Trade, Politics, and Revolution

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In May 1730 the British Parliament passed the Rice Act, “granting Liberty to carry Rice from His Majesty’s Province of Carolina, in America, directly to any port in Europe Southward of Cape Finisterre.”\(^1\) In an important amendment to the Navigation Acts that governed the empire’s trade, the act allowed merchants to export the grain directly from South Carolina to Spain and Portugal and marked the culmination of twenty years of on-off activism by South Carolina’s “friends” in London.\(^2\) Renewed efforts had begun in February 1730. A petition from “several Merchants, Factors and Traders to Carolina” was presented to the House of Commons, recapitulating arguments made over the previous two decades in favor of direct exports to the Iberian Peninsula. The petition identified the demand for the colony’s rice in Iberian markets but complained that the legal requirement that South Carolinian rice be landed in British ports before being reexported to Spain and Portugal made the trade uncompetitive: reexportation added to shipping costs and delayed the rice’s arrival in Iberian ports until after the annual Lent peak in demand. As a consequence, the Iberian rice trade was “in the Hands of Foreigners, to the detriment of the English Merchants, and Planters.” The London merchants who traded to South Carolina and comprised the “Carolina lobby” adopted a shrewd strategy. They strengthened their case by co-opting other commercial interests: petitions in support followed from merchants in the capital trading to Spain and Portugal and from Bristol merchants, manifesting a grouping that was both cross-sectoral and combined metropolitan and regional trading interests. Broadening the appellant base followed long-established precedents for petitioning Parliament in the eighteenth century and signified the Carolina lobby’s tactical astuteness. The choice of two MPs to introduce the Rice Bill to Parliament demonstrated this again: Peter Burrell, MP for Haslemere in Surrey, was a leading London merchant in the trade to Portugal and a director of the South Sea Company; and Abraham Elton was MP for Bristol and regularly presented petitions from the city’s merchants.\(^3\)

Over the previous two decades, the Carolina lobby’s regular petitions to Parliament had raised British political awareness of South Carolina. The lobbying coincided with rapid population and economic growth in the colony, which, coupled with profound political changes, had powerful implications for South
Carolina’s transatlantic trade and its relationship with the British state. In the twenty years before 1730, South Carolina’s population of free white and enslaved black residents had almost trebled, from 10,300 in 1710, roughly when the number of black slaves first exceeded that of free whites, to 30,000 in 1730 (table 1). Black slaves formed the clear majority of the population in 1730, numbering approximately 20,000 people. More than 9,000 enslaved black people had been brought into South Carolina over the previous ten years. Rice underlay the dramatic demographic growth. Planted, harvested, and processed by slaves in the irrigated fields and swamps of South Carolina’s lowcountry, the colony’s rice exports had increased threefold during the 1720s. Most went via Britain to Holland, Germany, and Portugal and to the West Indies. At the same time, South Carolina’s exports of deerskins had doubled, the volume of shipping clearing Charles Town harbor had grown by more than 100 percent, and per capita exports to Britain had risen by 37 percent. Politically, in 1729 the British Crown had taken formal control of South Carolina as the authority of the colony’s proprietors—the descendants and inheritors of the original eight Lords Proprietors who had founded the colony in 1670—was revoked after ten years of impasse. South Carolina was more closely integrated into Britain’s political and trading empire than ever before. As a colony that lacked the public and political profile of its northern neighbors, however, not to mention the West Indies sugar islands, its advocates in London needed to maneuver carefully to make their voices heard.

Petitioning between 1715 and 1730 that culminated in the Rice Act helped to put South Carolina on the political map in Britain. It also shaped the assumptions and expectations that would hold sway in South Carolina for the next half century about the responsibilities to the colony of London’s “Carolina merchants.” These were the capital’s traders in South Carolina’s exports of rice, naval stores, deerskins, and later indigo; they arranged the shipment of manufactured goods, textiles, foodstuffs, and other commodities to the colony and in some cases also supplied the slaves whose labor formed the basis of South Carolina’s economy. Aside from their commerce, these were the men who would be the colony’s leading interlocutors and lobbyists on matters of trade, regulation, and government in the empire’s corridors of power. Understanding the commercial trajectories of London’s leading Carolina merchants is essential in making sense of how this lobbying developed. It was in Charles Town—the “Metropolis of South Carolina”—that London’s leading Carolina merchants cut their commercial teeth before relocating to the capital. Their routes into trade were various. Some served apprenticeships with established merchants in Charles Town; others arrived on British North America’s southern frontier as captains of oceangoing ships and opted to stay. For all, the time spent in Charles Town in their early careers was formative, garnering them the capital and connections that would enable them to prosper in Atlantic trade and would propel them to the forefront of the Carolina trade in London.
Table 1. Population of South Carolina, 1680–1790

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Black Population</th>
<th>White Population</th>
<th>Black Population as % of Total Population</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1680</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1690</td>
<td>3,900</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>6,260</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>3,260</td>
<td>47.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1710</td>
<td>10,300</td>
<td>5,700</td>
<td>4,600</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1720</td>
<td>18,328</td>
<td>11,828</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>64.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1730</td>
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<td>20,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740</td>
<td>54,200</td>
<td>39,200</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>74,000</td>
<td>49,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>94,074</td>
<td>57,334</td>
<td>36,740</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>124,244</td>
<td>75,178</td>
<td>49,066</td>
<td>60.5</td>
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<td>180,000</td>
<td>97,000</td>
<td>83,000</td>
<td>53.9</td>
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<td>1790</td>
<td>249,073</td>
<td>108,895</td>
<td>140,178</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


**Mercantilism and “Interest”**

South Carolina’s value to Britain, like that of the other American colonies, was for most of the eighteenth century understood and articulated in terms of mercantilist orthodoxy. Since the sum of the world’s wealth was finite, trade was seen as what modern theorists would call a “zero-sum game”: the advantages Britain drew from economic growth would necessarily be to the disadvantage of rival nations. In practical terms, since a favorable balance of trade would augment Britain’s wealth, the government’s economic role was conceived as being to promote the nation’s exports and restrict its imports in order to achieve this. For the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, advocates of the free-trade liberalism advanced by Adam Smith in 1776 were in a distinct if occasionally vocal minority. Articulations of South Carolina’s value within Britain’s Atlantic empire were accordingly mainstream. Extolling the colony’s economic contribution to Britain to the Board of Trade in 1751, South Carolina’s governor James Glen noted how “twenty five thousand [South Carolina’s estimated white population] are wholly subsisted and supplied by the produce of the land, without manufactures of any kind . . . a circumstance that makes us perhaps more valuable to our mother country than any other province on the continent.”
Glen echoed earlier assessments. Francis Yonge’s 1722 *View of the Trade of South Carolina* suggested boosting the colony’s trade in ways that reflected the prevailing political-economic climate. Directed at the Board of Trade, the tract appealed for permission for the colony to export rice directly to foreign markets, making its case in a series of conventionally mercantilist claims. Higher rice exports would redound directly to the benefit of the mother country: rice did not compete with any of Britain’s crops, and therefore “every Hundred Weight sold to a Foreign market, is as much Money . . . added to the riches of Great Britain.” A surge in risiculture would bring greater prosperity to South Carolina and thereby nourish greater demand for British manufactured goods. Yonge suggested that the government might reasonably require all ships in the rice trade to be wholly owned in Britain, stimulating British shipbuilding and elevating demand for colonial timber—a prime example of the presumed mutuality of domestic and colonial economic interest that his audience wanted to hear.10

South Carolina’s productive potential was not lost on the more widely read economists of the day. Joshua Gee ruminated on the matter in his influential 1729 treatise, *The Trade and Navigation of Great Britain Considered.* Stressing the value of Britain’s colonies through their production of staple crops for which Britain otherwise had to rely on foreign rivals, as well as the colonies’ consumption of British manufactured goods, Gee highlighted the potential of the Carolinas and Virginia, “the most desirable of any in America for Latitude, Air, Soil, and navigable Rivers, and [which] lye so commodiously for corresponding with Europe.” Naval stores, potash, and indigo were commodities ripe for cultivation in South Carolina and vital to Britain. Growing these in the colony would reduce Britain’s dependence on foreign sources, improving the country’s balance of trade with rival European powers and stimulating domestic manufacturing through height-ened colonial demand.11 Gee’s was perhaps the best-known elaboration of a mercantilist refrain that was enshrined in law. Broadcast in published tracts and pervading the rhetoric of ministers and officials of state, his arguments were a staple of eighteenth-century political-economic discourse. It was no coincidence that they would also suffuse the appeals made with increasing frequency by South Carolina’s commercial advocates in London.

For London’s leading merchants, informing and influencing the state on commercial matters was part and parcel of their business. Merchants in the different branches of trade to the American colonies, whether the “New England trade,” “Virginia trade,” or “Carolina trade,” were no exception.12 One element of merchants’ interactions with the state was giving evidence to inquiries by the Board of Trade or to parliamentary committees on issues about which they had knowledge or expertise. To shape or propose legislation relating to their trade, merchants turned to petitioning. Since the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, petitioning had been the main way for interest groups to make requests and express grievances to Parliament. Petitions were means of either introducing
legislation or challenging existing laws. Circulated among and signed by interested parties, petitions were presented to Parliament by sympathetic MPs and then received readings. They were then either discussed in committee and ultimately informed new or amended laws or, in the face of opposition or lack of parliamentary time, were lost into the oblivion of unpassed legislation.¹³

The two decades before 1730 were formative years for Britain’s nascent Carolina trade. In these years trade to South Carolina developed as a distinct specialism alongside longer-established branches of American trade—to New England, Virginia, or the West Indies. “Carolina merchants,” as they came to be known, emerged as an identifiable group within the capital’s panoply of traders. Their interactions with the British state were galvanized by South Carolina’s appointment of its first formal representative in London, Abel Kettleby, in 1712. The appointment of a colonial agent followed precedent. Longer-established American colonies such as Virginia, Rhode Island, and Connecticut had long employed agents on a temporary and, from the 1680s, a permanent basis to represent their interests in the imperial metropolis—for example, lobbying the government on laws affecting the colonies, on trade regulations, and to encourage new settlement in America.¹⁴ Kettleby’s main task as South Carolina’s agent was to ensure that Britain maintained a bounty on naval stores such as pitch, tar, and turpentine exported to Britain. A further objective was to gain South Carolina the freedom to export naval stores and rice to all foreign markets.¹⁵ The position of a permanent colonial agent provided a figure around whom merchants could coalesce, and this Carolina lobby in London—mirroring the colony’s rapid economic and demographic growth—became more and more active. The issues raised by the lobby reflected the exigencies of a young colony on the vulnerable southern frontier of British North America. Defending South Carolina from Indian and rival imperial threats and establishing a viable export-based economy were the two most pressing, and mutually reinforcing, priorities.

Who were the merchants who composed London’s Carolina lobby? Capturing the membership of any branch of trade in eighteenth-century London is an inexact science; even defining the parameters of any given trade poses difficulties. No statistical records exist to reveal which merchants handled what goods, in what quantities, and at what frequency, and a lack of surviving commercial letters and accounts from either side of the Atlantic further complicates the study of the transatlantic Carolina trade before the 1730s. In light of these limitations, the petitioning activity of London’s merchants offers the best guide to the size, composition, and organization of London’s early Carolina trade. Thirteen surviving petitions signed between 1715 and 1730 by London merchants trading to South Carolina and two official lists of merchants identified as being involved in the trade reveal how a discernible Carolina lobby began to develop in London during the 1710s and 1720s. Although an imprecise guide to commercial activity, the frequency with which merchants signed the petitions implies the
scale of their involvement in the trade. In total, some 113 different names appear on the handwritten petitions and lists.\textsuperscript{16} This would seem to point to widespread involvement in London’s Carolina trade, making it structurally analogous to the capital’s Chesapeake trade—the only branch of London’s American trades for which statistics on merchant participation have been assembled.\textsuperscript{17} Closer analysis of the petitions suggests, however, that London’s Carolina trade may have been concentrated in many fewer hands than the Chesapeake trade was. Among the 113 merchant signatories, some 69 appear on only one petition or list, 15 on two, 11 on three, and 8 on four petitions. Just 10 appear five or more times. Among the 10 most recurrent signatories, David and Stephen Godin were cousins, and William and Samuel Wragg were uncle and nephew, strongly suggesting that they were in trade together.\textsuperscript{18}

The pattern of petitioning suggests that London’s Carolina trade was relatively open to new entrants during the early eighteenth century, but that a much smaller number of merchants were involved over the long term and on a large scale. Other evidence corroborates this. The papers of Charles Town merchant Robert Pringle, the earliest major set of correspondence on Anglo-Carolinian trade, show his extensive dealings with specialist London retailers such as wig makers, gunsmiths, pewterers, and hatters. Specialist textile wholesalers—generically termed “warehousemen”—too supplied Charles Town trading houses throughout the colonial era, while hopeful exporters in London sent out unsolicited cargoes to Charles Town merchants in their eagerness to claim a share of South Carolina’s growing market. “I have good friends enough in London that would send me more Dry goods than I could possibly Vend here, if was so Inclin’d without being so particularly Tied down in the Terms you propose,” Pringle rebuked one hopeful London warehouseman.\textsuperscript{19} Regular and large-scale London import-export merchants in the Carolina trade were scarcer. Although many in London had the capacity to send out cargoes of goods to be sold on commission in Charles Town—and were often accused in return of dumping outmoded, unseasonal, or unusable merchandise on the local market—fewer had the inclination or skill to receive and market remittances in the colony’s principal exports of rice, deerskins, and naval stores.\textsuperscript{20}

One of those who did, and who rose to preeminence in London’s Carolina trade, was Samuel Wragg. Writing to the Board of Trade in 1724 to protest against a petition from London merchants that had complained about the colony’s issuance of paper currency, South Carolina’s governor Francis Nicolson testified to Wragg’s status. “Mr. Samuel Wragg mercht. in London is more concerned in trade to this H.M. Province than all the petitioners and that his brother [Joseph Wragg] here with Messrs. Gibbon and Allen are by far the greatest traders here [in Charles Town],” he reported.\textsuperscript{21} Wragg’s route to becoming London’s leading Carolina merchant was a path that successors in the trade would follow. He was born in England and emigrated with his brother, Joseph, to South
Carolina in the first years of the eighteenth century. The pair soon emerged as two of Charles Town’s leading traders. Samuel Wragg invested heavily in land and slaves, and he was elected to South Carolina’s Commons House of Assembly, the lower house of the colony’s legislature. In 1718, however, he returned to Britain, transferring his business to London. His connections in Charles Town and in particular his transatlantic trade with his brother, who remained in South Carolina, seem to have underpinned his commercial success in the capital.

In London, Wragg was the city’s most prominent exporter of goods to South Carolina and recipient of the colony’s produce, with some twenty different vessels that he owned or part-owned landing in Charles Town between 1717 and 1739. He was also the largest single supplier of slaves to South Carolina during the 1720s and 1730s, with his ships bringing more than thirteen hundred enslaved Africans to the colony between 1725 and 1739. Wragg was the sole owner of several of these ships, a notable characteristic in a trade in which capital requirements made joint ownership of vessels the norm, pointing to the resources at his disposal. His brother’s presence in Charles Town facilitated his slaving ventures. Just as Samuel Wragg was the leading supplier of slaves to South Carolina, Joseph Wragg was the leading importer, handling twenty-two of the sixty-seven cargoes of slaves advertised in the *South Carolina Gazette* between 1733 and 1740, far more than any other trading house. Joseph Wragg paid £39,995 in duties on the slaves he brought into Charles Town between 1735 and 1739. With an average duty of £10 currency on each adult slave brought directly into South Carolina from Africa, his firm may have been responsible for the importation of up to four thousand enslaved Africans in these years. Samuel Wragg’s strong involvement in the slave trade distinguished him, however, from the next generation of London’s leading Carolina traders, who nearly all concentrated on the commodity import and export trades and left human trafficking to specialist slave traders in London, Bristol, and Liverpool.

The regularity of the petitioning by London’s Carolina merchants between 1715 and 1730 contrasted starkly with the inactivity of their counterparts in London’s trade to Virginia, once the most energetic North American lobby. Having petitioned Parliament fourteen times in the quarter century before 1716, Virginia merchants did so just twice between 1716 and 1732 and not at all between 1733 and 1754. This reflected contrasting structural conditions in the two trades. Regional ports, particularly Glasgow, gradually supplanted London as the centers for Britain’s tobacco business, while the capital’s Virginia merchants lacked the effective leadership that had shaped the group’s earlier lobbying. The diminishing political engagement of London’s Virginia merchants has been attributed to the consolidation of the trade in fewer hands; in contrast, the concentration of London’s Carolina trade among a small number of merchants appears to have had the reverse effect, fueling their lobbying activity. The period between the 1710s and the 1730s was a time when strong leaders emerged in London’s
Carolina trade. London controlled the largest share of Britain’s imports of rice, deerskins, and naval stores from South Carolina and of the country’s exports of manufactured goods to the colony; London also played a pivotal organizational role in the slave trade to South Carolina, as it did to Britain’s other slave colonies. During this period there was a rise in the number of issues that called for effective advocacy in the imperial capital.

Defense, Rice, and the Emergence of a Carolina Lobby in London

The substance of the early petitioning in London on Carolinian matters reflected the colony’s relative youth. Petitions were concerned in particular with trade and defense. Of the thirteen petitions between 1715 and 1730, five concerned British financial support for specific export produce as South Carolina searched for a staple cash crop on which to base an export-driven economy: three of these petitions were about naval stores, and one each about rice and potash. Four petitions concerned the issuance of paper currency in South Carolina, intermittently a source of friction between planters and merchants within the colony and between merchants in South Carolina—usually debtors who benefited from inflationary currency printing—and London’s Carolina merchants—usually creditors hurt by inflation. Two were on colonial defense, one concerned judicial process in pursuing debts in the colony, and one sought generally to “retrieve the desolation of Carolina, to strengthen that frontier of our colonies on the continent & to increase its Inhabitants & Trade.”

In their subjects, their style, and for the most part their tactics, they foreshadowed the petitioning by the Carolina lobby in London until the Revolutionary War.

The grave threat to South Carolina during the Yamassee War in 1715–16 gave rise to London’s Carolina merchants’ first display of their ability to effectively conduct information about the colony to the Board of Trade and to petition on South Carolina’s behalf. After years of growing indebtedness to white traders and of progressive encroachments on their lands, the Yamassee Indians, who lived along the Savannah River on South Carolina’s southern frontier, attacked the white settlements in the south of the colony in April 1715. Over the following months as many as four hundred settlers and Indian traders were killed and the survivors driven from lands to the south of Charles Town. They withdrew to Charles Town, where a defensive perimeter was established, and all white men and hundreds of enslaved black men were mobilized. With the Yamassees in alliance with the region’s Creeks, Choctaws, and Cherokees, the entire colony appeared in imminent danger of being overrun. “At no other time in colonial America,” one historian has written, “did a colony face the danger that South Carolina did.”

In urgent response to the crisis, the colony’s London agent Abel Kettleby organized some twenty-one “Planters and merchants trading to Carolina” in an appeal to the Board of Trade in July 1715 for immediate military aid for the colony: “Unless it is speedily relieved it must inevitably perish & all his Majesty’s
Subjects there fall a prey to their barbarous Enemies,” the petition warned. This appeal is a significant document in South Carolina’s history that deserves to be better known. It powerfully asserts the inadequacy of South Carolina’s proprietary government; it is an early exposition of South Carolina’s economic and strategic rationale; and it is the first coherent expression of British commercial advocacy on the colony’s behalf. In stating the nature of their interests in South Carolina, the merchant signatories prefigured the financial and territorial commitments that future London Carolina traders would have in the colony, as they reported that “Most of us have great Debts and Effects there, some of us large Plantations; & the Loss of these would be Considerable.” Beyond their own investments in South Carolina, the merchants were at pains to elide personal and British national interest, following mercantilist orthodoxy in pointing out the colony’s commercial and fiscal contributions to Great Britain. South Carolina, they asserted, had “for many years taken off so much of our English manufac-
tures, & brought such a large Revenue to the Crown, by the Duties upon Rice, Skins, Pitch, Tarr, & other Naval Stores & Commodities imported from thence, & yet from the first Settlement of it has not put the Crown to one Penny Expence.” Besides its economic significance to Great Britain, South Carolina occupied a crucial strategic location on the frontier of the British Empire and was a vital bulwark in a North American chain of defense. If the colony were to be overrun by Indians, behind whose revolt the guiding hand of France and Spain was discerned, “all the other Colonies would soon be involved in the same Ruine & the whole English Empire, Religion & Name be extirpated in America.” The petition was also an early acknowledgment of South Carolina’s worrying racial imbalance, with black slaves already outnumbering white settlers. The petitioners counted some two thousand white men in the colony able to bear arms, plus about sixteen thousand blacks, “some of which might be armed in our Defence if we had any Arms to supply them withal; But in that too there must be great Caution, least our Slaves when armed might make themselves Masters.”

The lobbyists persuaded Parliament to promise aid, although in military terms it was the raising of the local militia, the arrival of men and arms from New England and Virginia, and a diplomatic alliance with the Cherokees that were the critical factors in suppressing the Yamassee revolt. Two petitions to the British government in July and September 1715 against Virginia’s trade in guns and ammunition to Indians were significant too in planting South Carolina in Britain’s political consciousness. As the House of Commons committee that heard the July petition reported, South Carolina’s ruin would be “to the great Prejudice of his Majesty’s Subjects, and the Trade of this Kingdom.” The consideration of the petition by the Commons demonstrated the efficacy of the Carolina lobby’s political advocacy, leading to the first recorded discussion in Britain of the inadequacy of South Carolina’s proprietary government in the face of Indian and concerted French and Spanish threats. In the Commons on 10
August 1715, the revocation of the proprietors’ charter was subtly mooted: “That the Proprietors not being able, at their own Charges, either to send the necessary Succours for the present Relief of the said Province, or to support it under the like for the future, your Committee submit, in what manner it may be most proper to preserve and maintain this so valuable a Province, which is a Frontier of the British Plantations on the Continent.”

The duties on colonial naval stores, South Carolina’s issuance of paper currency, and—in particular—the liberalization of rice exports further stimulated the development of London’s Carolina lobby. Rice would be, as one of South Carolina’s first historians, David Ramsay, later put it, “the chief support of the colony . . . of more value than mines of silver and gold.” More than any other commodity, rice furnished South Carolina with export earnings and—for its white elites—wealth; embedded slavery at the colony’s economic, demographic, and social heart through the reliance on slave labor for cultivating the crop; and connected the colony with markets around the Atlantic. The first successful experiments in risiculture during the 1690s had shown South Carolina’s early white settlers the grain’s economic potential, and from the early eighteenth century they had sought favorable legislative and fiscal treatment for it. Merchants in London, who stood to benefit from enlarged rice exports and the consequent increase in demand in South Carolina for imported goods, were willing catalysts. The eventual passage of the Rice Act in 1730 represented the culmination of twenty years’ campaigning by South Carolina’s official agents and London’s Carolina merchants.

As rice had not originally been one of the “enumerated commodities”—colonial produce such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco that according to the Navigation Acts could be exported only to Britain—Carolinian planters had at first been able to export their crop directly to Portugal and to foreign colonies in the West Indies. In 1704, however, this trade was outlawed. Direct rice exports were, the prohibiting statute observed, “contrary to the true Intent and Meaning” of the Navigation Acts, and rice was added to the list of enumerated commodities. For Joshua Gee, the ban was due to the machinations of a ship’s captain, who “possessed a Member of Parliament . . . with an Opinion that carrying Rice directly to Portugal was a Prejudice to the Trade of England, and privately got a clause into an Act to make it an enumerated Commodity.” Gee condemned this rigid extension of the law, exposing the fault lines between mercantilist precepts as enshrined in the Navigation Acts and—as he saw it—the true spirit of mercantilism. “This could not have happened,” he claimed, “if that Gentleman who brought in that Clause had understood the Nature and Circulation of Trade, he would have then known, that it is much more the Interest of the English Merchant to sell his Rice in Portugal, and have the money remitted thence, than it is to have it brought to England, and afterwards shipp’d to Holland, Hamburgh, or Portugal; for the Difference in the freight and Charges is at least 50 per Cent.”
After Abel Kettleby’s efforts to have rice removed from the list of enumerated commodities had come to naught, such attempts continued intermittently during the 1710s and 1720s. In March 1715 three British merchants trading in Oporto, Portugal, told the Board of Trade that South Carolina might export some six thousand barrels of rice a year to Portugal if direct exports were allowed. With sound mercantilist logic, they insisted that the direct trade “might be a considerable benefit to Great Britain, and his Majesty no loser in his duties by their being paid in South Carolina.”

The Portugal traders’ evidence hinted at the incipient sophistication of the campaign, both in the arguments they deployed and in co-opting wider trading interests. Over the next decade, members of South Carolina’s London lobby would seek and gain the support of their counterparts in the capital’s Iberian trade in their efforts against the restrictions. In a striking gesture, South Carolina’s Assembly—as the Portugal merchants had hinted—even offered to offset the losses in customs duty that would be caused by rice exports not landing in British ports before reexportation.

In appointing Francis Yonge and John Lloyd as joint agents for South Carolina in 1722, the colony’s government made one of the agents’ principal duties to “endeavour to get the enumeration of rice taken off.” To help achieve this, they were instructed, “You may propose that the same duty may be pay’d upon the exportation of rice from hence for a revenue to the King in this Province, as is now reserved to the Crown after allowing the rebate upon the exportation from South Britain [Britain’s south coast reexport ports such as Poole and Cowes].”

This would make the liberalization of rice exports revenue-neutral to the British Treasury: a duty would be paid in South Carolina equivalent to that which would have been paid had the rice landed in England. The agents coordinated a petition signed by twenty-seven “merchants & traders to Carolina, Spain & Portugal” urging that rice be taken off the list of enumerated commodities; however, after the petition was introduced to Parliament in November 1722, it failed to progress through committee hearings.

A further attempt in 1725 indicated the Carolina lobby’s growing tactical sophistication. While the previous effort had sought permission for direct rice exports to Spain, Portugal, and the West Indies, the renewed attempt had a more limited goal, seeking direct rice exports only to European ports south of Cape Finisterre in Spain. A more powerful coalition of interests was aligned behind the proposal. Samuel Wragg, London’s leading Carolina merchant, sought to harness the influence of the South Sea Company, which had a monopoly on the slave trade to Spain’s American colonies, to “get off the Enumeration on Rice.” He paid some £33 to the company’s secretary and a further £150 “to Solicitors, Clerk’s Fees and other Servants of both Houses of Parliament.”

Although the effort was again unsuccessful, the potential efficacy of London lobbying was not lost on South Carolinians. Wragg had been, observed South Carolina’s Assembly, “very Serviceable to this Province in endeavouring to get the Enumeration
of rice taken off, and the bounty again given on Pitch & Tarr and in several
other negotiations tending to the benefit and advantage of this Province." The
partial removal of rice from the list of enumerated commodities in 1730, allowing it to be sent directly to Spain and Portugal, would be the ultimate reward for
Wragg’s efforts.

If achieving the 1730 Rice Act showed London’s nascent Carolina lobby the
benefits of cooperating with other interest groups that had connections in Parl-
ament, the value of these connections was confirmed five years later. As was
common in trade legislation, the permission for direct rice exports to Iberia had been
granted for a limited period, so that its effects might be reviewed. It was
due to expire in September 1735. In spring 1735 Peregrine Fury, who had been ap-
pointed as South Carolina’s official agent in London two years earlier, led moves
to get Parliament to prolong the act. His efforts were facilitated by the establish-
ment of Georgia on South Carolina’s southern flank and by the new colony’s
prominent supporters in Parliament. Fury attended a meeting of the Georgia
Trustees and, in the words of their president, the Earl of Egmont, asked “that we
would befriend them in a Bill they are endeavouring to procure. . . . We replied in
writing that we should always contribute our endeavours for the advancing the
interests of Carolina.” With backing from Georgia’s supporters in Parliament,
an act prolonging direct rice exports from South Carolina to southern Europe
and extending this privilege to Georgia was quickly made law.

Growing in volume and, through the London Carolina merchants’ interac-
tions with the state, in prominence, the Carolina trade was recognized by the
1730s as a distinct branch of the capital’s trade. Contemporaries distinguis-
hed it among the various groupings of London merchants. A writer to the Univer-
sal Spectator and Westminster Journal in 1734 listed the “Meetings of Clubs of
Particular Merchants, either fix’d or occasional . . . the Turkey and Italian Mer-
chants, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, the Flanderçan, the German,
the Danish, the Swedish, the Muscovite, the Dutch, the Irish, the West India,
the Virginia, the Carolina, New York and New England Merchants.” In their
composition, tactics, and rhetoric the Carolina merchants’ petitioning efforts
between the 1710s and 1730s laid the foundations for lobbying in London on
Carolinian matters over the next fifty years. These initial efforts also shaped
how London’s Carolina merchants understood their interactions with the state.
Their was not a formal political role: with a few exceptions, they did not be-
come MPs, nor did they even seek political positions within the City of London.
Instead their efforts were intermittent and issue-driven. South Carolina’s lobby
in London interacted with the Board of Trade, the British Treasury, and with
Parliament as and when necessary on specific issues, providing information, giv-
ing expert advice, and asking supportive MPs to propose and guide legislation.
It was not unusual in this, but in its energy during the 1720s, the Carolina lobby
stood out. As significantly, these early efforts were also important in the way
they informed expectations in South Carolina of the attentiveness and efficacy of London’s Carolina merchants as the colony’s informal representatives in the capital.

From its outset in the first decades of the eighteenth century, London’s Carolina trade was concentrated in the hands of a small number of merchants. Its coherence made it a particularly responsive and productive lobby. The trade’s domination by a small number of merchants remained a feature after Wragg and the capital’s other leading Carolina merchants of the 1720s and 1730s retired or died. Close personal connections with South Carolina from having lived and worked in the colony was a defining feature of the group of merchants who came to the fore of London’s Carolina trade during the 1740s and 1750s, as had been the case with Wragg. In this, London’s Carolina trade appears to have been exceptional among the different branches of the capital’s North American trade in the mid-eighteenth century. It was common for merchants in ports across Britain’s Atlantic empire to have spent part of their training or early careers elsewhere. A number of merchants in London’s various North American specialisms—the New York, New England, or Virginia trades, for example—had had such experiences. But in that all of London’s leading Carolina merchants during the 1740s and 1750s had spent time in Charles Town, and especially in the long duration and nature of their spells working there, they were distinct. This made the capital’s Carolina trade closer in composition to its West Indies counterpart than to other branches of trade to mainland North America. Many, perhaps most, of London’s West Indies merchants had commercial or planting experience on the Caribbean islands, building capital and connections there before relocating to Britain. Early commercial experiences in Charles Town were similarly formative for the leading merchants in London’s Carolina trade in the 1740s and 1750s.

Getting into the Carolina Trade

The career of James Crokatt, who would become London’s foremost Carolina merchant and advocate during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, exemplifies how a savvy merchant could prosper in the Carolina trade. Crokatt was born in Edinburgh in July 1701, but his early life is obscure before his arrival in South Carolina sometime before 1728. In Charles Town, Crokatt would have found a rapidly growing Atlantic seaport. Perched on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, Charles Town in 1730 had a population of around four thousand, split almost equally between free whites and enslaved blacks. With a regimented grid of streets and wharves along “the Bay”—the strip of waterfront facing the Cooper River and the center of Charles Town’s commercial life—it was the only town of note in South Carolina and comfortably the largest urban center in the southern colonies. Charles Town’s growth was fueled by South Carolina’s dramatic economic expansion. Rice exports had trebled in
the previous ten years. Thousands more enslaved Africans had been brought to South Carolina during the 1720s to labor in the growing rice plantations, and the colony’s combined population of free white people and enslaved black people had grown by three-quarters. It almost doubled again during the 1730s as forced and free immigration continued apace. Charles Town’s population grew to over six thousand by the end of the decade, making it the fourth largest settlement in British North America, behind only Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. South Carolina’s risicultural boom continued through the 1730s. As exports flourished, imports reached new heights as well: by the end of the 1730s, Charles Town received at least 15 percent of all imports into North America from England measured by value. A growing community of merchants handled the increasing volume of trade: the rice, deerskins, and naval stores that flowed out of the port, and the slaves and goods that arrived at its wharves. Between 1732—when the weekly South Carolina Gazette became the colony’s first newspaper—and 1737 some 122 different merchants advertised their wares. Prospective merchants and tradesmen arrived from Britain and from other American colonies to claim a share of Charles Town’s burgeoning commerce.47

Crokatt’s was perhaps a family migration. One brother, Daniel, owned land in Jamaica; other siblings, John and Elizabeth, were both in Charles Town by the late 1730s. Like James Crokatt, they were drawn to trade: Elizabeth Crokatt married the merchant William Woodrop, while John Crokatt also traded, though the two brothers were apparently not formally connected in business. Another John Crokatt, possibly a cousin, traded in Charles Town in the 1730s too.48 By 1731 James Crokatt was operating from a grand countinghouse and store on Broad Street, Charles Town’s premier commercial thoroughfare, where he built up one of the town’s leading trading houses. John Beswicke was another Charles Town merchant who would later dominate London’s Carolina trade. His entry into commerce in Charles Town also shows the importance of family connections. A native of Yorkshire, he went to South Carolina around the turn of the 1730s, where another John Beswicke—his father or uncle perhaps—was already
established as clerk of the markets. The younger Beswicke opened a store near Crokatt’s on Broad Street, possibly having inherited the premises from his relative, who died in 1735.\textsuperscript{49}

Although the exact details of how Crokatt and Beswicke began in trade are obscure, the routes taken by fellow Charles Town traders—several of whom, like them, later relocated to London—are better documented. They illustrate the allure of the Carolina trade, the opportunities it offered, and the means by which time and experience in Charles Town laid the foundations for future commercial fortunes in London. Captaining a ship offered one path into trade in Charles Town. Mariners gained special insights into market conditions through supervising the handling and exchange of goods at either end of a voyage, and the trustworthiness and skill of ships’ captains were vital to successful transatlantic commerce. Knowledge of winds and oceanic currents and the art of “seamanship” reduced crossing times and ensured that cargoes arrived safely, making experienced navigators highly valued. “The good of the Voyage depends [on] having a Clever Brisk Commander that is a good Seaman & well Qualified for his Business,” observed Charles Town merchant Robert Pringle.\textsuperscript{50} Besides making the Atlantic crossing in a safe and timely fashion, a captain in the Carolina trade was required to make technical decisions about the commodities on board. Errors of judgment in loading a ship could damage or even destroy precious cargoes. When his brother’s ship Susannah arrived poorly stowed in Charles Town, Pringle offered a warning: “It certainly requires a great deal of Judgment & Experience in the Stowing of a Ship with dry Goods which is a Main Matter in Regard to the Voyage. The Susannah will get a bad name here by haveing Goods Damaged every Voyage & people wont care to Ship on her.”\textsuperscript{51}

Able captains gleaned valuable insights into the business of Atlantic trade through being exposed to the factors influencing supply and demand, the profitability of different commodities, the appropriate storage and packing of goods, and the seasonality of voyages. Their role also offered them a foothold in trade itself, even if they did not have the capital to invest in a large cargo or the connections to supply with goods. With some personal space on board ship, a captain could stow goods that he could sell on his own account at the ship’s destination. With judgment and good timing, he could accumulate sufficient capital over time to set up as an independent trader or become an agent in the port for an overseas trading house. John Watkinson typified the latter path. A mariner in the Carolina trade, he settled in the 1720s in Charles Town, where he acted as a factor for the Rotterdam firm of Hope & Hope, importing and selling the firm’s goods on commission and brokering cargoes for export to Europe. He invested his profits in several properties in the town. He had returned to London by 1730 and became one of the capital’s leading Carolina traders in the 1730s.\textsuperscript{52}

A decade after Watkinson, brothers-in-law Richard Shubrick and John Nickleson followed a similar route: from captaining Atlantic shipping, to commerce
in Charles Town, to prominence in London’s Carolina trade. Both Shubrick and Nickleson began their trading careers as ship captains. Originally from Stepney, just east of London and home to many of the city’s mariners and their families, Richard Shubrick took over command of the *Loyal Jane* from his father. During the 1730s he plied a regular trade between London, Charles Town, and the West Indies. Besides supplying goods to Charles Town’s merchants, Shubrick also sold merchandise during his spells in Charles Town between voyages and bought land in the colony. At the same time John Nickleson made regular transatlantic crossings in charge of the 100-ton *Pelham* and its eleven crew members and then the 160-ton *Minerva*. From London the ships most often brought textiles and clothing for Charles Town’s stores, though sometimes they carried more exotic goods too, such as umbrellas, “Squire’s elixir, spirit of lavender, anchovies, olives, walnuts and capers.” Nickleson and Shubrick went into partnership together in Charles Town in 1739. The firm became one of the town’s leading retailers, selling a familiar mix of textiles, plantation tools, and consumables, while Shubrick’s younger brother Thomas took over the command of the *Minerva*. After several years in Charles Town, Nickleson and Shubrick relocated to London in 1743 and 1747 respectively, and there they became two of the capital’s leading Carolina merchants.

If captaining an oceangoing vessel was one common route into trade in Charles Town, an even more prevalent path was by serving a commercial apprenticeship, as was true in London and in British regional ports. A clerkship was a sound footing through which to learn a trade, establish a network of contacts, and build a reputation. Writing later in the century, the merchant, planter, and statesman Henry Laurens set out the advantages of learning at an established merchant’s elbow. “I would advise a Young Gentleman rather to serve as a Clerk than to dabble as a petty Merchant,” he explained to a correspondent in Savannah; “in the former case he is always loose & open to good offers & very often rises with great experience into considerable trade. In the Latter I have often observed worthy young Men by precipitate engagements in Trade confine themselves within a narrow compass & remain in a state little better than stagnant, for many Years.” Laurens’s advice was grounded in personal experience. Born in South Carolina in 1724 and raised in the colony, he had spent time in London in the 1740s as a clerk to James Crokatt, by then established as the capital’s leading Carolina merchant. Although Laurens’s connection with Crokatt ended in disappointment, as his attempts to become a partner in Crokatt’s firm were denied, he nonetheless valued his commercial training highly. Having returned to Charles Town and established himself in trade, Laurens took on a number of young apprentices himself. Working alongside an established trader, an apprentice learned the negotiations and bargain-striking of daily routine, calculations of price and risk, weights and measures, and strategic decisions on the freighting and destinations of vessels. Practical responsibilities supplemented
his observational gleanings. Besides making invoices, copying letters, and manning retail stores, young clerks were also tasked with marking rice barrels or transporting goods to and from the town’s wharves.

Apprenticeships, at least with Charles Town’s more conscientious merchants, also incorporated training in the theory of commerce. Alongside learning on the job, an apprentice was expected to spend a portion of his leisure time studying manuals on aspects of trade such as accounting and commercial regulation. Didactic literature such as Malachy Postlethwaite’s *Universal Directory of Trade and Commerce* or Henry Saxby’s *The British Customs* found a place on Charles Town’s countinghouse shelves just as they did in contemporary London. During his commercial training, a young clerk could also expect to make himself known to potential future trading partners. Introductions to fellow Charles Town traders were one part of this; still more beneficial was the chance to join his master on trips to other ports, even across the Atlantic, where he might meet important correspondents. In contrast, setting up independently as a small trader—though superficially more alluring—carried greater risks with fewer opportunities to make connections. As Laurens counseled, following this avenue would “seldom intitle you to an acquaintance with Men of consequence & at the same time are generally attended with most trouble.”

To grasp fully the complexities of transatlantic commerce, it was thought particularly advantageous for merchants-in-training to spend part of their early careers on the other side of the Atlantic. Those seeking to trade from Britain to South Carolina would benefit from a grounding in Charles Town’s commercial scene, and vice versa. After he had relocated from Charles Town to London in 1747, John Beswicke secured a four-year apprenticeship for a nephew at a prominent Charles Town trading house. Another young man, Peter Taylor, spent several years as an apprentice at his uncle’s Charles Town countinghouse and lowcountry estates. Though admonished by his uncle for his hedonistic lifestyle and “rough, forward and noisy carriage,” he became a substantial merchant on his return to his native Whitehaven, a port in northern England. Even South Carolina’s minor ports could furnish a good commercial education for trainees coming to the colony from Britain. One young Londoner went into partnership in a small trading house in Georgetown, some eighty miles north of Charles Town, where it was noted that he “will not spend his time unprofitably by a few Years residence in this part of the World where he will probably gain more knowledge of Men & business than he could have done in twice the time in London.”

In the late 1730s Robert Pringle had looked across the Atlantic for a bookkeeper. Like many of his fellow traders in the town, Pringle had been born in Scotland, and he had served an apprenticeship with a West Indies merchant in London before traveling to South Carolina in his early twenties. His particular requirements in any new clerk, sobriety and honesty, were perhaps qualities he identified in his younger self. He set out the terms for the bookkeeper’s
engagement to a London correspondent, asking that “if you should happen to hear of a good Sober Young Man that writes a good hand & is a good Accomp- tant & can be well recommended & inclinable to come over here for his Encour- agement, [I] shall be willing to give him at the rate of Forty Pounds Sterling (as the Exchange goes) Sallary per annum & Lodging & board & if he behaves to my liking will encrease his salary & keep him for a term of years.” As he was a shrewd trader, Robert Pringle’s generosity toward his new charge had limits, however: the clerk would have to be willing “to come over on the terms above mention’d & pays his own Passage & c.”

The last stipulation was perhaps a deterrent to would-be apprentices: when two young clerks, James Ogilvie and George Inglis, arrived with Pringle three years later, their £21 passage had been paid for them on Pringle’s behalf by his London-based brother, Andrew.

Ogilvie and Inglis would have starkly contrasting experiences of appren- ticeship with Pringle. Ogilvie’s apprenticeship began inauspiciously and went downhill. Having been captured by a Spanish privateer en route to Charles Town, delaying his arrival and adding greatly to the cost of his crossing, he was unprepared for the cut and thrust of trade in the port. He found his master hard to please and ruthless in his pursuit of profit. “It was not long that he [Pringle] treated me with common Civility,” Ogilvie complained to his brother in Scotland; “I soon began to experience the Effects of his Temper. It is impossible to do anything to please him, and he is continually finding fault with the smallest Trifles . . . Mr. Pringle himself has a most villainous temper, and is a Man I have not the least reason to expect anything from, for his own Interest, and a Desire of Scraping up Riches at any Rate is his only aim.” Overwhelmed by loneliness, he advised his brothers that any of them wishing to enter commerce should seek training nearer to home. Nonetheless he persevered in trade in Charles Town and went into partnership with Pringle’s former business partner in a store “on the bay.” By contrast, Inglis adapted more easily to his commercial training with Pringle. In 1745, two years after Inglis’s arrival, Pringle reported his “Good Behaviour Since he has Liv’d with me, so much to my Satisfaction & of the Great Regaurd & Esteem I have for him.” That same year Inglis began investing his own capital in joint cargoes with Pringle, and in 1749 the pair entered formal partnership. Both Ogilvie and Inglis chose to remain in Charles Town to make their fortunes with established merchants. Illustrating the breadth of commercial opportunity around the Atlantic littoral, other apprentices in the town sought to further their commercial education elsewhere. After beginning as a clerk to a merchant in Charles Town, one trainee, John Brown, received a better offer and decamped to join a firm of traders in New Providence, Bahamas.

For many young men entering trade in Charles Town, partnerships were both logical and financially essential. Partnerships reduced the start-up capital required of an individual; allowed the pooling of knowledge, experience, and contacts; and spread the financial risks of trade. However, capital and some
experience were needed to entice a potential partner into a formal connection. These requirements led some would-be merchants to pursue a different strategy: the alluring if risky approach of going it alone, which offered greater flexibility, autonomy, and the whole share of future profits. To do this required carefully accumulating one’s own capital to invest in a cargo of imported goods. Another young Scottish apprentice in Charles Town, Alexander Cumine, vacillated between going into partnership and going it alone. Having served two years in his mentor’s trading house and living with his employer at his premises—as was customary—he weighed his options. He first considered investing his spare cash in a cargo of imported textiles. However, “if you get a substantial partner you will do very well,” he mused, before striking upon a strategy that would provide him with the means to achieve this. Buying some two hundred or three hundred pounds in goods on credit from his connections in London would, he believed, “enable me to enter into partnership with some Merchant here. I might make a perhaps pretty good Fortune for myself in a short time; and this is the way all the Merchants here have begun viz. by Credit & if one be diligent & industrious & make proper Remittances the Merchants at home [Britain] will trust him more; and so enable him to extend his trade further. There is plenty of money to be got here if one was once in the way of making it.”

As Cumine appreciated, access to credit was vital in entering trade. Some young merchants were able to call on family wealth. After completing a five-year apprenticeship in Charles Town, one aspirant trader was promised a “very pretty foundation” of two thousand pounds by his father to set himself up; this money would allow him “to live genteely in the Character of a Young Merchant.” In preparation for setting up in business in Charles Town, he made visits to Jamaica “to make an acquaintance with Gentlemen in Trade at Kingston” and to Europe “to form some Connections with Men in Trade in Portugal, Spain, Great Britain, and Holland.” Illustrating the range of markets for Carolinian produce and the breadth of connections required by an ambitious Charles Town merchant, his various ports of call included London, Bristol, and Liverpool; Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Hamburg; and Oporto, Lisbon, and Cadiz. James Habersham, one of the leading merchants in Savannah, Georgia, set aside five thousand pounds in start-up capital for his sons’ new partnership; he believed this amount to be “a sufficient Fund to carry on Business in a respectable Manner.” Another new partnership aimed to muster a starting capital stock of five thousand pounds. “’Tis enough,” reckoned Henry Laurens, advising its young partners, that “you shall not want, nor make a mean Entrance.”

For many would-be Charles Town traders, however, raising the money needed to enter trade was no easy feat. After James Ogilvie had eventually established himself in trade in Charles Town, his twenty-year-old brother Charles decided to follow from Scotland to seek his own fortune in the town. Perhaps mindful of his brother’s initial problems, Charles Ogilvie opted not to take an
apprenticeship but to raise capital in London before going to South Carolina. He was unsuccessful. He first approached George Udney, both a fellow Scot and a London merchant in the capital’s Carolina trade, “believing he would have something for me . . . but I happened to be mistaken, for he absolutely refused me Credit.” Undeterred, Charles Ogilvie traveled to Charles Town anyway. As he lacked an established partner or any capital of note, his first ventures in trade came to nothing. He complained to his brother of “the difficulty of getting a tolerable maintenance in this country . . . I endeavoured to push a little in Trade myself & sent two or three small Adventures to the West Indies, but without success.”

No branch of Atlantic trade offered greater dividends than the slave trade, and with an entrepreneurial mind-set and an eye for a profit, Ogilvie was drawn toward it. He was offered a job as a supercargo—a shipboard agent charged with managing deals on a merchant’s behalf—on a vessel that was bound from Charles Town for Guinea on the coast of West Africa to collect a cargo of ninety slaves. The position offered the possibility of one hundred pounds in commission for Ogilvie and for the ship’s captain. For Ogilvie, the notorious morbidity of West Africa and the horrors of the Atlantic Middle Passage aboard a slave ship—the mortality rate among slave ships’ crews approached that of the ships’ enslaved occupants—were worth the risk since the proceeds he would make from the voyage would give him the chance to establish himself in Charles Town. He noted glibly that “all that go upon the Coast of Guinea run a great risk. But I believe ’tis not so bad as ’tis represented, & likewise I believe Dread & Debauchery kill as many as the Climate.” He asked his brother, “Who in my situation would not run
a risk, for the Prospect of getting into Business, which if we meet with Success, in all probability would make our Fortunes in a few years.\textsuperscript{73}

When the partnership backing the venture pulled out, Ogilvie and the captain took matters into their own hands. They agreed to fit out a small, sixty-ton vessel at their own cost, estimated at three hundred pounds, and to go to the Guinea Coast anyway. There they hoped—wildly unrealistically—to buy and bring back to South Carolina a cargo of six hundred slaves.\textsuperscript{74} Although the outcome of Ogilvie’s first slaving venture is unknown, he eventually succeeded in becoming a leading merchant in Charles Town. The three different partnerships he was a member of imported slaves from Africa and merchandise from the West Indies and from Britain’s other North American colonies. Through marrying the daughter of South Carolina’s chief justice, he became a large landowner in South Carolina. Maintaining the entrepreneurialism that propelled his rise in Charles Town’s commerce, he transferred his business to London in 1761 in search of the even greater profits offered by trade in the capital. His early commercial rise is one of the best documented and most eventful among all South Carolina’s Atlantic traders. In its motivations and trajectory, from relative obscurity in Britain to prominence in Charles Town and on to commercial zenith back in London, it was entirely typical.

**Trading in Charles Town**

Having established themselves in business in Charles Town, Crokatt, Beswicke, Nickleson, and Shubrick conducted their trade in ways typical of the town’s commercial scene in the 1730s. Evidence suggests that they were all independent merchants in the goods import trade, among the growing number of Charles Town merchants who by the 1730s were importing manufactured goods and consumables on their own account and risk. In the rice export trade, they acted either as correspondents for British merchants, assembling cargoes of the grain from local planters and their agents in Charles Town and shipping them on commission to British, continental European, and West Indian destinations, or purchased and shipped rice on their own accounts. Most rice was exported between November and May.\textsuperscript{75} Trading independently carried greater financial risks but offered higher returns, which would later finance these merchants’ relocation to London and their trade in the capital. Beswicke, Shubrick, and particularly Crokatt all acquired extensive land and property holdings in South Carolina that further point to a level of profits generated by independent trading. Such was the scale of Crokatt’s trade that he acquired a wharf in Charles Town harbor that came to bear his name. Occupying a prime location on the Cooper River, Crokatt’s Bridge was the northernmost of only eight such “bridges,” as the wharves were known locally.\textsuperscript{76}

Merchants sold an array of imported goods on credit, which was typically extended for a year, to South Carolina’s planters and tradesmen from their
stores in the town. In return they either took rice directly from planters in payment or, as was increasingly common, received remittances in cash or notes, which they used to buy rice sold by planters on the open market. However they acquired the rice, the merchants then exported it to their connections in Britain and continental Europe or the British West Indies, where rice was a staple food for slaves on the islands’ sugar plantations. Merchants also bought deerskins from specialist traders who often operated up to hundreds of miles inland and who received the skins from the region’s Native American tribes in exchange for goods such as guns, garments, and alcohol. Although trade in deerskins was less important to South Carolina’s economy during the 1730s and 1740 than it had been two decades earlier, deerskins remained a significant export and were shipped by nearly all Charles Town’s export merchants. To attract customers in Charles Town’s crowded retail market, merchants sought competitive advantage by two principal means. The length of credit a trader could offer his customers was one important differentiator. Running one of Charles Town’s leading trading houses from large premises on Broad Street, James Crokatt had enough capital reserves to allow him to offer particularly generous terms to buyers. He extended up to two years’ credit and accepted produce in receipt of goods sold. His customers were spread across the South Carolina lowcountry in at least five different parishes, from St. Bartholomew’s in the south to Prince Frederick’s in the north, reflecting the scale of his trade.

Besides their terms of sale and credit, retailers also distinguished themselves from their competitors through the range and quality of their goods. The diversity of wares advertised for sale at John Beswicke’s store was typical. In addition to foodstuffs such as “Herefordshire Cyder,” wine, and coffee and “a choice Parcel of Fans, China Ware, super fine Green Tea, Mens silk Stockings, Shoes and other sundry goods,” he sold a range of plantation hardware: one notice publicized his “good assortment of very best hard metal pewter, oznabrigs [coarse cloth] and other thread, British made sail canvas, 4, 6, 8 and 20 penny nails, hinges and locks of most sorts and variety of ironmongery ware.” Customers at Crokatt’s store on Broad Street or at Nickleson & Shubrick’s store “on the Bay” would encounter similar assortments, with different stock for different seasons: “gawse for Pavilions [mosquito screens], and almost every other kind of Goods proper for Summer” on sale in Crokatt’s store in May and June, and “most kinds of Woolen and other Goods proper for the Winter season” in September. These were general stores catering in full to the needs of country visitors and town dwellers alike. Legal suits filed against recalcitrant debtors reveal customers’ buying habits: one planter had acquired goods including fabric, buttons, knives and forks, and a broom; another small debtor had been able to purchase fabrics, rum, wine, sugar, gunpowder, bullets, and tea.

Supplying the Indian trade and South Carolina’s government provided profitable sidelines to consumer retail. James Crokatt was particularly active in the
deerskins trade, shipping more cargoes of skins from Charles Town between 1735 and 1739 than any other exporter. In exchange for the skins, he offered suppliers a conventional range of goods that they could exchange with their Native American connections—“guns, hatchets, caddis, beads & most other kind Indian trading goods”—and he provided the colonial government with goods to trade with Creeks and Chickasaws. Beswicke too was regularly contracted by the colonial government to supply goods “for the Use of the Indians” as Britain’s wars with France and Spain between 1739 and 1748 and the threats these posed to South Carolina heightened the importance of securing Native American alliances. Nickleson, Shubrick & Co. in particular benefited from the expansion of government spending during the war, becoming one of the colonial government’s leading contractors. In 1743, for example, the firm received £1,851.10s. currency, “being for Sundries supplied for the Use of the Indians and for victualling the Spanish Prisoners”; this was more than three times the amount received by the next largest supplier and nearly four percent of the colonial government’s total expenditure in 1742–43. The following year the firm supplied the government with a smaller but still substantial £557.3s.7d. of “sundry Goods for the Use of the Public.” Even more lucratively, the firm was made the official naval victualler in Charles Town, through which it supplied Royal Navy vessels in the port with provisions and equipment.

In contrast with their extensive ventures in handling rice, deerskins, military supplies, and consumer goods, the leading Charles Town merchants who later relocated to Britain—Crokatt, Beswicke, Shubrick, and Nickleson—had little direct involvement in the slave trade during their time in South Carolina. Imports of enslaved Africans into Charles Town reached record levels during the 1730s as planters sought more and more slaves to work in the colony’s growing rice plantations: more than twenty thousand slaves were brought into South Carolina between 1730 and 1739. Slave trading was the basis of some of the greatest fortunes made in Charles Town. Merchants such as Joseph Wragg, Benjamin Godin, and Benjamin Savage were “slave factors,” receiving cargoes of African slaves whose trafficking had been arranged by the merchants’ correspondents in Britain and on the coast of West Africa. In Wragg’s and Godin’s cases, their relations Samuel Wragg and David Godin in London played a vital role.

In total, more than ninety-two thousand slaves were brought into South Carolina in the seventy years before the American Revolution—a higher number than in any other British colony on the North American mainland (table 2). Most slaves were imported directly from Africa; the vast majority came in ships owned by merchants living in Britain. The greatest number of slaves arrived in the colony between May and November, timing that was influenced by climate, seasonal demand for labor on plantations, and relative demand for slave imports in the West Indies. Charles Town merchants sold the slaves at auction, keeping a commission. It was more likely for commercial than for moral reasons that
Crokatt, Beswicke, Shubrick, and Nickleson largely avoided the slave trade. The greater risks involved in importing slaves from Africa compared to goods from Britain and Europe, although offset by the potential for very high profits, were the most probable deterrent. The chief risk was inherent in the high monetary value attached to the slave ships’ human cargoes. If a ship was lost at sea or if the mortality rate among the slaves on board was exceptionally high, even by the standards of a trade in which the deaths of one in seven slaves during an Atlantic crossing was normal, losses incurred by a merchant and his connections in Britain would far exceed those resulting from lost or damaged goods.⁸⁹

### Table 2: Slave Trade to South Carolina, 1706–76

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<tr>
<th>Years</th>
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<th>Slaves imported on British vessels</th>
<th>Total number of slave voyages by British ships</th>
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<td>Total 1706–76</td>
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<td>69,765</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


All Charles Town’s merchants were, however, by the nature of their business inextricably entwined in the wider slave economy. Crops cultivated by slaves provided the bulk of their export trade and much of their wealth. The merchants’ stores supplied the equipment that slaves used in the rice and indigo fields, the textiles that clothed them, and the devices used to control them. Slaves were also a feature of the merchants’ domestic and commercial lives. They formed the labor force at the merchants’ plantations in South Carolina’s lowcountry, and Crokatt owned at least two domestic slaves who were “used to wash and dress Linnens.”⁹⁰ In addition slaves were a mainstay of the workforce on Charles Town’s wharves and in stores. Crokatt’s reliance on slave laborers at his warehouse was documented in a June 1735 story in the *South Carolina Gazette*. Telling readers of a large theft he had suffered, the newspaper reported that “a discovery was made of a Theft committed by some Negroes belonging to Mr. James Crokatt, a Charlestown Merchant; they had stolen out of their Master’s
Store a considerable Quantity of Goods to the Value of above 2000 Pounds, hid and buried several of them under Ground in his own Yard, carried others to such Houses and Persons as they knew would receive and conceal the same, and gave some to other Negroes of their Acquaintance. It is supposed a great many Negroes are concern’d in this robbery, and no doubt but some white Persons that are concealers of such Goods, will be detected at the Trial of these Negroes.  

Advertisement by James Crokatt, *South Carolina Gazette*, May 1736

Advertisement by John Beswicke, *South Carolina Gazette*, April 1741

Rarely were the merchants’ regular appearances in the *Gazette* so dramatic. Most notices concerned the arrival of new goods in their stores or appealed for recalcitrant debtors to come forward. Newspaper articles also recorded the merchants’ social fortunes in South Carolina, charting how they joined clubs and societies, assumed civic duties, and married into the colony’s landowning elite class. All of these stories served both to reflect and to reinforce their commercial standing. Most young traders were unmarried when they arrived in South Carolina from Britain. With their growing capital and good prospects, they were able to marry into more established families in the colony, marriages which in turn could facilitate commercial progress by supplying the merchants with extra capital and influential family connections. James Crokatt’s marriage to Esther Gaillard, from a notable Huguenot family, linked him to some of South Carolina’s most important planters with extensive landholdings in St. James Santee Parish. Her stepfather, James Kinloch, was an active merchant, politician, and major planter.  

Richard Shubrick married into the wealthy Ball family in 1740, in the process acquiring a large rice plantation. Quenby, about twenty miles upstream from Charles Town on the Cooper River. In 1742 John Beswicke married Mary Hill, the daughter of a wealthy merchant and planter and, in the *Gazette’s* estimation, “an agreeable young Lady, of great merit and a large Fortune.”
With successful commerce and marriages came civic duties. Crokatt’s status in the town was reflected by his officeholdings and social responsibilities. In 1738 his commercial and social standing was translated into political status with appointment to the Royal Council, the twelve-man upper house of the colonial legislature, which advised the governor and acted as a court of appeals.  

Crokatt was also prominent within Charles Town’s community of Scottish merchants—part of an association with Scottish causes that lasted throughout his life—as treasurer of the St. Andrew’s Society, a social and charitable club. Further enmeshing his social and commercial connections, and reflecting his status, Crokatt also became the master of the town’s Masonic lodge. Besides these charitable commitments, civic and parochial duties offered a public way of cementing status. In 1735 Crokatt helped establish the Friendly Society, the first fire insurance company in North America, and was one of its five directors. As churchwarden of St. Philip’s, Charles Town’s parish church, he turned his organizational skills to the task of refashioning the system of poor relief for the town’s most impoverished white residents. He oversaw a switch from “outdoors” relief, with the poor provided for in their own homes, to “indoors” provision, hiring a house and “proper Attendance” for “all such as are real Objects of Charity.” Putting it more bluntly, the parish vestry minutes noted that “all the Poor that are to be present on the Parish, be remov’d from their Several Lodgings to the Work House immediately.”  

John Beswicke, for his part, was appointed one of three tax inquirers for St. Philip’s Parish; and Richard Shubrick served as one of five commissioners of Charles Town’s market. Yet for Crokatt, Beswicke, and Shubrick, and for many other Charles Town merchants, wealth and respectability in South Carolina paled in comparison with the attractiveness and profitability of commerce in the empire’s capital.

**Relocating to Britain**

After having arrived in Charles Town from Britain and risen to the forefront of commerce in the town, how and why did these men—who were well established,
wealthy, and socially and politically connected in South Carolina—choose to uproot their businesses and families and go back to Britain? Writing about the careers of Charles Town merchants, the historian R. C. Nash described how most followed one of two paths on ceasing trade in the town. The most common route, particularly among merchants born in South Carolina, was to invest trading profits in plantation land and slaves and to seek greater fortunes from cultivating rice and indigo. Another group withdrew from trade altogether to retire to country estates in England. There was also a third path, which was profoundly important for South Carolina’s commercial and political connections with Britain, and which was pursued by mid-career merchants who had been born in Britain and drawn to Carolina between the 1720s and the 1740s. This group returned to Britain with their trading profits and reentered the Carolina trade in London. Among this group were most of the men at the forefront of London’s Carolina trade between the 1740s and the early 1760s, notably James Crokatt, John Beswicke, the brothers-in-law John Nickleson and Richard Shubrick, and Charles Ogilvie.

Merchants relocated from Charles Town to London throughout the colonial era. They had various motivations: some sought to restore their health in Britain’s more temperate climes; others left for family reasons. John Burn, a merchant whose assets in South Carolina included some 2,750 acres of land and at least seven properties in Charles Town, left the colony to improve his ailing health and for his son’s education. Richard Shubrick’s decision to return to London in 1747 was probably influenced by his wife’s death the previous year. Inheriting land in Britain led to other departures. William Middleton was one of South Carolina’s leading landowners, with some 15,314 acres in the colony, and a member of the colony’s Royal Council. In 1754 he was bequeathed an estate in Suffolk and properties in Chelsea and Mortlake, just west of London, which together produced an annual income of twelve hundred pounds. Informing him of his inheritance, a correspondent in London fully expected him to quit South Carolina for landed life in England, writing that “on the receipt of this I presume you will come to England with Mrs. Middleton & your family.” Middleton duly did, the allure of a country seat and London houses outweighing considerations of social and political prestige in South Carolina, though with the help of a brother who stayed in South Carolina, he would retain and expand his landholdings in the colony and in Georgia.

For most merchants who relocated to Britain, however, their decision was driven by commercial rationale. They left in search of the greater profits to be made in London from exporting goods on credit to South Carolina. In exchange they received rice, deerskins, naval stores, and from the late 1740s indigo. Trade between merchants across the Atlantic from each other was largely financed in so-called bills of exchange, a legal instrument that allowed for the payment of goods without hard currency changing hands. Merchants could transfer and
discount bills, enabling them to offset their own financial liabilities in London against the outstanding debts of traders in Charles Town, and vice versa. Assets that would otherwise be temporarily frozen in a merchant’s accounts or as unsold goods could thereby be liquidated. Other remittances were made in promissory notes, written promises to pay sums of money in specified periods for value received; more rarely paper money and specie—coin—changed hands. The rationale for relocating to London was best articulated by Charles Ogilvie. After his early ventures in the slave trade, Ogilvie established a partnership in Charles Town, exporting rice and deerskins to Europe and selling merchandise from premises “on the Bay.” In 1760 he decided to leave South Carolina for Britain. As he explained to his brother, his plan was to “establish matters here [Charles Town] & at home on such a footing as will enable me to live in London & transact the Business there while my partner remains here.” He reckoned that he could avoid paying 500 guineas (£525) a year in commission to London merchants if he settled in the capital and sent goods personally to his partner in Charles Town. Ogilvie’s calculation was echoed by a fellow Charles Town trader, Samuel Carne, who thought that by moving to London he could “supply Carne & Wilson’s shop [in Charles Town], I believe, on better terms than hitherto it has been done.” This is what modern economists would term “reverse integration” or “backward integration.” Ogilvie and Carne hoped to extend their control up the supply chain to achieve cost-efficiencies in the supply of goods, cutting out the middleman. Their logic echoed the reasoning that underlay the comparable move that many of their fellow merchants in Charles Town made up the supply chain into planting. By buying plantations, these merchants took a stake in the means of production, allowing them—they hoped—to reduce their transaction costs and get a more reliable supply of crops for export.

For his part, Ogilvie predicted that, besides the savings he would make, he could increase the quality of his trading goods by personally selecting the products he would export from London to South Carolina. He would take “more pains with [the goods] than can be expected from many of our present Correspondents.” The only constraints to his leaving South Carolina were financial. His profits in 1759—some one thousand guineas after taking account of debts—were lower than expected, forcing him to delay his departure while he accumulated more capital. Moreover, he owed a debt of four thousand pounds to John Beswicke, who had relocated to London more than a decade earlier. This was the remainder of a much bigger debt that Ogilvie had accrued through importing goods from Beswicke for sale in Charles Town. Ogilvie therefore sought a loan of five hundred pounds from his brother to supplement his existing funds and to enable him to send his first cargo of goods from London to Charles Town. He explained that his financial shortfall was one of cash flow, not credit. His debtors could not discharge their debts to him immediately, and many “I have no right to ask for perhaps 6, 9 or 12 months.” To reassure his brother of his own
credit-worthiness, Ogilvie instructed him in how commercial credit worked and
how his business was organized: “You may be surprised that men who have so
c onsiderable a Capital should want to borrow Money. The Reason of which is the
long credit given & the great Value of Goods always on hand to keep up a proper
assortment [of goods]. Ogilvie & Ward and Ogilvie & Forbes [his two partner-
ships in Charles Town] together have been due them by good men upwards
of Ten Thousand Guineas and O & F have on hand Merchandise on their own
 Account at least the amount of £4,000.” Whatever the true state of his finances
and for all his cash-flow difficulties, Ogilvie moved from Charles Town to Lon-
don in 1761. Before leaving, he made arrangements with several merchants in the
town to be their supplier in London, as well as maintaining a partnership with
one particular merchant.110

Relocating from South Carolina to Britain was a drawn-out process, compli-
cated by the need to run down inventories and to call in customers’ debts. Before
leaving Charles Town, merchants sold off their remaining stock and household
goods that were no longer required or could not be shipped to Britain. Usu-
ally they did so through their stores, but when their departures were imminent,
merchants were willing to accept the lower prices received at auction. Shortly
before leaving Charles Town in 1747, John Beswicke announced that he would
be selling “at Vendue [auction], under the New Market, what Shop-Goods he has
on Hand, together with his Household Goods.”111 James Crokatt’s sell-off eight
years earlier had been far more extensive, illustrating his standing in the town as
well as the wealth and grandeur that success in Charles Town commerce could
bring. His remaining dry goods were to be sold “at public Vendue” together with
his household fittings; these included “A New England Chaise never used, Good
Vidonia Wine, A Marble Chimney Piece compleat, An Iron Hearth with Brass
Facings, and Brass Shovel and Tongs, also several kinds of Household Furniture,
not much the Worse for use.” Closer to his departure, Crokatt would sell his fam-
ily’s more indispensable possessions, among them household furniture, horses
and a chaise, and two domestic slaves. Later still, Crokatt sold more furniture,
books, and “a Negro man.”112

Off-loading unsold merchandise, personal goods, and even household slaves
was simpler than winding up credit lines that stretched far and wide across
South Carolina. Merchants planning to leave placed repeated notices in the
South Carolina Gazette demanding that debtors come forward. None were more
frequent, insistent, and ultimately threatening than Crokatt’s, typifying a flair
for self-promotion that ran throughout his career and in particular the aggres-
sive commercial approach that would propel him to the top of London’s Carolina
trade. By the time he left South Carolina in June 1739, the Gazette had carried
notices alerting readers to his departure in every weekly edition for nearly eight
months. Not only did they stand out from other advertisements in the same
editions, but they were also far more prominent than other departure notices:
located at the tops of pages and spanning two column widths, they were among the most striking advertisements the newspaper had ever carried. Readiness to sue defaulting debtors further marked Crokatt’s combative approach. Poor rice harvests limited the ability of many customers to make their remittances to Charles Town merchants and could leave the merchants with extensive debts. While many traders’ notices in the Gazette noted the loss of crops, Crokatt was unique in alleging that a number of planters were using this as a cunning ploy. One of his adverts claimed that “several have made Excuses for not paying me last year, by losing, or pretending to have lost their crops.” After months of reminders, Crokatt’s patience wore thin. He announced, “And whereas many who were indebted to me before last January, have not yet paid or settled their Accounts, either by cash, bond or otherways, which it is in every Man’s power
to do, all such as don’t settle their Accounts due to me some time in this Month, may depend they will be sued for the same the 1st week in July, having now had six months notice in the most publick manner from James Crokatt.” Crokatt’s actions matched his rhetoric, and he hired Charles Town’s leading attorneys, Charles Pinckney and James Wright, to recover his dues in a series of lawsuits.

Crokatt’s care in settling his commercial affairs before leaving South Carolina illustrates the complexity of relocating a business across the Atlantic. Besides employing the attorneys to collect debts, he also took on an agent to manage his property investments in the town. In a shrewd commercial move, Crokatt, like other departing merchants who sought to retain a commercial foothold in Charles Town, entered partnership with two local merchants, Ebenezer Simmons and Benjamin Smith. The partners invested equal capital in the firm and agreed “to be equally concerned in all Profits & loss accruing, growing, happening or arising” over the partnership’s duration, set at seven years. Crokatt’s choice of partners was astute. Both were native-born South Carolinians; Simmons was already a trader of some status, while Smith, just twenty-one years old, had worked for Crokatt for at least three years. Smith would go on to be one of Charles Town’s foremost merchant-bankers and speaker of South Carolina’s Assembly. Terms were agreed in February 1737, and the partnership became effective beginning in September 1738. Having partners in Charles Town would give Crokatt a trusted outlet to which to send goods from London and a reliable supplier of exports from South Carolina. Operating from Crokatt’s old premises on Broad Street, where the regular range of imported goods was sold and the same terms Crokatt had given as a sole trader were offered—receiving planters’ produce in exchange for merchandise and up to two years’ credit—the store also offered commercial continuity, helping it to retain Crokatt’s existing customers in the colony.

Having made his arrangements, Crokatt left the humid climes and commercial bustle of Charles Town—a booming port on the frontier of Britain’s empire—to further his business at the heart of the empire. As was the case for

Notice by James Crokatt,
South Carolina Gazette,
March 1739
other leading merchants in Charles Town who forsook the competing allure of actively managing and building plantations in South Carolina in favor of returning to Great Britain, London’s Carolina trade offered Crokatt the chance of even greater profits and wealth than could be reaped by remaining in the colony. The elite status that these merchants would enjoy in London would bring with it responsibilities to the colony that had “made” them—responsibilities as conduits of colonial grievances and as political-economic advocates on its behalf. An earlier generation of London’s Carolina merchants had between the 1710s and the 1730s understood these responsibilities and offered a model of activism to emulate. Like the merchant lobbies representing London’s other branches of American trade, this first generation of Carolina merchants in London had lobbied the government on issues where their commercial interests intersected with matters of concern to the colony, notably on defending South Carolina from Indian and rival imperial threats and on rice exports. Their advocacy influenced how South Carolinians conceived the role of London’s Carolina merchants as representing the colony and its interests in Britain. It also conditioned how during the 1740s and 1750s a more prominent group of London’s Carolina traders would petition and lobby the British state. James Crokatt, John Beswicke, Richard Shubrick, and John Nickleson would be at the forefront of this group at a time when the North American colonies came to figure larger in the British political imagination and when Britain’s politicians paid closer attention to the colonies’ productive potential.