



## South Carolina's Story The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk  
and Louise Pettus

of the Winthrop College faculty

# Society Rebukes 1765 Stamp Act

Charleston's "Sons of Liberty" had their origins in The Fellowship Society, formed in 1762, and consisted primarily of artisans or mechanics.

The purpose of the Fellowship Society, as stated in its application for a charter, was "to afford relief to many poor distressed persons." The Fellowship Society promised to provide "regular advice, attendance, lodging, diet, and medicines" for the needy.

These artisans were the middle-class of an agrarian society. Urban and industrious, they provided Charleston with an endless list of special skills, contributing greatly to the city becoming a major seaport.

When the English Parliament passed the hated Stamp Act in 1765, the Fellowship Society turned into a political society and vigorously opposed the measure.

The Stamp Act touched everyone in the Province but particularly hurt lawyers, printers, and any artisan who had an apprentice. By law, the contract between a master and an apprentice carried a stamp. The Stamp Act rate of seven pounds for that stamp was equivalent to a half-week's wage for the artisan.

Christopher Gadsden, one of the 26 members of the Society, held a seat in the legislature and emerged as spokesman of the anti-Stamp Act forces. Gadsden was elected, along with John Rutledge and Thomas Lynch, to the Stamp Act Congress in New York. There, Gadsden established himself as a leader with his forceful arguments in favor of the idea of "natural and inherent rights . . . of Englishmen" not be taxed without their consent. Gadsden was already in tune with the political justification for the future American Revolution.

While Gadsden was at the Stamp Act Congress, a rumor spread that a British ship in the harbor had a stamp officer aboard. The situation stirred the mechanics to display their talents. In the heart of Charleston, where Broad and Church streets meet, the carpenters built sturdy gallows while other artisans stitched three effigies of stamp collectors, one beheaded, and one a red devil. A painter largely printed a sign, "Liberty and no Stamp Act."

That evening the effigies were cut down and placed on carts for a funeral procession. An estimated 2000 people followed the procession which stopped at the stamp officer's home who, fortunately for him, was not in. The crowd had to be restrained from destroying the house. A search of the house revealed no stamp papers.

The procession continued. The effigies were burned and to the sounds of St. Michael's bells, a coffin, labeled "American Liberty," was buried.

The crowd searched the homes of others suspected of harboring pro-British sentiments. The disturbances which lasted for a week were instrumental in the resultant notices, posted by British officers, that the Stamp Act would not be enforced in Charleston.

To assure the Stamp Act remain unenforced, the artisans, now known as the Sons of Liberty, conducted a boycott of British goods. The Fire Company of Charleston stood ready to burn any craft which loaded rice bound for any colony which used stamp paper.

By the winter of 1766, trade was at a standstill which angered many of the townspeople. The courts refused to operate without stamped documents. For a while it seemed that the radical acts of Charleston's artisans were doomed to failure. Then the tide turned.

British workers began rioting and suffering British businessmen petitioned the removal of the Stamp Act. The Crown was forced to respond to the British demands. The Stamp Act was abolished, however was replaced by the Declaratory Act which declared American colonies as subordinate to the Crown and Parliament.

Again, Christopher Gadsden and the artisans met at the Liberty Tree, "joined hands and swore their defense against tyranny." That defense proved important during the American Revolution a decade later.