

## CHAPTER 9

### EVERYDAY LIFE IN COLONIAL SOUTH CAROLINA

#### I. The Lowcountry: A Social Portrait

- A. Introduction. In less than a century, South Carolina went from a struggling settlement to one of the wealthiest colonies in the British Empire. The South Carolina lowcountry was the richest society in North America. On the eve of the American Revolution, of the 10 wealthiest men in America, 9 lived in the South Carolina lowcountry. In 1750 Governor James Glen said that 80% of the population enjoyed “the necessarys of life” and 20% had “plenty of the good things of life.” In examining this society, we need to look at all segments of the population – who they were and how they lives.
- B. The population of the lowcountry is usually divided into four groups or classes: the elite, or aristocracy, the middle class, the working class, and slaves.
- C. The Elite
  - 1. South Carolina’s elite included some of the wealthiest individuals in North America.
  - 2. Colonial South Carolina society was fluid; many of the elite had humble origins.
  - 3. The source of one’s wealth was not important during colonial period.
    - a. The greatest fortunes were made by rice and indigo planters.
    - b. Some Charleston merchants, physicians, and lawyers also obtained great wealth.
  - 4. By the end of the colonial period, the elite was interrelated by marriage and business partnerships.
- D. The Middle Class
  - 1. Charleston’s artisans – cabinetmakers, carpenters, bricklayers, silversmiths, etc. – formed the bulk of the lowcountry’s middle class.

2. Small shopkeepers, and less successful physicians, lawyers, and teachers also were part of the middle class.
  3. Members of the middle class could rise to become members of the elite (examples: Henry Laurens, Daniel Cannon, and John Rose).
- E. The working class consisted of journeymen and apprentices, day laborers, and sailors.
- F. The Slaves
  1. Slaves comprised 80% of the population of the lowcountry.
  2. The vast majority were field hands on rice and indigo plantations, but some were house servants.
  3. Others were skilled craftsmen: carpenters, cabinetmakers, bricklayers, etc. whose skills were highly valued in Charleston and on the plantations.
- G. Everyday Life
  1. Family
    - a. The husband was master of his household and expected to earn a living for his family.
    - b. Woman's place was at home or helping her husband.
    - c. Except for children of elite, all others were expected to work by age 11 or 12.
    - d. Although slave marriages were not legally recognized, slaves – particularly females – did what they could to maintain some semblance of a family.
  2. Food
    - a. Carolinians raised most of their foodstuffs.
    - b. Local fish and game were important to colonial diet.
    - c. The types and amounts of food consumed depended to a great extent upon a person's place in society.
  3. Clothing
    - a. The elite imported expensive clothing from England.
    - b. The middle and working classes made their own clothes.
    - c. The elite and middle classes tended to overdress for the Carolina climate.

- d. The rough clothing furnished slaves was, ironically, better suited to the climate than the velvets and laces of their owners.
- e. Children of all classes dressed as miniature adults.
- f. Even for the elite, clothes were considered family heirlooms and willed to other family members.

#### 4. Housing

- a. The wealthy built large mansions on their plantations and in Charleston.
- b. Middle and working class housing spaces were cramped. Frequently small merchants and shopkeepers lived above their stores.
- c. Slave housing, particularly on the plantations, was crowded. The designs of some slave houses reflected African building traditions.

#### 5. Education

- a. Only children of middle and elite classes got any education at all – and then education was primarily for males.
- b. The elite often sent their sons to England for schooling.
- c. Private tutors and “Dame Schools” provided rudimentary education.

#### 6. Religion

- a. The Church of England remained the official church from 1704-1778.
- b. Other Protestant denominations flourished and more than 50% of the population belonged to churches other than the Church of England.
- c. Colonial South Carolinians were noted for not being overly religious.
- \*d. George Whitefield and the Great Awakening probably had less impact in South Carolina than in any other colony.**

### H. Life and Death

#### 1. Death was always near.

- a. As late as 1763, births and deaths were equal.

- b. Epidemics were almost annual threats.
- c. Infant mortality and the primitive state of medicine contributed to the high death rate.
- d. There always were potential threats from Indians, slave rebellions and the French and Spaniards.

## 2. Marriage

- a. Couples married at about the same ages as couples do today.
- b. Large families of 4 or 5 children were common.
- c. Divorce was not permitted.
- d. Remarriage after the death of a spouse frequently occurred.

## I. Diversions

- 1. All men – regardless of class – hunted, fished, rode horseback, gambled, danced, and drank.
- 2. Elite males played cards, billiards, and dice and formed clubs.
- 3. All women danced and visited family and friends.
- 4. Elite women attended musicals and teas, read novels, and did fancy sewing.
- 5. Children's entertainments mimicked those of their parents.

- J. Summary. Life in the South Carolina lowcountry, even for the elite, was not without its drawbacks. Death did not respect a person's status. This ever present threat of danger led to a hedonistic lifestyle among the wealthy. They lived as if there were no tomorrow. For the bulk of the lowcountry's population, life was controlled by others and the rhythms of the planting and harvesting seasons.

## II. Charleston, City In The Wilderness

- A. Introduction. Charleston, the capital city of colonial South Carolina was the only major seaport in the Southern colonies. The city's merchants developed regular trade patterns with the West Indies, northern colonies, Portugal, and England. Charleston developed into one of the major port cities of the British Empire and on the eve of the American Revolution was one of five colonial American cities.

**\*B. In 1775 there were 5 major colonial cities in British North America: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Newport, Rhode Island, and Charleston.**

C. The city

1. Like European cities, Charleston had walls for protection against Indians and European enemies.
2. The streets were laid out in a regular grid pattern.
3. The Cooper River side of the peninsula became the commercial center with docks, warehouses, and stores.
4. There were handsome public buildings; the Exchange, State House, market, and churches.
5. Wealthy merchants and planters built fashionable “single” or “double” houses.
6. Charleston was a dirty city in which pigs and buzzards scavenged the garbage thrown into the streets.
7. There was no regular police force and it was dangerous to go out at night alone.

D. Cultural Life

1. Charleston’s theater was the most sophisticated in colonial America.
2. The Charleston Library Society was one of the country’s first lending libraries.
3. There were 3 weekly newspapers that circulated not only in South Carolina, but also in British East and West Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina.

E. For entertainment, there were horse races, taverns, and coffee houses.

F. Trade and Commerce

1. Charleston was center for export of rice and indigo.

2. South Carolina deerskin traders dominated the trade throughout what is now the southeastern U.S. – all the way to the Mississippi River.
  3. English merchants shipped goods to Charleston first, then they were transshipped to Savannah and North Carolina's coastal villages.
- G. Summary. Trade and commerce made Charleston the great city that she was. Her golden age coincided with the rise of rice exports in the 1720s and ended with the American Revolution. Some historians have described colonial Charleston as a city state in the same way that they speak of medieval Venice and Florence as city states. The comparison is an apt one, for South Carolina's port city totally dominated the cultural, economic, political, and social life of the colony and, to an extent, the activities of adjacent areas of Georgia and North Carolina as well.

H. Readings

1. Edgar, South Carolina: A History, Chapter 9
2. Bridenbaugh, Myths and Realities, pp. 54-118
3. Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness, see index for "Charleston"
4. Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, see index for "Charleston"
5. Cohen, South Carolina Gazette
6. Jones, South Carolina, pp. 221-251
7. Littlefield, Rice and Slaves, pp. 115-173
8. Spruill, Women's Life and Work
9. Walsh, Sons of Liberty, pp. 3-25
10. Weir, Colonial South Carolina, pp. 205-264
11. Kovacic & Winberry, South Carolina, pp. 81-84
12. Rogers, Charleston, pp. 26-115
13. Walsh, Charleston's Sons of Liberty, pp. 3-25
14. Olwell, Masters, Slaves and Subjects