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## The Metropolis and the Backcountry: The Making of a Colonial Landscape on the South Carolina Frontier

### ABSTRACT

The colonial settlement of South Carolina in the 18th century resulted in the emergence of two largely separate economies, the organization of which gave rise to distinctive frontier landscapes. The commercial rice economy of the Lowcountry was characterized by dispersed plantation production facilitated by riverine transportation. The urban functions of this largely rural landscape were centered on entrepôt of Charleston, a city whose size and material wealth reflected the region's commercial success. The Backcountry initially lacked access to the entrepôt's urban and export markets and its regional isolation fostered insular economic institutions dispersed among smaller nucleated settlements linked by overland routes. Commercial investment by Charleston interests eventually established the infrastructure of specialized production in the Backcountry and incorporated its resources in the larger export economy. The settlement system that emerged in the interior reflected these changes, but did not emulate the Lowcountry. Rather, it bore the imprint of the frontier landscape, components of which merely acquired new roles as regional nodes in South Carolina's expanding economy, the focus of which remained the older entrepôt that emerged as the South's major port in the post-frontier period.

### Introduction

Over sixty years ago, historian Leila Sellers recognized that Charleston on the eve of the American Revolution was as the commercial focus of an immense interior region and occupied a central position in the overseas trade that linked Great Britain with its American colonies on the continent and the Indies. From the beginning, the city's economic position was tied to the development of its hinterland. Its initial importance derived from its role as the terminus of the far-flung Indian trade as well as a hub for commerce along the coastal waterways (Sellers

1934:3-7, 25). As Charleston's hinterland expanded with the inland spread of settlement, so did its importance as a regional entrepôt. By the third quarter of the century it had become the major metropolitan center in the southern colonies as well as the center for political, religious, and social activity in South Carolina (Petty 1943:49-50; Merrens 1964:13; Rogers 1969:17-24). Charleston was inextricably tied to its hinterland, thus an examination of the city's rise as urban center cannot be divorced from its relationship with the larger region.

The dominance of Charleston was a result of the city's role in the formation of a cultural landscape that was shaped by a larger process of agricultural colonization. This process involved the region's settlement as well as its incorporation within a European world economy. Colonization occurred in the particular geographical context of South Carolina, and the resulting landscape was conditioned by a specific environment as well as colonists' perceptions of its physical characteristics and resources. The new landscape was also influenced by the manner in which colonization modified the natural geography. The development of a commercial agricultural region entailed the addition of "improvements," including settlements, fields, roads, ferries, river landings, and other alterations that transformed nature to serve human ends. These features altered the regional geography to produce a "second nature," created by its new inhabitants and containing new elements conducive to settlement (Cronon 1991:55-57). The image of this altered landscape increasingly replaced that of the "first nature" they encountered. So powerful was this image in shaping perceptions of the region that it guided the direction of its subsequent settlement. The creation of a transportation network and the establishment of central places in the initial period of settlement not only provided an infrastructure for colonization, but formed the basis upon which later immigrant farmers evaluated the value of land for commercial production.

## Pattern and Process on the Frontier

The role of a second nature in directing the form of colonization is tied to the directional character of the process itself. Agricultural colonization involves the occupation of territory, accompanied by the establishment of production, the internal integration of the region through the creation of a transportation and communications system, and the eventual opening of reciprocal economic links with the homeland and other regions (Lewis 1984:19-26). These developments result in a landscape of increasing complexity, the changing form of which affects the shape of its future.

Settlements play a key role in agricultural colonization. Their functions are intimately related to the evolving structure of the process and the landscape it produces. During the period of initial colonization, a relatively simple hierarchy of settlements appears to facilitate immigration and regional integration. Consisting of an *entrepôt*, secondary centers called frontier towns, smaller nucleated and semi-nucleated agglomerations, and dispersed settlements, the system is an adaptation to low population density and attenuated access (Casagrande et al. 1964:312-314). There are fewer population centers in an area of colonization than in longer settled regions, thus services normally performed by many lower level settlements tend to be concentrated in those at the higher levels (Berry 1967:33-34). Many of the central functions in colonial regions are associated with the *entrepôt* and frontier towns, whose locations and links to other settlements also reflect their relative importance (Lewis 1984:23).

The initial colonial landscape is dynamic by nature. Increasing immigrant population density and the expansion of the agricultural production base create conditions conducive to the rise of commercial farming. If potential markets exist, the opportunity for establishing a viable export trade attracts the capital necessary to create the necessary processing and transportation infrastructure. Such a development not only alters the focus of production, but also the composition of

the settlements associated with it. The incorporation of a frontier region in a national or international economy immediately enmeshes exchange in a larger context that not only increases its volume, but also its complexity. This brings about a drastic reshuffling of services in the area of colonization, with the result that many are acquired by lower level settlements while the overall proliferation of services expands in those that become central places.

The formation of a colonial economy and its subsequent absorption into one controlled by larger markets creates a landscape comprised of settlements whose composition and linkages are increasingly based on adaptations to an altered environment, a second nature. The investigation of key settlements in colonial South Carolina must be conducted in the context of such a landscape.

## Landscape and Settlement in Colonial South Carolina

South Carolina's colonial landscape emerged largely in the second quarter of the 18th century. This period witnessed the consolidation of the coastal economy around the commercial production of rice and the occupation of the interior by immigrant agriculturists whose settlements opened the Backcountry to development. As the center of the trade with Native Americans and the focus of coastal trade, Charleston was a logical choice for the regional *entrepôt*. Possessing facilities for shipping and storage, it attracted other economic activities. Charleston was also the administrative center for the colony and the seat of its government and church offices. The function of the city was clearly shaped by its central role in the frontier region of which it was a part, and Charleston's development was tied closely to the formation of the emerging colonial landscape.

Charleston's role as a regional *entrepôt* was conditioned by the nature of the regional economy. Despite its possession of South Carolina's central economic, political, and ecclesiastical institutions, the city's influence extended

over only a portion of the province. This situation was largely a result of the manner in which it was settled as an agricultural region. The interior was colonized later than in coastal areas where ease of access promoted commercial production. From the close of the 17th century, rice growing expanded dramatically, promoting the rise of an export economy tied closely to the fortunes of a single staple (Petty 1943:23; McCusker and Menard 1985:175-178).

Rapid entry into a commercial market allowed the Lowcountry to develop a plantation economy similar to those of Barbados and Jamaica. As in the British West Indies, agriculture was carried out on a large scale employing large numbers of slaves. It required a high initial investment of capital and managerial skill, attracting investors possessing the wherewithal to provide both. The European population of the Lowcountry contained a substantial proportion of estate owners, many of whom acquired great wealth which was displayed in their lifestyle and invested in private and public institutions (Greene 1987:201-209).

The income generated by commercial agriculture and trade enhanced the growth of the Lowcountry economy by providing the credit necessary to finance the expansion of production. In South Carolina, much of this credit was generated internally through a growing mortgage market centered in Charleston. The significant role of mortgage capital in agricultural investment strengthened the links between rural planters and lenders, merchants, and other commercial interests in the entrepôt. The expansion of credit for production thus encouraged the continued concentration of urban functions in Charleston, a process that insured its dominance as the commercial center for the province (Menard 1994:673-675).

The opening of the Backcountry began in the 1730s with the formation of a series of townships situated on region's principal river drainages (Figure 1). Created to increase South Carolina's European population and expand its area of colonization, their establishment initiated a substantial movement of population into the interior. Unlike the Lowcountry, the Backcountry

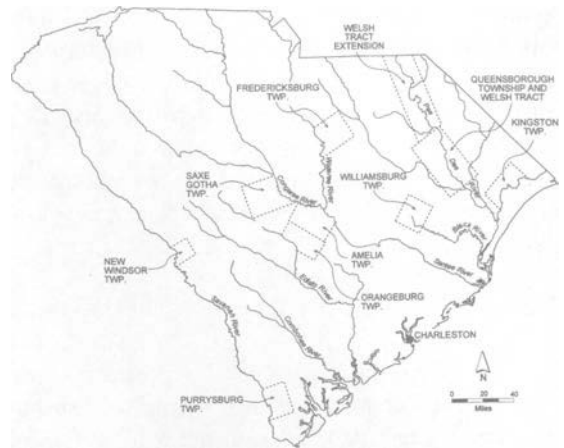


FIGURE 1. Layout of the interior townships established in South Carolina in 1731. (After Schulz 1972:14.)

offered slim possibilities for early return on investment. Consequently, the region attracted those of limited means who were willing to defer entry into commercial production. Pioneer households, occupying family farms or small plantations, usually engaged in a strategy of diversified production for a regional market within the colony. Unable to acquire the credit available to commercial producers, reinvestment took the form of improving real assets (Baldwin 1956:166-168; Nobles 1989:656-657; Kulikoff 1993:353).

The nature of small-scale production for regional markets promoted insularity from national interests and encouraged pervasive social change. The administration of such regions depended less on the imposition of outside rule than upon the creation of viable regional institutions because of their isolation. On the Backcountry frontier, formal social, political, and religious institutions were poorly developed. Here, the household served as the basic unit of both economic and social organization and its role had a marked influence on the nature of settlement in this region (Steffen 1979:94-123; Kulikoff 1993:348-349).

The bifurcated character of South Carolina's colonization led to the development of two

economies, each of which was characterized by a distinctive pattern of settlement. Prior to the incorporation of the region within the larger commercial economy in the second half of the 18th century, these patterns produced a landscape whose components comprised the second nature that shaped South Carolina's subsequent development.

### Settlement Patterning of the Frontier Period

The economies of the Lowcountry and Backcountry created settlements whose distribution and composition reflected the organization of each region. In the former, settlement locations were tied closely with the structure of production and trade. Following the riverine network of the lower Coastal Plain, most settlements were situated so as to provide access to navigable water leading to major ports such as Charleston and the smaller ports of Beaufort and Georgetown. Areas between the principal drainages appear to have been avoided because they were less accessible and were perceived as poor lands for raising cash crops. Overall, settlement became denser as proximity to coastal ports increased. The highest concentration occurred, not surprisingly, in the vicinity of Charleston (Catesby 1977:92-95; Terry 1981:7; Lewis 1984:60-64, 162-167; Kovacik and Winberry 1987:26).

The character of the Lowcountry economy is further revealed by the composition of the settlements themselves. Although rice was a bulky commodity like other grains, ease of access and the limited size of the area in which it could be grown permitted it to be shipped without the elaborate network of processing and support settlements usually associated with the commercial production of such crops (Earle and Hoffman 1976:66). Consequently, the Lowcountry did not acquire an elaborate settlement hierarchy. Most of those who lived in the region resided on dispersed plantations, where crops were produced and processed, or in the coastal ports. Small nucleated or semi-nucleated settlements grew up primarily at key transportation points where they

accommodated the shipment of produce by planters to coastal ports and met the periodic economic and social needs of shippers, travelers, and local residents. Childsbury, located on the western branch of Cooper River less than 20 mi. inland from Charleston, was typical of such settlements. Despite the fact that it was situated at an important ferry crossing and river landing and played a key role as a regional transshipment center, Childsbury never contained more than a few structures (Barr 1994).

In the Backcountry the population was dispersed over much of the territory that was available, accessible, and perceived suitable for agriculture. The establishment of 11 townships scattered across the central interior from the Savannah River to the North Carolina border insured a relatively uniform occupation of the region (Meriwether 1940; Petty 1943:35-43). Limited initial access to markets and an absence of extensive outside commercial ties encouraged the development of internal trade and communications networks necessary to facilitate regional exchange. These networks were focused on small nucleated settlements that served as trading and processing centers for grain and other crops. Such settlements included Long Bluff and Cheraw Hill on the Pee Dee; Pine Tree Hill (Camden) on the Wateree; Saxe Gotha (Granby) and Ninety-Six on the Saluda drainage; and Savannah Town, on the river by the same name near present-day Augusta (Figure 2). Although early Backcountry settlements were devoted largely to economic activities, some acquired other functions as well. Pine Tree Hill, for example, was a focus of religious activity for a sizable Quaker community, many members of whom also played central roles in establishing the settlement as a social center and focus of regional trade (Gregg 1867:112, 118; Kirkland and Kennedy 1905:67-76; Meriwether 1940:170-171; Petty 1943:40-41).

Throughout the first half of the 18th century, most of the institutions that represented official authority were largely absent in the interior and their roles were taken by indigenous movements

that arose at the household level. The absence of effective civil authority and a legal and administrative structure was answered by the rise of the Regulator movement, a grass-roots political movement that sought to establish and maintain order in a region increasingly beset by criminal activity (Brown 1963:13-15; Klein 1981:674-675). Similarly, ecclesiastical authority remained weak in the Backcountry. The absence of a strong state church encouraged the dominance of dissenting Protestant denominations. Unlike the larger established churches, these groups maintained a degree of flexibility by organizing rural congregations served by itinerant ministers who insured doctrinal continuity yet permitted rapid growth (Howe 1870; Bernheim 1872:88-147; Townsend 1935; Fisher 1989:703-705). Political and religious activity was thus organized at the household level and often not associated with settlements (Nobles 1989:652-653, 659).

Like their counterparts in the Lowcountry, early settlements in the Backcountry were small and functioned largely as economic centers. The economy and the transportation network that supported them were internal and based on grain production; however, these settlements were

placed centrally among the dispersed communities they served. As the nature of the regional economy changed in the second half of the century, their distribution not only facilitated the development of commercial production, but also formed the basis for an urban hierarchy unlike that found in the older rice-growing region.

### The Changing Patterns of Commercial Agriculture

With the introduction of capital to establish large-scale milling in the Backcountry and the improvement of transportation to permit the efficient movement of flour and other agricultural commodities to the coastal entrepôt, production in South Carolina's interior began a transformation to meet an expanding grain market (McCusker and Menard 1985:304). The adoption of commercial production brought a dramatic change in the function of settlements in the interior. Those occupying central locations within the frontier trade and communications system attracted outside investment and acquired the complex facilities necessary to support the long-distance shipment of bulky commodities. With their larger economic functions, these settlements became nodes in a more complicated urban system developing in the Backcountry (Earle and Hoffman 1976:65-66).

As the locations of collection and processing facilities, Camden and other frontier towns became the foci of extensive agricultural hinterlands and captured the trade of smaller frontier centers. In addition, they became the sites of courts, churches, fairs, and other organized activities as formal political, social, and religious institutions were introduced into the Backcountry. Central frontier settlements grew in complexity as a result of their expanded functions. Although remaining relatively small, they served as the foci of an elaborate settlement network that would form the basis for the post-frontier agricultural economy. Camden is an outstanding example of such a transformation. A focus of regional activity in the 1750s, it expanded rapidly during



FIGURE 2. The road network of colonial South Carolina and the locations of 18th century settlements mentioned in the text. (After Petty 1943:38.)

the following decade following the arrival of Joseph Kershaw as the agent of a Charleston mercantile firm intent on establishing an interior business location. Within a few years he and his associates had acquired mill sites and lands, constructed stores and warehouses, and platted a town site. The settlement grew rapidly as Camden took on the role of a processing center and export market. It became the site of the district court and fair, as well as the focal point of formal religious activities. Camden's expanded economic role also attracted manufacturing and service industries and, by the 1770s, the town was home to at least three merchants, a tailor, a shoemaker, two blacksmiths, and a lawyer and contained two taverns, a bakery, an inn, a brickyard, a brewery and distillery, and a pottery factory. In two decades, Camden had not only become a settlement of substantial size, but also one of great economic complexity and social diversity (Kirkland and Kennedy 1905:12-13; Schulz 1972:19-23, 26, 29, Appendix C; Ernst and Merrens 1973:562-564; Lewis 1976:132; 1984:74-83; Thorp 1991:408).

For the most part, the late frontier Backcountry remained a sparsely settled region in which tiny settlements that had arisen with its initial regional economy found themselves taking on the activities necessary for the economic and political integration of the region. The establishment of courts at Orangeburg, Ninety-Six, and Long Bluff made these settlements foci for activity in the third quarter of the century. These, together with other older nucleated settlements at Cheraw, Granby, and Augusta, in neighboring Georgia, became important centers of trade and administration (Figure 2). In spite of the fact that all remained relatively small, their composition changed dramatically with their altered roles. All were situated at key positions in the long-distance road network and were occupied by British forces as strategic points during the Revolution. They, like Camden, had become centers in an emerging urban system. Although the Backcountry would remain a frontier until the

end of the century, its developmental infrastructure was in place before the Revolution and the second nature created by its presence shaped the region's continued evolution as a commercial agricultural region (Gregg 1867:118; Lewis 1984:79-83; Richardson 1993).

Throughout the Backcountry the effects of economic change were also evident on the household level. Not only did the opening of outside markets expand the volume of specialized agricultural production and trade, but it also replaced a regional economy with one tied more closely with international markets. The development of reliable transportation brought frontier merchants closer to sources of supply and reduced capital costs, while the appearance of well-financed entrepreneurs, such as Joseph Kershaw and his associates, provided the capital necessary both to build the infrastructure for large-scale production and underwrite the credit for business expansion (Cronon 1991:324-327). Concomitant growth in the retail and service sectors of the economy promoted the acquisition and display of wealth as an indicator of differential social standing among late frontier households, a process that dramatically affected the nature of their material culture.

Archaeological studies have revealed material evidence for such change by examining the differential appearance of high-status items, the use of which was symbolic of refinement and gentility. The sites of settlements occupied in the third quarter of the 18th century have been observed to exhibit both architectural and artifactual materials that reflect differential wealth and status on the frontier. In Camden, as elsewhere in the South Carolina Backcountry, earthfast architecture characterized structures of the initial period of colonization; however, by the 1770s it was rapidly replaced by brick construction. The buildings of Joseph Kershaw's estate there all rested on brick foundations and the "great white house" exhibited the latest stylistic elements of Georgian architecture (Lewis 1977:9-12; 37-42, 46-47; Groover 1994:46-48; Crass et al. this volume). Similarly, the use of imported ceramics

expanded dramatically here after 1760. Such a pattern occurred elsewhere in the Backcountry during this period on settlements with European populations and corresponds with the increased availability of ceramics during this time (Yentsch 1991:44). The extensive use of these imported artifacts contrasts markedly with that of Colono ware, a low-fired, burnished ceramic ware manufactured by aboriginal potters or those of African descent and employed widely on plantations and many frontier settlements (Ferguson 1991:188-191; Groover 1994:50-51). Although present at Camden, the rarity of Colono ware implies that it played a minor role in households that were acquiring the wealth and opportunity to possess the symbols of gentility in daily life (Lewis 1976:138-140; Crass et al. this volume).

The addition of the frontier grain and flour trade enhanced Charleston's role as an entrepôt at a time when its economic growth had leveled off. The environmental limitations of inland swamp rice agriculture curtailed the expansion of rice production, and the trade in rice and slaves, upon which the city's economy rested, began to stagnate. With the opening of the Backcountry grain trade, however, business increased again as Charleston emerged as a major exporter of grain to the West Indies (Ramsey 1858:122; Earle and Hoffman 1976:18-19).

The growth of grain marketing in the third quarter of the 18th century also affected Charleston's role as a colonial urban center. Much of the city's earlier trade had been controlled by interests in British ports who managed the marketing, financing, and shipping of rice, an arrangement that retarded the growth of commercial institutions in the entrepôt. Beginning in the 1730s, however, the rise of an independent rice trade with southern Europe encouraged the emergence of these institutions in the colonial port. Their role was further strengthened by Charleston's subsequent growth as a regional grain market and export center, a development that increased the city's economic autonomy and enhanced its importance as an urban center (Earle and Hoffman 1976:67-68).

Rice remained South Carolina's most lucrative export, however, resident merchants never came to dominate trade to the extent that they did in northern ports. Throughout this period, British firms continued to make the entrepreneurial decisions and provide the capital and resources for much of Charleston's export trade, and their agents constituted an important element of the city's business community (McCusker and Menard 1985:186). As a result of substantial outside economic influence, Charleston failed to develop many supporting urban industries and services, such as a shipbuilding, commonly found in more autonomous colonial ports. The city's distinctive economic role also retarded the growth of its physical infrastructure. It never achieved the size of principal northern ports, such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, despite of the fact that it conducted a comparable volume of trade (Sellers 1934:11, 15-16; Price 1974:162).

The nature of Charleston's trade, however, enhanced its role as a major commercial center. Although much of the new trade was controlled by outside commercial interests, the wealth it generated also benefited Charleston merchants, who were heavily involved in the expansion of re-export and import trade. Their business was tied closely to the city's development as the regional credit and retail market serving a complex system of interior urban settlements (Sellers 1934:82-91; Hammond 1957:168, 170-171). A marked increase in the number of persons engaged in retail trade between the 1730s and the 1760s testified to Charleston's expanding role as the regional focus of internal commerce (Stumpf 1983:1-2; Calhoun et al. 1985:186). The foundation established by the growth and diversification of the city's economic institutions in the 18th century permitted it to remain the focus of the agricultural trade in the Lower South. As the region's principal cotton port after 1790, Charleston continued to control a vast hinterland and a substantial trade as this crop became the lower South's most lucrative export. Even after New York rose to dominate American foreign trade after the War of 1812, Charleston remained the

region's most important commercial center (Albion 1939:120-121; Taylor 1951:195-197; Nettels 1962:202-204).

### A Mature Colonial Landscape

By the fourth quarter of the 18th century South Carolina's economy was rapidly evolving its post-colonial form. This economy was characterized by two distinct zones of agricultural production that had evolved separately and produced distinctive settlement systems. These systems constituted a second nature that not only established a pattern for later settlement, but also encouraged and guided the direction of that growth. Lowcountry settlement patterning remained relatively static because it arose rapidly as a mature commercial agricultural region. The Backcountry, however, was settled as an agricultural frontier, and its initial regional orientation created patterning that reflected its economic and political isolation. When subsequently enmeshed in a larger commercial economy, the Backcountry's earlier settlements took on new roles, and existing transportation networks became the basis for external trade.

The form of the Backcountry landscape, characterized by central places grown from pioneer settlements, was a product of initial colonization. Improvement of existing transportation arteries reinforced older patterns of settlement as the economy of the late frontier grew in size and complexity. The frontier was a zone of transition, however, and the forces that allowed it to emerge from its regional focus continued to promote closer integration with the larger world. The expansion of commercial production would eventually bring about a shift to more efficient water transportation of bulk goods, a change that markedly altered older patterns of processing and shipment (Ramsey 1858:121; MacGill 1917:276-279). This technological shift modified the second nature of the frontier and the perception of early settlements as key landscape elements. Although many of the old frontier centers remained recognizable components on the antebel-

lum landscape of South Carolina's interior, their importance was eclipsed by settlements, such as Columbia, located more strategically in emerging canal and later railroad networks (Schulz 1972:75-77; Kovacik and Winberry 1987:92-98; Moore 1993:136-137).

The single element of South Carolina's colonial landscape that remained unchanged was its focus. From the beginning of colonization, Charleston had been the principal port of the coastal rice economy and the heart of urban activity. With the incorporation of the trade of the inland frontier, the city's domain expanded to encompass a much wider region. As the focus of a regional grain market, Charleston became the entrepôt for an extensive settlement system that restructured the old frontier and altered the nature of its own economy. Although the city's trade was still controlled largely by overseas interests, the growth of independent grain marketing expanded its role as a commercial center and retail mart for Britain's southern colonies. This change was reflected by its growth as well as in the proliferation of economic services. Both insured that the city would remain a dominant urban center into the antebellum period and a hub in the South's evolving agricultural economy.

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