in that it was marked by leisure and extravagance. This was the same type of lifestyle that Charlestonians attempted to replicate in the Lowcountry.

The English aristocracy's practice of conspicuous consumption is exemplified in Laroon's painting. Every element of the room speaks to the owner's status in English society, from the paintings on the wall to the furniture throughout the room. English aristocrats delineated status through the display of wealth using material goods and architectural design. These status indicators were displayed throughout the grand houses of England that Charlestonians toured. Just as in Laroon's painting fashionable English people and goods were displayed at events, such as tea, where other members of polite English society could see and compare lifestyles. This, in turn, created a standard by which others, such as Charlestonians, attempted to live. Once Charlestonians saw how their English counterparts lived they, too, strived to achieve a fashionable lifestyle that delineated societal status.

The rapid growth of Charleston's planter class and increased wealth led to a number of changes to the Lowcountry over the last half of the eighteenth century. Once rice and indigo production flourished in the Lowcountry the wealthy planter class increased their cultural influence over the region. Through increased wealth from



agricultural production, wealthy Charlestonians traveled to England and across Europe for pleasure. Social customs and refined tastes modeled after the English stuck with these Charlestonians who traveled abroad. England was also where these same Charlestonians sought to send their sons for a traditional education, the same education that many previous generations completed. The educational institutions which Charlestonians attended were the same attended by the English aristocracy. Life-long connections were forged at these institutions that led to greater trade benefits when Charleston's planter class returned to their fields. Simply put, wealthy Charlestonians aimed to replicate the English aristocratic lifestyle they often witnessed.

Most importantly, the time that Charlestonians spent in England and traveling across Europe provided them with the opportunity to see how members of the English aristocracy lived and what they viewed as a fashionable and desirable lifestyle. Wealthy Charlestonians attempted to replicate this same desirable lifestyle upon their return to the Lowcountry. From the architectural style of Charleston estates to the items that furnished these same homes, Charlestonians attempted to replicate the lavish interiors of their English counterparts. Specifically, Charlestonians sought to furnish their homes with the fashionable goods with which the English elite filled their homes.

Of particular interest were the products of the cabinetmakers. Charlestonians ordered home furnishings, both locally and from England, in such high numbers that local craftsmen struggled to keep up with the demand. As a result, Charleston cabinetmakers hired or trained enslaved Africans in order to keep up with demand, despite Charlestonians' preference for English-made goods. The regional effect of these actions can be seen in both the output of cabinet shops, such as Thomas Elfe's, and in

the numerous legal codes pertaining to the hiring out of enslaved Africans within Charleston city limits.

The second half of the eighteenth century in Charleston witnessed tremendous economic growth, along with a series of cultural and legal ups and downs. The rise of the white, planter elite resulted in a demand for more home goods, not least among which were fashionable furniture pieces. Locally, Charleston cabinetmakers experienced a growth in demand, despite Charlestonians' preference for English-made goods. In turn, Charleston cabinetmakers hired enslaved Africans from different owners or purchased enslaved craftsmen in order to keep up with the growing demand of the local population.

As Charlestonians imported enslaved Africans into Charleston over the eighteenth century to meet the needs of agricultural production, Charleston cabinetmakers, too, looked to enslaved labor in order to keep up with business. John Fisher's 1771 advertisement stated that he recently "purchased of Mr. Stephen Townsend his Stock in Trade and Negroes brought up in the Business" is one example of how prominent Charleston cabinetmakers utilized enslaved labor for economic success.<sup>152</sup> Charleston cabinetmaking shop owners capitalized on this form of labor in order to maximize profits and fulfill the local demand. This also allowed for more work to be accomplished out of one shop, which made shop owners all the more financially stable.

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<sup>152</sup> *South Carolina Gazette; and County Journal*, 1 June 1771; Cabinetmaker Stephen Townsend likely found great success in his cabinetmaking business as he retired as a gentleman planter after he sold out his business and enslaved craftsmen to Fisher. E. Milby Burton, *Charleston Furniture, 1700-1825* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1955), 123.

The practice of hiring enslaved craftsmen experienced rocky periods over the second half of the eighteenth century. Mounting discontent from white craftsmen and residents of Charleston resulted in laws intended to curb the prosperity of the growing number of enslaved laborers in the city. Laws made it difficult for enslaved craftsmen to purchase their freedom because they restricted the places an enslaved craftsman worked and how much he earned at any time. This practice is evidence that Charleston's economy boomed and its need for enslaved labor to keep up with demands for fashionable goods over the successful years. Through account books, newspapers, and personal records it becomes apparent how important enslaved craftsmen were to the local economy, despite the fact that it perpetuated the institution of slavery.

While it is unclear to what extent enslaved craftsmen filled their roles in Charleston cabinetmaking shops it can be stated that they were viewed as a beneficial part of a cabinetmaking shop. Working in a cabinetmaking shop was not a one-man operation, but took a team of skilled craftsmen to complete projects. It is very likely that many of the goods that came from Charleston cabinetmaking shops have, in some way, been touched by the hands of an enslaved tradesman. What is revealed in studying the role of enslaved Africans in the cabinetmaking shops of Charleston is the extent to which enslaved Africans are essential contributors to the culture and history of this region.

While it is unclear to what extent enslaved craftsmen filled their roles in Charleston cabinetmaking shops it can be stated that cabinetmakers viewed enslaved craftsmen as a necessary part of the system. Working in a cabinetmaking shop was not

a one-man operation, but took a team of skilled craftsmen to complete projects. It is very likely that many of the goods that came from Charleston cabinetmaking shops were, in some form, touched by the hands of an enslaved craftsman along the way. What is revealed in studying the role of enslaved Africans in the cabinetmaking shops of Charleston is the extent to which enslaved Africans were essential contributors to the culture, economy, and history of the Lowcountry.

In the historiography of enslaved Charleston craftsmen, scholars have focused on each of the separate components of enslaved Africans, craftsmen, legal codes, and Charleston. What has been acknowledged in this paper is how all of these components are equally important parts to the history of Charleston material culture. Charleston cabinetmakers and cabinet shop owners did not solely influence the market for fashionable goods. Likewise, wealthy Charlestonians did not solely influence the market for fashionable goods in Charleston, as they looked to England for what was desirable.

Scholars such as Mary Allison Carll, Maurie McInnis, Ronald Hurst, and Jonathan Prown made valuable scholarly contributions to the history of Charleston's enslaved craftsmen. However, these scholars alone have only covered some basic understanding as to how involved enslaved Africans were to the production of fashionable goods in Charleston. Carll offered the most insight into the vast roles of enslaved craftsmen. Her research revealed that enslaved craftsmen were trained and involved in all of the building and decorative arts trades. Harland Greene thoroughly addressed the extensive legal codes and use of slave tags. Maurie McInnis's volume illuminated on the interest of Charlestonians in England and Europe and how their taste for fashionable goods returned with them to the Lowcountry.

The history of enslaved craftsmen in Charleston cabinetmaking shops cannot be told from only one or two of these perspectives. Rather, to fully understand the impact of these enslaved craftsmen a more comprehensive analysis is necessary. By looking at the multiple facets that shaped enslaved craftsmen's lives one can begin to understand how they navigated their surroundings and contributed to their community. By looking at the multitude of sources available, one can begin to see just how extensively enslaved craftsmen shaped Charleston and its market for fashionable goods.



Figure 9- Marcellus Laroon, *A Musical Tea Party*, c. 1740, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of The Royal Collection.





Figure 10- Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Charles Stanhope, Third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant*, 1782, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

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