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CHRISTOPHER GADSDEN:
RADICAL OR CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTIONARY?

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The most frequently repeated historical cliché describing South Carolina's Christopher Gadsden is that he was the "Samuel Adams of the South"—a phrase which implies a certain excessive radicalism or a plebeian leading popular causes. Writers are also wont to employ Silas Deane's description of him on the eve of the Revolution: that "Mr. Gadsden leaves all New England sons of liberty far behind. He is for taking up his firelock and marching direct to Boston; nay, he affirmed this morning, that were his wife and all his children in Boston, and they were to perish by the sword, it would not alter his sentiment or proceeding for American liberty. . . ." From this, one is given the impression that we have here a kind of Harry Hotspur.¹

Christopher Gadsden has come down to us, therefore, as the fiery anti-imperialist who did much to get the "ball of revolution rolling" in his state and who led the "mob" because of his democratic tendencies. Yet, in 1778, when his followers exploded in rioting, the erstwhile leader of popular causes was moved to write to Peter Timothy: "I am afraid we have too many amongst us who want again to be running upon every fancy to the Meetings of [the] Liberty Tree." Is not such action, he asked, "a disease amongst us far more dangerous than anything that can arise from the whole herd of contemptible, exportable Tories?"²

It is in the light of this last statement that we must examine Christopher Gadsden. How could the democrat and fighter of Tory and conservative viewpoints have uttered such a remark? Does it represent a turn of mind in Gadsden somewhat different from what has been said of him? How deeply convinced was he in his radicalism?³

¹ Dr. Walsh, associate professor of history at Georgetown University and editor of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, is editing *The Writings of Christopher Gadsden* to be published soon by the South Carolina Historical Society. This article is based upon the paper he presented at the annual meeting of the Society in February 1962.

² Connecticut Historical Society, *Collections*, II (Hartford, 1870), 175.

³ Gadsden to Timothy, June 8, 1778, South Carolina Miscellany, Manuscript Department, Presbyterian College Library, Clinton, S. C.

⁴ Richard B. Morris, "Class Struggle and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XIX (1962), 3-29, very ably discusses the early leadership of the Revolution and the "internal" struggle of the conservative with the democratic elements. He stresses, as does this author, the need for more research on this problem.

In 1749, Gadsden launched one of the most successful mercantile careers in the American colonies. He had received a classical education in England beginning at the age of sixteen, after which he was brought up to his trade as an apprentice to Thomas Laurence of Philadelphia. On the eve of the Revolution his business had so developed that he held large properties both in town and in the country. By 1774 he had completed what was probably the largest wharf in the provinces, described as 1,000 feet long and equipped to service all kinds of vessels, from trans-oceanic carriers to small plyers of the trade to the Indies. Typical of the merchant-factor of Charlestown, his pursuit of wealth was relentless. He loaned money at interest, discounted bills of exchange, handled plantation affairs, exported provincial staples, speculated in land, imported goods from England and sold them at both wholesale and retail. He was to remain in business throughout his career except when the needs of politics and his country called or when the fast-moving events of the war intervened.⁴

First elected to the Commons House of Assembly in 1757, he quickly rose to such prominence that he was one of three men nominated to the Council by Governor William Henry Lyttleton.⁵ This seems to be the only time he had ever received any kind of near-royal favor, for soon he was embroiled in the Grant-Middleton feud,⁶ which, it is surmised, earned him some English enemies. He entered the verbal lists as newspaper essayist, "Philopatros," a pseudonym well chosen to express his sentiments. While he did not become anti-British at this point, he revealed a surprising nationalism in his attacks on Grant and in his defense of the American Rangers whom Grant singled out as cowards in the fighting in 1760. Gadsden's severe, heated, and wordy attacks were, as Josiah Quincy would later observe of his oratory, "plain, blunt, hot, and incorrect,"; but his "Letters of Philopatros" possibly gained him popularity, chiefly among the mechanics of Charles Town, several of whom served in his Battalion of Artillery on the Lyttleton expedi-

⁴ For biographical sketches of Gadsden see Robert L. Meriweather in *DAB*; David Ramsay, *History of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1807), II, 457-466; H. A. Porcher, *A Memoir of Gen. Christopher Gadsden* (Charleston, 1878). His many advertisements appear in the *South Carolina Gazette*, e.g., April 29, July 22, September 23, 1751. See also, for the operations of the merchants in general, Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1934).

⁵ Records Relating to South Carolina in the British Public Records Office, Nov. 30, 1757; April 1, 1758. Transcripts and microfilm in the South Carolina Archives Department, Columbia, S. C. Hereafter, Public Records.

⁶ Lt. Col. James Grant had taken the command above the provincial colonel Thomas Middleton in the last expedition against the Cherokee Indians.

tion. On the other hand, his work brought the sneers of the royalists for his preposterous censure of Grant for Montgomery's errors in the second expedition, few among the Crown's officials being willing to admit to any mistakes by either of the British commanders.⁷ In spite of Gadsden's denial, one has the feeling that he became a marked man in British circles thereafter.

It was therefore no inadvertency that the royal Governor Thomas Boone in 1762 chose Gadsden's election to the House of Commons from St. Paul's Parish as an example of the need for revision in electoral practices in South Carolina. When Gadsden's election was confirmed by the House, the irritated Governor further pressed the issue by refusing to give him the oath of office, as was the custom, hoping thereby to unseat him.⁸

But the Governor had poked a hornet's nest. Gadsden's skill in satire and invective were now amply displayed against Boone and were coupled with an excellent knowledge of British history and of the Constitution on the rights of assembly. He already had the mechanics in his pocket; he now gained strong allies to his principles of American rights in the persons of John Rutledge, Rawlins Lowndes, and other planter politicians, by using such materials as the English Commons' remonstrance against James I in 1604: "That the prerogative of princes may easily, and *do* daily grow and encrease—but the privileges of subjects are, for the most part, *at an everlasting stand*. . . ." He stressed the need to guard against "any encroachment upon the *natural* privileges" all Americans "are entitled unto as British subjects."⁹

The South Carolinians with Gadsden won their point. The Board of Trade recalled Boone and reprimanded him for interfering with the rights of the provincial assembly, but it admonished the Commons for refusing to pay the governor's stipend, a popular weapon which dragged the bickering, unfortunately for the empire, well into the Stamp Act Crisis.¹⁰

⁷ "Philopatris No. 1" appeared in the S.C.G., Dec. 18, 1761; "Philopatris No. 2" may be found in South Carolina Miscellany, Presbyterian College. The only known extant copy of *Some Observations on the Cherokee War* is in the Rare Books Division, L.C. Typed copies of these are in the possession of the writer for publication in his forthcoming *Writings of Christopher Gadsden*.

⁸ See Jack P. Greene, "The South Carolina Election Controversy and the Revolutionary Movement in South Carolina," *Miss. Valley Hist. Review*, XLVI (1959), 469-492. W. Roy Smith, *South Carolina as a Royal Province* (New York, 1903), p. 340 ff., *passim*, in which the dispute is as thoroughly discussed.

⁹ S.C.G., Feb. 5, 1763.

¹⁰ Smith, *South Carolina* . . . , pp. 342-349.

Sent to New York as a delegate to the Stamp Act Congress, Gadsden expressed the ideas he had formulated in 1763 in the Boone controversy and found he was of one mind with other radicals on the nature of imperial rule. In letters to Charles Garth, agent for South Carolina in England, and to William Johnson of Connecticut, he revealed a desire for unity of resistance based on "the broad and common ground of those natural and inherent rights that we all feel, and know, as men, and as descendants of Englishmen we have a right to." These were the best grounds, he maintained, on which to make the appeal. To invoke the various charters, because of their very differences, in defence of American rights might be fatal to unity.¹¹

By this time he was the undoubted leader of the progressive party, composed chiefly of the mechanics, who lent him enthusiastic support, and most of the planters. He won but very few of the merchants, however, whom he attacked as miscreants and Butean rascals, who would sell their country's liberties as any piece of osnaburg.¹² In these years he was in sharp conflict with the men of his own merchant class. Why? He was numbered among the greatest of them. He, like them, would be injured by the disruption of the empire whose credit system, naval and merchant establishments were necessary to the well being of South Carolina.

The answer to the question must lie in his foresight and ambition. In defending the boycotts raised against England in 1769 and 1774, he admitted the needs of immediate sacrifices on the part of his fellow merchants for future political and economic gains. However, he was very critical of the idiocy of British trade regulations which he claimed impeded commerce and in the end prevented the British as well as the American merchant from attaining a broader market and hence greater wealth through free trade. That he wanted new mercantile worlds to conquer became evident after the war, when in writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1787, he marked Britain as a "paltry customer" to whom "we have been so long and losingly attached." He hoped for commercial agreements with France, the Germanies, or any nation willing to buy the state's products. Gadsden, then, held the position of the liberal merchant who would operate in a free, not mercantilistic, economy. At the same time he was also nationalistic in his economic thinking. He

¹¹ Gadsden to William Samuel Johnson, April 16, 1766, in the Manuscript Division, Bancroft Transcripts, New York Public Library. A copy of this letter was also sent to Charles Garth.

¹² See Richard Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty* (Columbia, 1959). Hereafter Walsh, *Sons of Liberty*.

blamed the transient trader—the factor placed by a British house—for “engrossing” the trade of the province justly belonging to the native born. It was this Tory, Scot merchant, he claimed, who was most inimical to American rights.¹³

Thus far, Gadsden’s thoughts are as far advanced as any of the continental radicals. As he indicated in a letter to Samuel Adams, he was a constant friend to the New England men during the critical years before the Revolution. But the period after 1776 was to witness several events which were to turn Gadsden’s thinking.¹⁴

Late in 1775 he departed the Continental Congress to return to the defense of his state, then menaced by a British fleet. As a brigadier general, he was to play a minor role in the Battle of Charles Town, and in 1777 during Prevost’s raid he would appeal to the troops in an attempt to stir them against councilors who were about to surrender the city. Upon his return to the Provincial Congress, in February of 1776, fresh from the deliberations and excitement at Philadelphia, he demanded that the Congress declare South Carolina independent of Great Britain. This stand came as a bolt to the majority of that body, particularly to the aristocratic planter element. They would not hear of it. In their minds a war for the rights of Englishmen was necessary; but one which would break up the empire was inadmissible. Gadsden’s insistence on the point roused the wrath of these conservatives; he was dangerous, and they would attempt to thwart and outmaneuver him.¹⁵

The “old leaven,” as he dubbed them, brought in a constitution in 1776 which merely put into writing the old, unwritten form of the royal government. They declared that it would serve until an accommodation with Great Britain could be had.

Meanwhile Gadsden and William Henry Drayton worked feverishly on a new constitution declaring the independence of the state from Great Britain. Adopted March 19, 1778, it contained several democratic innovations—including a bill of rights and the promise, not fulfilled until 1808, of equal representation to the back-country and a popularly elected senate. However, it is noteworthy that the property qualifica-

¹³ S.C.G., June 29 1769; Gadsden to Jefferson, Oct. 29, 1787, Jefferson Papers in the L. C., also in Julian K. Boyd, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1955), XII, 296-297.

¹⁴ Gadsden to Samuel Adams, July 6, 1779, in the Samuel Adams Papers. N. Y. P. L.

¹⁵ Edward McCrady, *South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775-1780* (New York, 1901), pp. 235-245.

tions for voting and holding office remained as they had been since 1721 and that the governor's council, as in the past, remained a bulwark of property in its role of Chancery Court. Aside from the popular election of senators, the only genuinely democratic feature of the new system was the divesting of the Anglican church of public support, the result of Gadsden's efforts. But a provision following this defined and hedged the states, declared religious toleration in that "the Christian Protestant religion shall be deemed . . . the established religion of this state," and in further clauses excluded all but Christian Protestants from public life.¹⁶

Nevertheless the "old leaven" considered Gadsden a madman. When John Rutledge resigned the governorship in protest to the new government, Gadsden, who deserved to succeed him, was given the innocuous post of lieutenant-governor, while Lowndes of the Rutledge group was elected to the higher office.¹⁷

Gadsden found himself caught between two fires; his work was far too liberal for the conservatives and too conservative for the rising democracy. Early in June 1778, because of a proclamation to delay the execution of a test oath act, aimed against the still considerable number of tories and fence-sitters in the province, Gadsden's former followers rioted. For his advice in setting aside the oath, he seemed to be the chief object of their wrath, and among his friends he reported "much negative impulse."¹⁸

The riot reminds one of the "great Fear" which took hold of the popular mind in the French Revolution. From Gadsden's letters to Peter Timothy, there was much confusion in the tumult. Rumors had it that the Council was ruling extra-legally by proclamation, that it intended to take "away our liberties." Apparently, the hot debate over independence and the forms of government had played on the public imagination. It should be remembered, too, that this was the time of the arrival of the Carlisle peace commission at Philadelphia, which would offer the Americans everything but independence; and on the commissioners' list of probable friends was John Rutledge of South Carolina, "very artful, sensible, ambitious and a man of business; may be practiced upon."¹⁹ At any rate, a distinct distrust of the old leaders is evidenced in Gadsden's letters on the riots.

¹⁶ Francis Newton Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions* (Washington, 1909), VII, 3241-3248; 3248-3257.

¹⁷ McCrary, *South Carolina* . . . , pp. 239-245.

¹⁸ Walsh, *Sons of Liberty*, pp. 81-87.

¹⁹ Carl Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1951), p. 77.

The following decade revealed that the riot was more than a minor affair. Several mobbings took place in Charleston during the early years under the Confederation. The insurgents, having given up Gadsden for Alexander Gillon, arrayed themselves as democrats against the aristocrats. The latter, they alleged, sought to control the state and were in league with the Tory faction still remaining in the town since the British occupation. The democrats were in high hopes of paying the cost of the war with seized Tory estates, Gadsden opposed this plan as unjust, since such confiscation often punished the innocent for the guilty. There is little doubt of a democratic desire for social advancement and equality with the aristocracy. How deeply this latter desire was felt is evident from the myriad of newspaper essays which filled the gazettes of the times; but democratic ideas of equality were hazy, characterized more by negative abuse of the aristocracy than by constructive programming. Some idea of the aims of the democrats, however, may be gathered from the tax exemptions granted the mechanics and also from Gillon's plea in the legislature for an easing of competition between town laborers: the mechanics and the planter-owned, slave tradesmen.²⁰

In this battling, which once brought the gentry out on horseback to put down a tumult, the aristocratic party discovered an able supporter and pamphleteer in Gadsden. He found these new stirrings for "liberty" dangerous and against law and order—indeed, a threat to the Revolution itself. Once the most active of demagogues, he now branded Gillon with that epithet and looked upon the scenes with mounting anxiety.²¹

Gadsden had moved far to the right. Upon the meeting of the convention at Philadelphia, he wrote Washington, exhibiting his always present nationalism: "Congress ought to be well supported and rendered respectable." In this letter, as in another to Jefferson, he expressed the merchant's view of paper money: to Washington he rejoiced that the Carolina legislature had come to its "Sences," working to "pay our Debts and keep up Public Credit by rejecting a proposal of making any more paper currency"; and to Jefferson that the Constitution would make trade "unsubjected in future to Frauds from Paper Tenders, and

²⁰ Walsh, *Sons of Liberty*, p. 111, *et passim*.

²¹ *Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, May 6, Aug. 5, July 17, 1784. Gadsden's attacks on Gillon in the press and the legislature were so severe that they worried the aristocracy itself. See Thomas Waring to Gen. Andrew Pickens, July 22, 1784, Waring Papers, South Carolina Historical Society.

other too common unjustifiable Practices from Unprincipled Debtors very prejudicial to their Creditors."²²

In the convention of 1790, called to rewrite the state constitution, he echoed the tone of the Low Country. He grudgingly consented to a more equitable representation to the back-country districts and was displeased that the capital of the state had been removed from Charleston.²³

It was but a short step for Gadsden to move the full circle from prewar radical to conservative. The property-conscious merchant aristocrat was always present in him. He had found the guiding hand of Providence in the deliberations of the federal convention and regarded the Constitution as insurance against "tumult, instability, and inefficiency." Not even the Jay Treaty shook his Federalist loyalty although before a large gathering of fellow townsmen, he exclaimed that he'd "as soon send a favourite virgin to a Brothel, as a man to England to make a treaty." Ironically, many of the "old leaven," John Rutledge among them, looked upon Federalism with a quizzical eye. The Jay Treaty marked the beginning of the end of Federal sentiment in South Carolina.²⁴

In the presidential campaigns of '96 and 1800, Gadsden staunchly supported John Adams. In the newspapers he posed as an independent political thinker, but his letters to Adams evince another disposition. Writing as "Steady Federalist," he countered Thomas Paine's criticism of the administration with the characterization of Paine as a "pull down politician," good in time of revolt, but incapable of building soundly. Gadsden had used material from *Common Sense* to aid in the acceptance of the constitution of 1778 and as an antidote to a revival of royalist sentiment.²⁵

The victory of Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800 brought bitter disappointment to the old revolutionary. He had consistently criticized the Virginia, pro-French cabal of dictating and interfering

²² Gadsden to Washington, May 13, 1787, in the papers of George Washington, Library of Congress; Gadsden to Jefferson, Oct. 29, 1787, Library of Congress.

²³ Gadsden to Thomas Morris, *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, II (1901), 44-45.

²⁴ "Steady and Open Republican," *State Gazette of South Carolina*, May 5, 1789. Washington Papers, vol. 273, May 31-July 23, 26, 1795. Dunlap and Claypoole, *Am. Daily Adv.* (Phil.), Aug. 24, 1795.

²⁵ *A Few Observations on Some Late Public Transactions* (Charleston, 1797), Charleston Library Society. Papers of David Bruce, South Carolina Archives Department. See essays in *S. C. State Gaz. and Timothy's Daily Advertiser*, April 23, 1798; July 15, Aug. 29, Oct. 8, 1800.

with the state's selection of the president. Now their artful moves had resulted in triumph. He lamented this "strange reversement" in the state, in which, as he told Adams, "our old standers and independent men of long well-trying patriotism, sound understanding, and good property, have now in general very little influence in our public matters." "Long have I been led to think our planet a mere bedlam, and the uncommonly extravagant ravings of our own times, especially for a few years past, and still in the rightest rant, have greatly increased and confirmed that opinion. Look around our whirling globe . . . where you will, east, west, north, or south, where is the spot in which are not many thousands of these mad lunatics?" The "lunatics" were immigrants, French Revolutionaries, and Jeffersonian Republicans.²⁶

By way of summation, some assessment of Gadsden's politics seems necessary. Before the revolution he was radical—as much as any of the early leaders of the movement. His hatred of imperial, political, and economic control fed his desires for independence and self-determination. But in internal affairs Gadsden was still moved by his views as a merchant. Although more liberal than his colleagues, he was horror stricken at the unrest which the Revolution had unleashed. After 1778, he might have agreed with Lt. Governor Bull's observation of 1773 that the "People who have been obediently made use of by their numbers and occasional riots to support the claims set up in America, have Discovered their own strength and importance" and now will not be "so easily governed by their former Leaders. . . ." ²⁷

In brief, he felt that the country should break with Britain, but, as in the words of John Jay, "the people who own the country ought to govern it" ²⁸—not the common herd. Such sentiments probably were known to the "mob" in 1778, causing it to turn to new leadership.

Gadsden was no radical—at least not in the later phases of the Revolution which sought more control by the commoner, a movement which Jefferson would come to symbolize. Gadsden, then, should be placed in the "rebel" camp of John Adams, Livingston, Jay, Hamilton, and other conservatives who broke with Great Britain merely to supplant its domination with their own, in which the untrustworthy democrat would have little voice.

²⁶ Gadsden to John Adams, Mar. 11, 1801, *Works of John Adams* (Boston, 1850), IX, 578-580.

²⁷ Public Records, XXXV, 79-80.

²⁸ Quoted in Russell B. Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation* (New York, 1960), p. 103.

MIDDLETON CORRESPONDENCE, 1861-1865

Edited by ISABELLA MIDDLETON LELAND

(Continued from July)

[Susan Middleton to Harriott, Flat Rock]

Columbia—Thursday

[Oct. 9/10, 1862]

. . . The Mrs. Means I spoke of was a Miss Stark. . . She died a few days ago. It has been a tragedy, as people say, first their only daughter died, a few months ago, then the father was killed at Manassas, the mother now is gone, and the only son, Major S. Means, was desperately wounded at Sharpsburg, and is in the hands of the enemy still. Dr. Trezevant's son is dead, nothing can be heard of Dr. Goodwyn's, and his niece, a poor Mrs. Calhoun, can only hear of her husband that he was mortally wounded, and that indirectly. Col. Glover's widow is in a most distressing condition, she had not shed a tear since she heard of her husband's death, but sits motionless, only saying now and then, "Dead, dead, did they say he was dead?" It is feared her mind will never recover from the shock. . . .

Columbia—Oct. 19th

. . . rumour is rife everywhere that Beauregard has had a warning from our Washington spies, who report that Dupont has been ordered to attack between the 15th and 30th of this month. Columbia has it that the women and children are already ordered out of the town! Meanwhile the steamer "Leopard" has come in with thirteen large rifled cannon and a quantity of powder. On the cars, a few days ago, a commissary asked Papa if he had any wood near Charleston for sale. Beauregard has ordered him to collect 2000 cords of it, and 2000 barrels of turpentine, to set fire to the place if we should not by other means be able to prevent the Yankees from occupying it! If there is an attack at all, they say that the houses on the Battery must be blown up, for, should they be fired by the enemy's shells during the engagement, the heat would be so great that our men could not work the guns just in front of them. Would it not be a pity to destroy all these charming rooms and piazzas? I try to think very calmly of the terrible probabilities before us—it is hard to reconcile oneself to the churches going as well as the homes, yet, for my own part, it is better, I feel, that they should burn, clean and pure, than stand to be polluted by the invaders. . . .