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SOUTH CAROLINA'S FORGOTTEN CRAFTSMEN

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Although blacks have been recognized in historical literature as contributing members of the labor force, the extent of their involvement and the types of skills undertaken have never been analyzed extensively. A review of primary source materials reveals, however, that many black craftsmen were extremely versatile and could perform a variety of skills. As eighteenth-century writer Alexander Hewatt observed, "Many negroes discover great capacities, and an amazing aptness for learning trades, where dangerous tools were used, and many owners from motives of profit and advantage, breed them to be coopers, carpenters, bricklayers, smiths, and other trades."¹

Although most of these laborers were under the bonds of slavery, the presence of free black craftsmen in the work force cannot be overlooked. During the eighteenth century, this group constituted only a small percentage of the black population; however blacks as a whole formed a sizeable percentage of the total population of the south. South Carolina, in particular, had the largest black population of any of the southern states.² For this reason, the geographical area known as the Charleston District was selected for analysis of the role of the free black artisan in the building trades and decorative arts.³

Present at its founding, blacks first outnumbered whites in South Carolina around 1708;⁴ but by 1720, the number of slaves in the colony's

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¹ Alexander Hewatt, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia*, 2 vols. (1779; rpt. Spartanburg, 1971), 2:97.

² In Virginia, for example, blacks constituted 40.9 percent of the population of the state in 1790. The figure for Maryland was 34.7 percent, and in Georgia blacks numbered 35.9 percent of the total population. South Carolina, in comparison, had a black population of 43.7 percent in that same year. See Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), p. 23.

³ Geographically, the area included in the Charleston District lies between the Santee and Combahee Rivers. The district was further divided into thirteen parishes including St. Philip's and St. Michael's, which together made up the city of Charleston. Since Charleston was the seat of government for colonial South Carolina, information was found to be most readily available for individuals living within this area. Data were examined for references to free blacks working as sawyers, carpenters, bricklayers and makers, painters and glaziers, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, upholsterers, silversmiths, tallow chandlers, and textile workers.

⁴ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), p. 143.

Nor did the temporary interlude in industrial labor organization permanently transform the black population into a mobile, wage-earning proletariat. The phosphate boom required new relations with recently emancipated black laborers. Mine owners had to lure freedmen with wages, then set up mining camps to house families, provide health care and credit, and hold miners, as best they could, through indebtedness. For their part, sea island Afro-Americans in particular demonstrated their own conservative desire to pursue an independent course as self-sufficient yeomen. Other Afro-Americans living in the Charleston Neck area turned to vegetable truck farming, already emerging as a significant economic activity for many large planters who had been forced to abandon cotton to the boll weevil. With the demise of the phosphate boom the black miners apparently were absorbed into the existing agrarian economy of the lowcountry, or they shifted to unskilled, service occupations in Charleston and Savannah. In both settings, they remained generally poor, unskilled, and politically powerless within a system of racial caste that was notably rigid even within the south. It was only with World War I and the Great Migration that younger members of this lowcountry "peasantry" responded boldly to the lure of high wages outside the South.⁴⁸

The upper class of planters and factors in the Charleston area, like those in many of the old cotton seaports on the periphery of the lower south, managed to shore up a slightly shabby replica of the social order they had defended in the late war. They adjusted to changes that the new conditions of black freedom required and even responded to new opportunities for industrial development — so long as those actions helped maintain their position and way of life. Within the interior of the south, generally outside the old plantation belt, there arose a new class of merchants, industrialists, and other ambitious entrepreneurs, all imbued with a vigorous bourgeois spirit of economic development, social progress, and a new order of race relations. It was the cities, mills, and railroads this class promoted that would steadily expand from the interior of the region and invade the domain of the planters, sharecroppers, and yeomen. Charleston and the lowcountry remained remarkably sturdy bastions of an older way of life in the backwater of a region increasingly controlled by men with a different vision for the South.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See Heyward, *Mamba's Daughter's*, pp. 193-97, 201-05, *et passim*, for a vivid description of the impact of World War I on Afro-Americans in the Charleston area.

⁴⁹ See Carlton, *Mill and Town*, for an excellent analysis of the middle class and the New South in South Carolina.

parishes constituted sixty-five percent of the total population.⁵ Although census data for the majority of the eighteenth century are sketchy, figures for the year 1760 reveal that 57,862 slaves were residing in the colony. Of this number, 45,116 or seventy-eight percent belonged to masters living in the Charleston District. In addition, fifty-three free blacks were reported to be residents of South Carolina in this same year; forty of these lived in the district.⁶

By the time of the 1790 census, the population as a whole had spread throughout the state. According to census figures, 107,094 slaves were now inhabitants of the state; of these, almost half, or 47 percent, lived in the Charleston District. The number of free persons was placed at 1,801 with 950 of them living within the district. Over one-half of this latter group resided in the city of Charleston.⁷

Between 1790 and 1800, the free black population living in the Charleston District increased by 22 percent. By the end of the century, a total of 951 were living in Charleston alone.⁸ Using these population figures as a basis, the forty-year period from 1760-1800 thus became the focus of the study.

There were several factors which led to the increased number of free black inhabitants in South Carolina. A few slaves were able to purchase their freedom from their masters; the fact that some tradesmen were allowed to "hire their own time" enabled them to accumulate earnings. Other free blacks migrated to the Charleston District from the West Indies. Still others were manumitted by their masters in their wills; and this, in turn, led to the largest increase in the free-black population.⁹

From the early years of the province, however, the South Carolina legislature had set forth strict provisions for manumission. An act ratified in February 1722 directed that slaves who had been freed had to leave the colony within a year or they would be returned to servitude. A later act shortened the slave's departure time to six months and stipulated that the slave could not return to the province for a period of seven years if he wished to maintain his freedom.¹⁰ Legislation ratified in

⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

⁶ South Carolina, Office of the Public Treasury, General Tax Receipts and Payments, 1761-1769, p. 39, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, cited as SCDAAH.

⁷ 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, 1908).

⁸ Marina Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Blacks in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia, 1973), p. 22.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-10.

¹⁰ Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, 10 vols. (Columbia, 1836-41), vol. 7, pp. 384, 396. Those slaves whose manumission had been approved by both Houses of the Assembly did not have to depart from the province. The second act was ratified in March 1735.

December 1800 placed further restrictions on masters who wished to emancipate their slaves. Thereafter, the slaveholder had to signify his intent to a group of five local freeholders, to establish proof of the slave's character, and to attest to the ability of the slave to gain his livelihood "in an honest way." The slave then was awarded a certificate to show that he was capable of self-support. The last part of this act was particularly significant, however, since it stated that no part of the document should be interpreted "to effect or invalidate any disposition by will of persons now deceased."¹¹

During the period from 1760 to 1800, several masters living in the Charleston District specified in their wills that one of their slave craftsmen should be freed. In four notations, the manumission directly involved a slave laboring in the building trades. In August 1763, slave Andrew was promised his freedom provided he would complete the carpenter's work on a storehouse within the next three months. The manumission was carried out by John Burne, acting upon the wishes of Andrew's deceased master, Charleston merchant Charles Mayne. Another Charleston merchant, Othniel Beale, directed that his slave Robin, a bricklayer, was to have his freedom and a new suit of clothes two months after his master's decease. Beale specified that if Robin did not desire to be free, he could choose to live with either William Bull or Beale's son John and added, "I desire that he may be kindly used." In a later will, Beale not only provided for Robin's freedom but also bequeathed to him a house and lot.¹² In another instance, planter Thomas Mell of St. Andrew's Parish manumitted his carpenter Isaac, directing his executors to "Warrant and Defend his Freedom to him for ever."¹³

Perhaps the most revealing of all manumission documents is a letter from Henry Laurens to David Ramsay, whom Laurens appointed to be guardian for his carpenter George. Laurens, who specified that his slave was to be called thereafter George Laurens, wrote:

George The Son of Mr. Beekman's Neptune and Old Lucy belonging to me, Aged the 5th of September 1789, Twenty Six Years, now

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, pp. 442-43. One explanation for the tightening of the manumission laws may have been the St. Domingo slave uprisings which had begun earlier in the decade. Due to close ties with the West Indies, South Carolinians no doubt were particularly fearful of a black rebellion. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York, 1968), pp. 375-86, 399.

¹² South Carolina, Secretary of State, Miscellaneous Records, Book MM, 1763-67, pp. 245-46, SCD AH, hereafter cited as Misc. Rec.; Charleston County, Court of Probate, Will Book, 1771-74, pp. 428-36, SCD AH, hereafter cited as Char. Co., Will Book.

¹³ Char. Co., Will Book, 1793-1800, pp. 172-73. Mell's will was proved on Dec. 22, 1794, and the manumission was carried out one year later. See Misc. Rec., Book FFF, 1795-96, p. 309.

working for me at the Carpenter's trade, might have had his full freedom some Years since but he would not accept it.

Now I do hereby absolutely Will and Order that at my Death, he shall be manumitted and be made a free Man, and that the Executors of my last Will and Testament or Administrators of my Estate do pay to him out of my Estate the Sum of One hundred and twenty Silver Dollars or the full value thereof in the Current Money of this State one half in one Month after my decease the other half in three Months for purchasing Tools and Cloths for himself, and that he be permitted to take away with him such Tools as he may be working with at the time of my decease. Solemnly given under my hand and Seal at Mepkin in the State of South Carolina the 7th July 1790.¹⁴

Whether these newly freed slaves remained in South Carolina to contribute to the labor force is unknown. Unfortunately, data concerning these and other free black craftsmen are scarce. The problem is compounded by the fact that unlike whites, free Negroes generally were identified as such in the literature and not by their trades.

When additional source materials such as inventories, newspapers, and deeds were examined for references to free black artisans working in the Charleston District between the years 1760-1800, only twelve could be linked directly to the building trades or decorative arts. Historian E. Horace Fitchett has suggested that the free black had to be cautious that his behavior did not offend or disturb the "hierarchial arrangements."¹⁵ The data tend to confirm this theory. Unless free blacks advertised in the newspaper or had some type of legal dealings, most remained in the background of colonial society.¹⁶

Of the twelve free blacks for whom trades could be ascertained, six were noted as carpenters, two as house carpenters, two more as carpenters and joiners, and one was a bricklayer; one mulatto worked as a cabinetmaker (see Table 1). In addition, one reference was to mulatto carpenter John Thompson, who lived in Charleston just prior to the

¹⁴ Henry Laurens to David Ramsay, July 7, 1790, Laurens Collection, South Caroliniana Library, cited as SCL.

¹⁵ E. Horace Fitchett, "The Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History* 25 (April 1940): 151.

¹⁶ On Nov. 1, 1790, however, a social and status group called the Brown Fellowship Society was formed by those of mixed Caucasian, Negro, and Indian blood. Unfortunately the membership roster does not list occupations. Among the goals of the group was education for children, assistance to orphans and widows, and the provision of burial grounds. In later years, the name was changed to the Century Fellowship Society. Brown Fellowship Society (1799-1911), SCL. See also Fitchett, "Traditions of the Free Negro," p. 144.

Table 1. Free black craftsmen known to have been working in the Charleston District, 1760-1800.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Town or Parish</i>	<i>Date of Earliest Reference</i>
Baldwin, Robert	carpenter	Charleston	1800
Cole, Thomas	bricklayer	Charleston	1784
Gough, John	cabinetmaker	Charleston	1783
Gowen, Alexander	carpenter	St. Bartholomew's Parish	1774
Hescutt, John	carpenter	Charleston	1783
Johnson, Peter	carpenter & joiner	Charleston	1766
Johnson, William	carpenter	St. James', Goose Creek	1778
Johnston, Andrew	carpenter	Charleston	1766
Logan, John Martin	house carpenter	Charleston	1796
Miles, James	carpenter	Charleston	1786
Peronneau, Richard	house carpenter	Charleston; St. James', Santee	1771
Williams, John	house carpenter & joiner	Charleston; land on Santee River	1763

period under study; a second reference identified mulatto jobbing carpenter James Stewart as an indentured servant who had run away from his master in 1796.¹⁷ In no case was an age range indicated for any of these free blacks; however, of the twelve tradesmen, ten were identified as Negroes and the remaining two as mulattoes. Furthermore, only two of these free tradesmen lived outside of the city of Charleston. Carpenter Alexander Gowen resided in St. Bartholomew's Parish; William Johnson, who followed the same trade, lived in St. James', Goose Creek.¹⁸

Just how successful these free blacks were remains a question worthy of further study. Historian Marina Wikramanayake has written, "The average free black artisan had to create his market and fight to survive in the competing mass of free blacks, slaves and white artisans, and his place in the labor market was not always assured."¹⁹ Yet in his will dated June 27, 1791, black house carpenter Richard Peronneau indicated that he owned land in both St. James', Santee, and on

¹⁷ Misc. Rec., Book LL, 1758-63, p. 177, SCDH: *South Carolina State Gazette and Timothy and Mason's Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 27, 1796. On June 5, 1759, John Thompson manumitted his slave Tony, of unknown occupation.

¹⁸ *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, Sept. 9, 1774; Misc. Rec., Book QQ, 1773-89, p. 290. The advertisement in which Alexander Gowen is mentioned states that Gowen has sold his slave Primus to Mrs. Elizabeth Wise. It is likely that Gowen was the tradesman under whom Primus had served his apprenticeship.

¹⁹ Wikramanayake, *World in Shadow*, p. 105.

Harleston Green.²⁰ Free mulatto house carpenter and joiner John Williams advertised that he owned two lots on Ellery Street as well as 400 acres on the Santee River, with a warrant for an adjoining 200 acres; he added that he had recently met with some discouragements and was intending to depart from the province.²¹ On the other hand, black carpenter Andrew Johnston, who was "well known about Charlestown," was detained in the gaol for a debt which he owed. Likewise, carpenter Robert Baldwin was summoned to court by Thomas Bennett for failure to pay for lumber which he had purchased.²² Emanuel Abrahams of King Street posted a public notice to warn persons not to purchase land and tenements on Guignard Street from free mulatto John Gough, a cabinet-maker, because they were under lease to the subscriber.²³ Another "free man of colour," bricklayer Thomas Cole, was summoned to court for his financial difficulties in 1788.²⁴ Thus although the majority of free artisans who were identified were involved in some type of financial difficulties or legal proceedings, others undoubtedly carried on their trade and supported themselves without drawing public attention.

In comparison to the free black population figures available for the years 1760-1800, the number of artisans specifically noted as working in the building trades and decorative arts is small. Two reasons for this lack of data have been suggested: first, free blacks generally were identified as such in government records and not by their trade; secondly, many

²⁰ Char. Co., Will Book, 1786-93, p. 587. Peronneau's will was proved on July 11, 1791. See also Charleston County, Mesne Conveyance Office, Deeds, Vol. E-5, 1781-82, pp. 129-32, mfm., SCDAH. In the *South Carolina Gazette*, Oct. 3, 1771, Peronneau announced that his wife had eloped. Cited as *SCG*.

²¹ *SCG*, Aug. 13, 1763.

²² *SCG*, Dec. 8, 1766; Charleston District, Court of Common Pleas, Petitions and Decrees, 1800, #44A, SCDAH. In another case, however, free Negro carpenter and joiner Peter Johnson of Charleston took free mulatto John Gorden to court for failure to pay for carpenter's work done in 1768. The occupation of Gorden has not been determined. Charleston County, Court of Common Pleas, Judgment Rolls, Box 83A, 1769, #126A, SCDAH.

²³ *South Carolina Weekly Gazette*, March 1, 1783. This may be the same John Gough who was freed by spinster Elizabeth Akin of Charleston in a will proved Sept. 23, 1763. Gough was to remain in servitude until he had paid the executors of the estate £250, at which time £50 was to be returned to him "to Enable him to purchase Tools that he may get his Livelyhood by his Trade." This trade was never noted specifically. Char. Co., Will Book, 1767-71, pp. 67-69. A John Gough was also admitted to the Brown Fellowship Society in 1790. See Brown Fellowship Society (1790-1911), SCL.

²⁴ It is believed, however, that Cole did own some property. See Deeds, Vol. S-5, 1785, p. 347-50; *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser*, Aug. 2, 1785. On Jan. 7, 1791, he presented a petition to the S. C. Senate that free black be given equal rights, including trial by jury and proportionate property taxes; six days later his request was denied. S. C., General Assembly Legislative Petition, 1791-181-01, SCDAH.

chose to maintain a low profile. Yet it is probable that more “free persons of colour” were working in home-related trades than the figures reveal.²⁵ If a slave’s master had to insure that he could earn his livelihood prior to granting the slave his freedom, many would do so by apprenticing their slaves to a trade. Eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements abound with evidence that slaves were laboring in all branches of the building trades and decorative arts. Some of these craftsmen surely would have been among those persons who helped to swell the free black population as the century progressed. When compared with both the numbers of slaves and whites laboring in identical trades, the demand for these skills in the lowcountry appears to have been sufficient to ensure the free black a means of earning his livelihood. Since the work of most of these men will remain anonymous, their exact contribution probably can never be measured. Yet these free tradesmen were among those, both black and white, who labored to build the Charleston District, and their contribution must not be overlooked.

²⁵ For example, the data pertaining to Charleston house carpenter George Bedon seem to suggest that he was a mulatto although this could not be confirmed; the same holds true for Charleston carpenter Simon Boggs. See Charleston County, Court of Common Pleas, Judgment Rolls, Box 150a, 1789, #744A; Char. Co., Will Book, 1793-1800, p. 150; *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1776. The wife of St. Bartholomew’s Parish house carpenter Anson Howsen is known to be a free mulatto. Howsen’s race could not be determined. Charleston County, Court of Probate, Letters of Administration, 1785-91, p. 96.