

TWO RECENTLY DISCOVERED LETTERS OF
CHARLES COTESWORTH PINCKNEY:

ANOTHER GLIMPSE INTO THE MIND OF AN EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY MAN OF AFFAIRS

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The organization of materials in the French *Archives Nationales* presents the researcher with certain obstacles to the easy completion of his work. Yet the monotony of the task is sometimes relieved by the reward of an unusual or unexpected discovery. Such at least were the feelings of the present author, who, while in Paris investigating the nature of French radicalism between 1794 and 1797, by chance uncovered a small packet of documents relating to the famous "X Y Z" episode. These documents, located among a large collection of papers connected not at all with French foreign office affairs, included, along with other items, two personal letters of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney written from France in 1797. How these letters came to be in the possession of the French archives can not easily be determined. Since the original envelopes are preserved along with the manuscripts, we can perhaps assume that the letters never left France. To be sure, both Pinckney and the administration in Philadelphia suspected at the time that his correspondence was being intercepted. And too, since both letters bear the official stamp of the archival director under the French Empire, they probably were deposited there early in the nineteenth century upon Napoleon's organization of the archives. Addressed to friends in Charleston, the two epistles in question are reproduced below in the expectation that they will prove of interest to later day South Carolinians.¹

By November 3, 1797, the date of the first letter, Pinckney had been away from Charleston for over a year.² Because he was considered to be a political neutral—that is, holding neither a partisan attitude favor-

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¹ *Archives Nationales*. F7 4268, dr. 9, *lettres de MM Pinckney, Marshall, et Gerry*. The author acknowledges his gratitude to Monsieur F. Dousset, Adjoint au Directeur General des Archives de France, for granting him permission to publish the letters in this magazine.

² Pinckney and his family sailed from Charleston on September 2, 1796, going first to Philadelphia, where they boarded a vessel for Europe.

failed to make an impression on the Grand Juries and audiences, already disposed to receive them."²⁸

There is little doubt that had he lived, Pringle would have taken the patriot's side during the Revolution. Throughout his career he gave evidence that he prized the rights of Englishmen. In 1744 he commented on a tax act which was detrimental to Charleston merchants. He wrote it "Greatly affects the Interest of British Subjects Trading here who reckon themselves a free People & not Subject to such Arbitrary Taxes at Home, much Less ought to be Suffer'd in new Collonies or Plantations."²⁹ His protest against arbitrary taxation in 1744, his participation in the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765, his joining the Association in 1769 to boycott British imports and to thwart the Townshend Duties, and his defense of the right to trial by jury all are indications that Robert Pringle was not afraid to speak or act against British officialdom's threats to colonial liberties.

In 1751 when he began to withdraw actively from trade, Robert Pringle was considered to be one of Charleston's "eminent merchants," and following Defoe's advice for "the rich Tradesman leaving off," he "quit the World of Trade in Peace—with the good word of the Rich and the Blessings of the Poor, and . . . well spoken of . . .,"³⁰ for it was his standing in the community that enabled him to be accepted as a judge.

Retired from trade and removed from the bench, Robert Pringle lived out the remainder of his years quietly in Charleston, where he died on 13 January 1776. His obituary read: "Robert Pringle, Esq., Late one of the Assistant Judges of His Majesty's Court of Common Pleas in this Province."³¹ Pringle's obituary reflected the progress made by the young emigrant Scot—a change similar to that in William Hogarth's moral tale, "Industry and Idleness" in which the industrious apprentice wed the master's daughter, rose to wealth, retired from trade, was elected Sheriff and then Lord Mayor of London. Robert Pringle had been an apprentice, married well, grew prosperous, withdrew from trade, was elected to the Commons House, and was appointed a judge. "Robert Pringle, Esq., Late one of the Assistant Judges of His Majesty's Court of Common Pleas in this Province." No mention of Robert Pringle, merchant.

²⁸ Transcripts of records in the British Public Record Office relating to South Carolina, in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S. C., XXXII, 407-08.

²⁹ *The Letterbook of Robert Pringle*, II, 700.

³⁰ [Defoe], II, 210.

³¹ *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, 19 January 1776.

able toward England nor an open hostility toward the French Revolution. In May of 1796 Pinckney had been selected to replace the disgraced James Monroe as United States minister to France. Pinckney's objective in traveling to France was to heal the widening breach between our nation and that of the French. Circumstances scarcely provided him with any chance for success. Authorized only to defend America's previous actions and to maintain inviolate the Jay Treaty recently signed with Great Britain, he was given no powers to negotiate or to offer concessions to France.³ Moreover, from Pierre Auguste Adet, the French minister to the United States, the executive Directory of France had learned that Pinckney allegedly was the tool of the hated Federalist administration, and consequently was not to be trusted.⁴ Even James Monroe denounced Pinckney beforehand to the French governors, calling him an "aristocrat."⁵ Reacting to the American ratification of the Jay Treaty, which France considered a violation of their agreement of 1778 with the United States, the French already had begun to seize American ships at sea. And suspension of diplomatic relations followed late in 1796, before the arrival in Paris on December 5 of Pinckney, his wife, and his daughter Eliza.⁶

Pinckney realized immediately that he would not be officially received by the French authorities. Furthermore, he was informed that the Directory would refuse accreditation to any American minister until its grievances against the United States government had been satisfied.⁷ Lingering in Paris until formally ordered out of France, the unaccredited ambassador departed the French capital finally on February 5, 1797. Accompanied by his private secretary, Henry Middleton Rutledge,⁸ Pinckney and his family moved to Amsterdam, where they remained for seven months while Pinckney awaited new instructions from his government.

³ Gerard H. Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy 1795-1800* (Columbia, Missouri, 1969), p. 57.

⁴ Marvin R. Zahniser, *Charles Cotesworth Pinckney Founding Father* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1967), p. 138.

⁵ Albert J. Beveridge, *The Life of John Marshall* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1929), II, 224.

⁶ *Ibid.*; Zahniser, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141; Clarfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 49, 52.

⁷ Charles F. McCombs, editor, *Letter-book of Mary Stead Pinckney November 14th, 1796 to August 29th, 1797* (New York, 1946), p. 36.

⁸ Henry Middleton Rutledge (1775-1844) was the son of Edward Rutledge and Henrietta Middleton and the nephew of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. A student of the law in London before 1796, he functioned as Pinckney's private secretary during the period of the mission to France.

Rejection by France of an ambassador notwithstanding, the recently elected Adams administration was anxious to avoid war. It realized that with the nation divided internally between the Republican admirers and the Federalist opponents of the French Revolution, hostilities might possibly bring on civil war as well as military disaster. Alarmed also by the inaccurate information that both England and Austria were about to capitulate to the French republican armies, American statesmen in the spring of 1797 adopted the project of sending a new set of envoys to Paris to negotiate a settlement. In part, this move was designed to assuage the moderates in and out of Congress, and to contribute to the government's efforts toward unifying the nation in the face of a possible war with France. As Alexander Hamilton pointed out, even should the project fail, the administration would nevertheless benefit; an unsuccessful mission, he argued, would silence Republican criticism by placing the responsibility for any hostilities upon France.⁹

The new delegation, headed by Pinckney, was authorized in May of 1797, and included in addition John Marshall and Elbridge Gerry. Its chances for success, however, appeared no brighter than those of Pinckney's unlucky mission of the previous year. Regarding foreign policy, the Adams administration was determined to maintain United States neutrality, to make France no loans, and to adhere rigidly to the Jay Treaty. And the president's insistence that any settlement between France and the United States should be on terms dictated from Philadelphia practically negated his instructions that the envoys negotiate in the spirit of compromise.¹⁰ As for France, with her armies almost everywhere victorious, the governing Directory had recently strengthened its hand, when, as a result of an anti-royalist *coup*, it had eliminated from official positions the conservative politicians who were more favorably inclined toward the United States.

Without waiting for Gerry, who had not yet arrived in Europe, on September 18, 1797, Marshall and Pinckney left Amsterdam for Paris, reaching the French capital on the twenty-seventh. Because they had decided not to enter into direct negotiations in the absence of their colleague, they delayed presenting their letters of credence to the Directorial authorities until October 8, four days after Gerry had joined them. As is well known, Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, employed a sequence of unofficial negotiations centering especially on the subject of what the United States might do financially for himself and

⁹ Clarfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104; Zahniser, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁰ Clarfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-108; Zahniser, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161.

his government. In the French minister's opinion, the United States owed to France a debt of gratitude for aid rendered during the American War for Independence which could properly be removed with a loan and other compensation of specified amounts. The American envoys considered the proposals briefly, but they rejected the idea of payment when Talleyrand refused to guarantee security of American commerce from French harassment. France, however, determined to make of the loan a *sine qua non* of any negotiations, and Talleyrand further angered the Americans by insisting on the continuance of informal talks only. For Pinckney and Marshall,¹¹ official negotiations had become a matter of principle, and the issue of monetary payment a question not open to discussion.¹²

Matters stood at this point when, early in November of 1797, Pinckney conveyed, in the two letters which follow, his feelings regarding the troubled mission to France. Heretofore unknown to historians, this correspondence provides not only interesting and additional insights into late eighteenth century European politics, but also it resolves at least one historical question noted by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney's most recent biographer.¹³ From these documents too, it becomes immediately apparent that Pinckney despaired even at this early date of the hope of success of the project. And, because he realized that the Directory expected to profit from the internal division of the American people, Pinckney sought to alert his Charleston friends Edward Rutledge and Henry William DeSaussure that there had never been a greater need for national unity among Americans than at that time. As the letters show, he believed that the desired solidarity would result from the early publication of the facts relating to the failure of his latest negotiations as well as from revelations of French aggression toward United States commerce.

Aside from political attitudes, these letters of Pinckney are especially important for illustrating certain aspects of the life and character of an

¹¹ Elbridge Gerry refused to go along with Pinckney's concept of solidarity within the commission then negotiating with the French. Instead, he acted unilaterally, and even stayed on in France after the departure in 1798 of Pinckney and Marshall.

¹² Zahniser, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 174. The question raised concerned the date at which Pinckney, doubting beneficial results from his stay in France, seriously began to consider seeking passage back to Charleston. His letter of November 3, 1797, to Edward Rutledge confirms his interest in the vessel *Aurora* which was departing Bordeaux for Charleston on the twentieth.

eighteenth century man of affairs. Although burdened down by the tremendous responsibilities of his diplomatic mission and the realization of failure, Pinckney nevertheless refused to allow the weight of his own problems to become his sole preoccupation. Rather, the epistles reveal with clarity the stature and the unselfish qualities of the writer. Through his pen concern is expressed for the health of his close business and political allies; there is also an interest in what is happening at home, particularly that which involves close members of his family; and there is a relish for gossipy tittle-tattle along with a general, very pronounced, affability.

An indication of the many fiscal problems which might confront the wealthy eighteenth century man of business emerges from the text of Pinckney's letter to Edward Rutledge. In addition to being close friends, Pinckney and Rutledge were brothers-in-law and business partners. Following the Revolutionary War they had invested in partnership in several properties, including two plantations which had been confiscated by the state legislature from previous owners who had held pro-British attitudes during the war. One of these, Charleywood Plantation in Saint Thomas Parish, is the object of the concern shown by Pinckney in his letter. As noted therein, the two partners, along with a number of South Carolina merchants and planters, were suffering financially from the recent disastrous decline in the price of rice in Europe.

Of greater value for its political observations—as well as for its appeal to American nationalism—is Pinckney's letter to Henry William DeSaussure. In his early years a student of the law under both Pinckney and Rutledge, DeSaussure continued thereafter to admire and to emulate the finer qualities of his mentors. Professor Zahniser describes DeSaussure as a "confidant" in 1800 of Pinckney, whereas, two years earlier, when war between the United States and France appeared likely, DeSaussure "was appointed aid-de-camp to General [C. C.] Pinckney, and would have served, if the army had taken the field."¹⁴ Pinckney's letter reveals particularly the warm affection and esteem held by the correspondent for that Charleston friend.

¹⁴ William Harper, *Memoir of the life, character and public services of the late Hon. Henry William DeSaussure, prepared and read on the 15th February, 1841, at the Circular Church, Charleston, by appointment of the South Carolina Bar Association* (Charleston, South Carolina, 1841), pp. 13-17; Zahniser, *op. cit.*, pp. 227, 238.

Paris, November 3, 1797

My dear Ned,¹⁵

I sincerely wish it was in my power to send you more agreeable intelligence than this letter will contain, and that I could inform you that there was a disposition in this republic to listen to the voice of reconciliation, but I am afraid such a temper does not direct her Councils, and that we shall not be permitted to open our negotiations. In case we should in a few days receive a mandate to quit the territories of the Republic, I think of embarking with my family in the *aurora* [sic] Cap. Woodman from Bordeaux to Charleston, but should the order come too late to sail from Bordeaux by the 20th instant, I shall accompany my colleagues to England and embark from thence about February or March next. You will observe that these measures are only eventual in case we are ordered to depart, and neither of them will be pursued in case such order is not given, and we are permitted to enter on the duties of our office. . . .^o I have so often repeated my sentiments on the necessity of union, and am so convinced that even the appearance of being attached to any interest but that of our Country is pregnant with evil to us, that to you I need not reiterate them; but be assured my dear Ned that union was never more requisite in America than at present. I however will not plague you more with this subject.

Did you receive the money on Thayer's¹⁶ and John Price's protested Bills and again remitted them to Poyas?¹⁷ What remittances have you made him from our Charleywood Rice last year? The 190 barrells sent to Bordeaux did not turn out well, it netted in Bills on Amsterdam after deducting the Amsterdam charges on those Bills but six thousand five hundred and one florins—two florins and a half make a dollar. I directed Messrs. Willinks¹⁸ to remitt this sum to Poyas and they have done so. Let me conjure you to make every exertion to send remittances to sink Taylors and Bissetts [sic] debts¹⁹ which give me great uneasiness.

Your son Henry is well and continues to act in a manner that will make you and myself, his friend, and his country proud of him. Mrs. Pinckney and

¹⁵ Edward Rutledge (1749-1800). For ease in reading, the ampersand has been expanded and a paragraph arrangement introduced where needed.

^o At this point the letter is interrupted by several lines of text written in cipher.

¹⁶ William Thayer, an important Charleston merchant.

¹⁷ James Poyas, formerly of Charleston, represented Pinckney's and Rutledge's financial interests in London, handling for them Bills of Credit. He died in 1799 in Bath, England.

¹⁸ Willem and Jan Willinks were official financial agents in Holland for the American government. During their 1797 stay in Amsterdam, the Pinckneys were often in the company of the two brothers.

¹⁹ This must refer to an indebtedness owed to the Captain Bissel and Peter Taylor mentioned in note 11, p. 77, in Zahniser, *op. cit.*

Eliza, Mr. and Mrs. Middleton and their children,²⁰ Ralph Izard²¹ and States Rutledge,²² are all well. We shall dine together tomorrow. I hope our friend Mr. Izard of South Bay is entirely recovered of his indisposition.²³ It is well he is not here, for European politics would make him mad. They even ruffle the *serene philosophy* of my *temper*. Remember me affectionately to him and his family, to my sister, children, nephews, nieces, and friends and believe that I constantly am

Your sincere and affectionate friend

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney

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Paris, November 4, 1797

Dear Major,²⁴

By a chance opportunity I venture a line to inform you that myself and family are well, but that neither myself or Colleagues have been officially acknowledged by the Directory, tho the Minister of foreign affairs received from us the copy of our Letters of Credence so long ago as the Eighth of last Month. To speak in the mildest terms the dispositions of this government appear to be very unfriendly to America, and I have not at present any hopes that our negotiations will be successful. My Countrymen will I dare say be ready to meet events with firmness. Divisions and parties in America are much relied on here. My own opinion is that when the conduct of this Country to ours is fully known, we shall have but one party and that will be

²⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Henry Middleton (son of Arthur and Mary Izard Middleton), who for several years had been living in England, had come to Paris just before Pinckney's arrival there in December of 1796. Mrs. Middleton, née Mary Helen Hering, was an English woman not known by the Pinckneys until this sojourn in Paris.

²¹ Ralph Stead Izard, the son of Mrs. Pinckney's sister Elizabeth. Undoubtedly, he had accompanied the Pinckneys to France in order to study the French language, for, in her letters to her sister, Mrs. Pinckney shows considerable concern over the progress of his education.

²² States Rutledge (1783-1829), the son of John Rutledge and Elizabeth Grimké. Perhaps he too had accompanied the Pinckneys to Paris.

²³ Senator Ralph Izard (1742-1804), Mrs. Pinckney's cousin. In 1797 he suffered a stroke and was an invalid for the rest of his life.

²⁴ Considerable difficulty was experienced in determining the correct identification of this Major DeSaussure, since, in 1797, both Daniel DeSaussure, the father, and Henry William DeSaussure (1763-1839), his son, were then alive and residing in Charleston. Both men were active during the Revolutionary War, although only Henry William DeSaussure is listed by F.B. Heitman as an officer ("Lieutenant 3d South Carolina; 1777") of the Continental Army. Additional search into Heitman's volumes failed, moreover, to provide evidence of DeSaussure's promotion to Major. But as noted in the text above, in 1798 Henry William was appointed aide-de-camp to General C.C. Pinckney.

truly American—our vessels are still taken for the want of a *Rôle d'Equipage*²⁵; the Tribunals continue to condemn them; and the application has been made to the supreme Court of appeals, the Tribunal of Cassation, to suspend proceedings till the result of our negotiations shall be known, such delay has been refused, and our lawyers are of opinion that every American vessel will be condemned, and declare that it will be in vain to attempt to defend them.

Your favour of the 8th of July did not reach me till about three weeks ago. I am much obliged to you for it; if you knew how much pleasure your letters give me you would indulge me oftener in hearing from you, and besides this pleasure they always bring me some intelligence of our domestic politics and local transactions not mentioned by any of our other friends. I am convinced many of my letters must miscarry; I will in future keep a list of the dates of those I write.

I wrote to my brother October 28th, to my sister Oct. 11th, and Nov. 1st, and to my friend E. Rutledge yesterday; as they are all sent by different conveyances, some of them I trust will reach their destination. By Cap. Izard I sent a cypher enclosed to our friend E R and I desired him to let you take a copy of it. In hopes that it will arrive safe my next letter shall contain a few paragraphs written therein. I had not time to arrange the key but Mr. W A Deas²⁶ will show you how to do it. The Northern papers mention that my Brother is appointed Member of Congress for Charleston district,²⁷ but I have not received any intimation of that kind from Carolina. Return my best remembrances to my friends Holmes,²⁸ Ford,²⁹ Majors Lining³⁰ and

²⁵ A *Rôle d'Equipage* was a bill of lading or a form of ship's paper required by the French government of American sea captains, the lack of which made American vessels liable to capture by French ships. Allegedly, these were practically impossible for American ship's masters to obtain.

²⁶ William Allen Deas had been private secretary to Thomas Pinckney, Charles Cotesworth's brother, when Thomas as United States ambassador to England had represented American interests in London.

²⁷ Thomas Pinckney replaced William Loughton Smith as United States senator when Smith resigned his seat in 1797 to become United States minister to Portugal.

²⁸ John Bee Holmes, a Charleston lawyer who had collaborated with Charles C. Pinckney and Edward Rutledge in the 1790s on various cases dealing with the question of debts owed to English merchants.

²⁹ Timothy Ford (1762-1830). brother-in-law and law partner of Henry William DeSaussure.

³⁰ Charles Lining (1753-1813), a Major in the Continental Army and son of Dr. John Lining. He shared with Charles C. Pinckney various civic interests, and like Pinckney was a prominent member of the Society of the Cincinnati.

Beekman.³¹ Your brothers [sic] aid, Major Rutledge³² is perfectly well, and acts in a manner to obtain universal love and esteem. Mrs. Pinckney and my daughter Eliza write with me in best Compts to Mrs. DeSaussure and your daughter in hopes that the summer has not proved prejudicial to your health; that it may long remain uninjured, and if not perfectly restored, that it may speedily be so, is the ardent wish of your sincere friend

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney

³¹ Samuel Beekman (or Beckman) (1750?-1812), a veteran of the Revolutionary War, civic leader, and member of the Society of the Cincinnati.

³² According to F.B. Heitman, Henry Rutledge was commissioned a Major in the United States Army on July 12, 1799; however, the *City Gazette* of October 15, 1798, notes that "Major Henry Rutledge, secretary of General Pinckney arrived in N.Y. on the ship *Factor* from London." See F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from its organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903* (Washington, D. C., 1903), I, 885.

Since Henry William DeSaussure had no brother, perhaps Charles Cotesworth Pinckney is referring to DeSaussure's brother-in-law, Timothy Ford, when he writes: "Your brothers aid, Major Rutledge."