“The success of a Crokatt, a Shubrick, or a Beswicke, but a few Years here in the Mercantile Way, or of a Lynch, or Huger, or a Serre, in the Planting Way, with many other such Instances, proves more in Favour of South Carolina, than all the Pamphlets that were ever wrote about.”¹ In 1749 London’s three principal Carolina merchants—James Crokatt, Richard Shubrick, and John Beswicke—were held up in Charles Town as paragons of commercial achievement. All three had begun their careers in South Carolina, where their commercial training, as the correspondent to the South Carolina Gazette implied, had furnished them with the skills and resources that formed the basis for their efflorescence in business in the imperial capital. South Carolina could bask in their reflected glory; their accomplishments were testament to the potential of a place where “but a few Years” could turn a colonial trader into a major metropolitan merchant. Two years, three years, and ten years respectively after they had relocated from Charles Town to London, Beswicke, Shubrick, and Crokatt were still synonymous with commercial success. For the Gazette’s anonymous correspondent, it was three merchants who had left the colony, rather than their counterparts, who continued to prosper in trade in Charles Town, who best epitomized the transformative power of commerce. These three pillars of London’s Carolina trade continued to be held in high regard, even at four thousand miles’ remove. Rather than diminishing their relevance, being at the center of imperial commerce and politics increased their appeal.

By the mid-1760s attitudes among Charles Town merchants toward their London counterparts had begun to shift. Commercially the capital’s share of South Carolina’s overseas trade was as great as ever. London continued to dominate the export trade to the colony. The capital accounted for some 85–90 percent of Britain’s exports to South Carolina between 1760 and 1775—a function largely of the superior credit London’s merchants could offer their Charles Town counterparts compared to merchants in Britain’s regional ports as well as the capital’s better access to European and Asian textiles.² In the slave trade too London continued to play a major organizational and financial role. Of the 103 slave ships from Britain that arrived in Charles Town between 1769 and 1774, 25 were from London—more than from Bristol and second only to Liverpool.³ The capital also
remained the principal hub for South Carolina’s agricultural exports. In 1763, for example, London handled 93 percent of South Carolina’s indigo exports and received 24 percent of its rice exports to Britain, mostly for reexport to northern Europe. This was second only to Cowes, an important transshipment port on the Isle of Wight. Cowes’s share of the rice reexport trade is deceptive, however, since a high proportion of the port’s rice trade was controlled by merchants in London. At the same time, the Carolina “interest” in London reached its zenith. Collectively, London’s Carolina merchants were wealthier and more prominent in the city’s commercial life during the 1760s than ever before. Their political lobbying reached new heights at a time when other North American lobbies in London were lapsing into inactivity. While the Virginia “interest” in the capital declined, perhaps as a result of the consolidation of the capital’s tobacco trade into fewer hands, London’s Carolina trade continued—as had long been the case—to be dominated by a small number of firms and individuals. Far from reducing its vigor, this concentration of power seems to have made the Carolina lobby more coherent and responsive. Lobbying remained central to the activities and identities of these wealthy London merchants. Carolinians visiting London joined them in signing petitions and attending parliamentary committees considering colonial trade.

In South Carolina politicians and merchants also continued to regard lobbying in London as essential. This long-established approach had paid dividends in the past, representing Carolinian grievances and facilitating the colony’s trade. In the mid-1760s this lobbying reached the high point of its influence, led assiduously by Charles Garth, who had been made the colony’s official agent in London in 1762. London’s Carolina merchants, acting in concert with Garth as commercial interlocutors with the British state, were at the forefront of campaigns to liberalize and incentivize colonial exports. Although not always successful, the lobby could congratulate itself on significant legislative accomplishments: securing the renewal of the bounty for Carolinian indigo that had been introduced in 1748; gaining permission to export rice from South Carolina to new markets; and coordinating a campaign for a bounty on exports of hemp from the colonies. London’s Carolina merchants also lobbied strenuously on the colony’s behalf against the Stamp Act.

Lobbying was especially vital for South Carolina compared to the other American colonies, authorities in Charles Town believed, because of the particular legal impediments that constrained the colony. While the Navigation Acts allowed Britain’s more northerly North American colonies to export their grain and fish freely to European markets, exports of South Carolina’s two staples, rice and indigo, remained strongly circumscribed by the laws. “The laws of trade lay greater restrictions on this province than on many of her sister colonies,” the South Carolina Assembly’s Committee of Correspondence complained to Garth in September 1764. “Almost all our commodities are enumerated, whereas few or
none of theirs are so, notwithstanding ours are such as tend wholly to improve, and by no means interfere with those of the mother country." The discrepancy was clearest in the relative treatment of South Carolina’s rice and northern colonies’ corn. Urging Garth to press the case in London for the lifting of restrictions on the direct export of rice to northern Europe, the committee failed to see “any reason why ships from America loaded with Rice should not be excepted from touching any Ports of England in the Passage to and from America, to or from any Ports North of Cape Finisterre as well as those loaded with Corn.” It also singled out the different regulations governing the importation of salt. As well as the restrictions on exports, the committee noted that “our imports [are] much more confined [than other colonies’], particularly that of salt—an article of the greater consequence, which most of the other colonies are prepared to import directly from Portugal, but we are not allowed that privilege.” Public critiques in South Carolina of the mercantilist strictures that governed British trade policy were articulated on grounds of competitive disadvantage: the laws were unfair because they treated other colonies more favorably. The assembly’s complaints, however, were the thin end of the wedge. Although in 1764 the intersection of free trade economic theory and republican ideology was yet to be articulated, more systematic—though still largely tacit—condemnations of how British mercantilism subordinated South Carolina’s economic interests would emerge alongside ideological critiques of British political authority in the years that followed.

The idea that advocacy in London was an effective conduit for South Carolina’s grievances rested on the assumption that the interests of London’s Carolina traders were fundamentally aligned with those of the colony. As the 1760s progressed, this notion was increasingly challenged. Growing political disputes between South Carolina and Great Britain were mirrored by increasing mistrust between Charles Town’s merchants and their London counterparts. London’s Carolina merchants came under growing criticism in South Carolina for their business practices, their conspicuous wealth, and their purported political orientation as political tension between Britain and its North American colonies mounted. This paralleled changes in the composition of London’s Carolina trading community. Before the mid-1760s London’s principal Carolina merchants had each spent time in Charles Town learning and building their trade, accumulating networks of trusted correspondents, participating in the civic life of the town, and often investing in land and property in South Carolina and Georgia. The merchants who from the mid-1760s replaced them at the forefront of London’s Carolina trade lacked these personal experiences in or connections to South Carolina.

Changes in personnel and loss of trust eroded the assumed mutuality of interests between South Carolinians and their correspondents in London. Despite
their lobbying accomplishments, London’s Carolina merchants came to be viewed with growing skepticism by their Charles Town counterparts. Commercial disagreements arose, centering on suspicions of profiteering, sharp business practices, and outright fraud. By the eve of the American Revolution, London’s Carolina merchants were viewed by many in South Carolina as being implacably hostile to the colony. This undercut connections between the colony and the mother country: South Carolina’s interests could no longer be adequately served by a system that required distant agents to represent the colony by proxy, especially when the agents’ actual commitment to the colony’s interests was increasingly questionable. Interpersonal grievances laid bare deeper systemic inequalities. Reliance on far-flung advocacy symbolized a commercial system tilted against the colony, highlighting the constraints imposed by British law that ensured South Carolina’s commercial subordination to Great Britain. Grievances about metropolitan commerce were not articulated as direct challenges to the British Empire’s mercantilist orthodoxy but represented implicit critiques of it. These grievances permeated the colony’s shifting political and ideological environment: the political, economic, and commercial motivations behind South Carolinians’ growing resistance to British government were interrelated.

South Carolina’s elites, a group that was among the chief beneficiaries of the British Empire, turned against the system from which it had so greatly profited. The self-confident, even self-congratulatory, mind-set that by the 1760s had developed among South Carolina’s merchant-planter elites shaped their attitudes toward Atlantic trade, toward commercial advocacy in London, and through these toward British authority. Within the colony politics continued to be defined by the assembly’s self-confidence and assertiveness in challenging council and gubernatorial authority. In a classic exposition of South Carolina’s colonial politics, Robert Weir made the case that, driven by their republican “country ideology” and self-conception as independent country gentlemen, elite Carolinians’ political opposition to British government overrode material economic arguments for maintaining the imperial status quo. Responses to the conjoined commercial practices and political advocacy of London’s Carolina merchants suggest how Carolinians’ conceptions of political and commercial subjugation were interrelated. These subjugations represented two sides of the same coin—entwined and mutually reinforcing. A growing sense of commercial subordination to metropolitan traders mimicked political experiences, such as the sense of political subordination within the colony to British placemen whose appointments to positions in South Carolina restricted native Carolinians’ access to high office. Commercial experiences and the system of trade that governed these experiences both drew upon and informed ideological resistance to British control. Anglo-American trade became both a crucible for and a mirror on broader political controversies.
“Supported by the Whole Body of Merchants in London”

Charles Garth was appointed South Carolina’s agent in London in May 1762. A cousin of the colony’s governor Thomas Boone, he was “fixed upon tho’ personally unknown” to his employers “as a Gentleman of Ability, Address, of Assiduity.” The Committee of Correspondence further hoped, it told him, that it would “have sufficient cause to be satisfied with your faithful & diligent discharges of the duties of your station.” Garth proved an inspired choice at an apposite moment. Like James Crokatt’s appointment in 1749, Garth’s selection coincided with a revival in the British government’s attention toward the country’s Atlantic trade. An assiduous, well-connected, and newly appointed agent was well placed to galvanize South Carolina’s lobby in Britain and exploit a favorable political agenda. The following three years would be the lobby’s apogee.

A decade earlier the end of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748 had heralded close parliamentary scrutiny of Britain’s colonial commerce and a flurry of legislation. This included three acts directly affecting South Carolina: the 1750 Silk Act; the 1751 Potash Act; and most significantly, the 1748 Indigo Bounty Act. Driven by the same political-economic rationale, Prime Minister George Grenville’s administration, in power between April 1763 and July 1765, introduced measures similarly designed to boost colonial prosperity and channel it back toward the mother country, thus augmenting Britain’s own economy and its strategic power. Stimulating the production of nationally important commodities in the colonies was one element of this. Commodities that strengthened Britain’s navy and merchant marine—the cornerstones of the nation’s defenses and its ability to project power overseas—were especially favored: naval stores, hemp, and flax. South Carolina was well placed to capitalize on this stimulation. Further underpinning the drive to enhance colonial prosperity was the belief that colonial wealth would translate into greater prosperity for Britain through increased demand for the mother country’s goods. The South Carolina lobby would take advantage of this, using the rationale of economic feedback to good effect when it resumed the long-running campaign for permission to export rice directly from South Carolina to other parts of the Americas in 1764. The government’s measures for economic stimulation would be overshadowed by its attendant efforts to make the American colonies more fiscally remunerative through the Stamp Act and to clamp down on the highly profitable smuggling of foreign wines and molasses through the Sugar Act, as well as the fierce resistance these aroused. The government’s desire to incentivize commodity production would, however, have more subtle political ramifications within the Carolina trade in once again signaling the potential efficacy of the Carolina lobby in London.

Garth’s first achievement as agent was getting the indigo bounty renewed. Having originally been set for a term of seven years, the bounty had been extended by Parliament in 1755; three years later London’s Carolina merchants had
defeated an attempt by one of the capital’s West Indies merchants to open a trade exporting slaves into the French West Indies in exchange for French indigo. After hearing evidence against the application from “several merchants . . . trading to the province of South Carolina,” the Board of Trade dismissed the application on the grounds that “the supply of the French colonies with negroes as well as the taking from them indigo in return would be impolitick and attended with dangerous and destructive consequences to the commercial interests of this country and of its colonies.” The privileged status of South Carolina’s and Georgia’s indigo was maintained. With the indigo bounty due to expire once more in March 1763, Garth lobbied the board with William Knox, agent for Georgia, for it to be extended for another seven years. Discovering that the customs commissioners had advised the British Treasury to end the bounty on the grounds that it had been fraudulently claimed on imports of French indigo, Garth called on sympathetic connections in Parliament for aid. He asked his two cousins who were MPs, James Edward Colleton and Charles Boone, both of whom had strong family connections to South Carolina, to attend the Commons committee on expiring laws to make South Carolina’s case. With support from the Board of Trade the bounty was duly extended, albeit at a reduced rate of fourpence per pound of indigo.

Since getting the indigo bounty extended was essentially a procedural victory that did not require any fundamental adjustments to government policy, Garth had no need to co-opt other interest groups. In contrast, simultaneous efforts to allow rice to be exported directly to Madeira, the Canaries, and other islands off the coast of Africa and to any part of the Americas required a much broader campaign. Direct rice exports to new markets had been an objective for South Carolina’s planters and traders since the 1720s. Appeals to this end in 1745–46 had been rejected by the customs commissioners on the grounds that while the measure might benefit the colony, it would have unpredictable consequences for Britain’s overall trade; a further attempt in 1758 for direct rice exports to any port in mainland Europe had been similarly rebuffed.

Garth’s campaigns for direct rice exports in 1763 reiterated how effective lobbying could be. He assembled a broader and more persuasive coalition of merchant support than in the two prior attempts, first securing the collective backing of London’s Carolina traders by circulating a petition that was, as he told the Committee of Correspondence, “signed by every merchant of London in the Carolina trade.” The petition, which was heard by the Commons in March 1763, emphasized the breadth of its support, coming from “several Merchants in London, Planters of So. Carolina, and Owners of Ships, trading to His Majesty’s said Province in America.” It recapitulated the claims long made in support of freer rice exports: that present laws compelled two voyages, first to England and then on to the ultimate destination of the islands off Africa or in the Caribbean, raising transport costs and making the rice more vulnerable to pests during the long journey. This made it economically unviable against rice
supplied by Genovese, Leghornese, and Levant merchants. Besides the specifics of rice shipping, the petition’s patriotic economic rhetoric was calculated to appeal to wider political concerns, restating the arguments offered to great effect in the late 1740s and early 1750s. Not only would the deenumeration of rice promote South Carolina’s economy; it would also “greatly redound to the Benefit of Great Britain” by increasing the demand for shipping, expanding the merchant marine, and strengthening demand for British goods, since the greater prosperity of South Carolina would filter back to manufacturers and suppliers in the mother country.\(^\text{18}\)

“I am supported by the Whole Body of Merchants in London,” Garth told his employers in South Carolina, “& have good reason to hope from Bristol.” Support from traders in Britain’s regional ports would be vital in demonstrating the commercial consensus behind the proposal. Garth solicited the aid of Robert Nugent and William Meredith, MPs for Bristol and Liverpool respectively, to galvanize the support of their commercial constituents. He also printed copies of a petition that he and Knox had given the Board of Trade on the matter in January and distributed them to merchants in both cities. A week after hearing the London petition, the Commons received a nearly identical petition from merchants of Bristol in support of the proposal, while William Meredith chaired a parliamentary committee examining the proposals.\(^\text{19}\) James Crokatt, John Nutt, and William Greenwood each gave supporting evidence to Parliament on behalf of London’s Carolina merchants, together with the former resident and major South Carolina landowner William Middleton. Crokatt explained the centrality of risiculture in South Carolina’s economy; Nutt reported “the great spirit of Planting now arising in that Colony” but warned that “the Planters cannot reap the Fruits of their Spirit and Industry, unless new Markets are opened to them.”\(^\text{20}\)

The parliamentary committee resolved in favor of the rice petitions, concluding that direct exports of the grain from South Carolina to the African islands and the Americas would “greatly tend to increase the Culture and Commerce of the said Province.”\(^\text{21}\) This overrode objections raised in Parliament to the proposal, which Garth reported to the Committee of Correspondence. These included the protests that there was insufficient benefit to Great Britain to justify amending the Navigation Acts; that Britain would be bypassed in the reexport trade in rice to valuable northern European markets since both Madeira and the Caribbean island of St. Eustatius could be used as entrepôts for onward shipment; and ironically, that the boost given to the rice economy in South Carolina “would interfere with and reduce the cultivation of indigo.” One objection was strikingly prescient: that by allowing trade to bypass Britain, the proposed measure “carried with it strong Symptoms & Wishes in design in a colony to become Independent of the Mother Country.” It was pressure on parliamentary time, however, rather than any of these specific complaints,
that meant scrutiny of the proposal was repeatedly adjourned, and the parliamentary session ended in mid-April before legislation on the matter could be passed.\textsuperscript{22}

Undeterred when the rice proposal was rejected in 1763, Garth and Knox reintroduced it to Parliament in March 1764. Their new petition appealed directly to domestic British interests. Alongside regularly heard arguments for British manufacturing and government income, it asserted the benefits of the slave trade to the country. Growing rice in South Carolina and Georgia had, it argued, “been productive of great Advantages to Great Britain, by increasing the Consumption of British Manufactures in the said Colonies, increasing the Demand for Negroes, and augmenting the Freights of British Shipping, besides contributing to the Increase of the public Revenue.”\textsuperscript{23} The application also explicitly linked rice to contemporary geopolitics. It emphasized how trade with the Caribbean islands captured from France and Spain during the Seven Years’ War—Guadeloupe and Martinique, and Havana in Cuba—had stimulated risiculture in South Carolina and Georgia. Since these islands had been returned to France and Spain after the war, this profitable market had been lost. The proposal seized too upon South Carolina and Georgia’s disadvantages compared to Britain’s more northerly North American colonies, since exports of rice to foreign colonies in the West Indies were forbidden while northern colonies’ lumber, fish, and corn could all be sent directly.

Evidence from the previous year’s efforts was resubmitted, and Nutt and Greenwood again spoke to the committee considering the application. In asserting their credentials as expert witnesses, they indicated their dominance of the export trade to the region, avowing that between them they had exported goods—"chiefly British manufactures"—worth around two hundred thousand pounds to South Carolina and Georgia the previous year. If true, this amounted to nearly two-thirds of total British exports to these colonies. Again, their testimony carefully fused specifically Carolinian concerns with a nod to domestic political-economic preoccupations, proposing the increased demand for British manufactures that would come from a more prosperous rice-growing region. Evidence from customhouses in South Carolina and Georgia revealed that the 120,000 barrels of rice exported in 1763 had yielded twenty-two thousand pounds in revenues to the British Treasury.\textsuperscript{24} This time the arguments won the day. A bill specifically permitting direct rice exports to foreign colonies in the West Indies and South America, but not the African islands, passed through Parliament and received royal assent in April 1764.\textsuperscript{25}

Merchant agency was instrumental again in securing a bounty on colonial hemp the same year. Reflecting their particular activism among London’s North American lobbies, the capital’s Carolina traders were once more to the fore. Hemp was essential for rope making for the Royal Navy and merchant fleet, and getting government support for its cultivation in the colonies had been a
long-standing ambition for American agents and merchants. Taking advantage of the favorable political-economic climate that followed the end of the Seven Years’ War, colonial agents and London’s American traders mounted a concerted campaign for a bounty on North American hemp exports. The petition was unprecedented in the scale and breadth of its commercial support. Nearly all the American merchants in London backed the petition, Garth explained, “except those who have seats in Parliament, and who are going to be Judges, could not with Decency make themselves Parties to signing it.” In total, around one hundred merchants and agents, representing all the colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia, signed a petition to Parliament in November 1763 seeking “proper Encouragement for the Importation of Hemp and Flax from His Majesty’s Colonies in America.” As with the simultaneous petitioning on rice exports, all of London’s principal Carolina traders were signatories, together with—and further suggesting Garth’s influence in the campaign—two Carolinians temporarily resident in London. In March 1764 Parliament approved a bounty on hemp and flax imported from the American colonies, to run for twenty-one years and worth eight pounds per ton for the first seven years. American hemp imports, Parliament concluded, would reduce Britain’s dependence on Russian sources, encourage settlement of newly acquired lands in North America that were ideal for its cultivation, and encourage Virginia and South Carolina to diversify into a new commodity for an alternative source of income.

“The important services they have done to America in General”

Effective commercial lobbying bred expectations that London’s Carolina merchants would press similarly hard on more explicitly political issues. Their responses in 1765–66 to the Stamp Act and Mutiny Act would test these expectations. In November 1765 James Crokatt’s Charles Town agent, Robert Raper, reported to him the hostility and disruption that the Stamp Act had brought about in South Carolina. Passed by Parliament in March 1765 and requiring that printed material in the colonies ranging from attorneys’ licenses to newspapers bear official and often expensive stamps produced in Britain, the act amounted to a direct tax on the colonies. Riots erupted in Charles Town in October 1765. An effigy of a stamp official was publicly hanged, people suspected of supporting the act were harassed, and the house of a man rumored to be involved with the distributing of stamps was attacked and ransacked. The mob violence was effective in preventing the distribution of the stamps, meaning that the town’s courts, which under the terms of the act could not function without stamped paper, closed at the beginning of November. In consequence, no commercial debts owed to London merchants could be recovered by legal process. Worse still, Charles Town’s port was closed to shipping, since vessels too were required to have their paperwork stamped. Raper told Crokatt of “the Stagnation of Trade here and all along the Continent occasioned by the Stamp Act which is very disagreeable
to this part of America. I dare say you have heard very fully about it & will en-
treavour to get it repealed.”

Personal interest, Raper believed, would stir Crokatt and his fellow merchants in the capital into action. With popular resistance to the Stamp Act preventing the pursuit of debts, Raper warned another London client, William Greenwood, bluntly that unless the courts reopened, “many of you will suffer and several be ruined.” A month later he reiterated his concerns, alerting his client to personal repercussions. “I have received no money this long time for your account and as we have no law to compel people to pay I cannot help you,” he warned.

Raper’s confidence that the closure of Charles Town’s courts and port would galvanize London’s Carolina traders was not misplaced. Together with London’s other Carolina merchants, Crokatt was to the fore in pressing for the Stamp Act to be repealed. Facing financial losses from the protests and deadlock in Charles Town, Crokatt and Greenwood represented the capital’s Carolina trade in a delegation of twenty-eight London merchants to the British government in December 1765. Charles Ogilvie and John Clark, both significant traders to South Carolina, represented Georgia. Raper and others in Charles Town could hardly have been unaware of the traders’ efforts. North American newspapers carried reports from London of a “very numerous meeting of the merchants of this city, trading to North-America” on 4 December, from which the delegation that included Crokatt and Greenwood was selected. The reports made clear that the traders’ goal was “to solicit some effectual remedy in the present distressed state of trade to the colonies.” The newspapers, among them the South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal—launched in December 1765 and printed on unstamped paper in defiance of the new regulations—identified the “principal merchants trading to each colony” who took part in the delegation, including Crokatt, Greenwood, Ogilvie, and Clark.

Long before the colonial press had publicized the London merchants’ efforts to repeal the Stamp Act, Charles Garth had kept South Carolina’s politicians informed of their behind-the-scenes lobbying. Garth had been elected as an MP in 1764, enabling him to report firsthand on government policies on American administration and revenue and on the opposition to the policies. Anticipating the hostility that the 1765 Mutiny Bill would arouse in South Carolina, in particular its stipulation that British troops in America might be billeted in private houses if no barracks were available, Garth alerted London merchants to the bill’s introduction in Parliament. “I have sent to the merchants to acquaint them with the purport of it [the bill],” he told the assembly’s Committee of Correspondence in April 1765, “leaving it to their discretion what steps they will choose to take but not without a hint what I think their friends in America have a right to expect from them.” Suitably alarmed, London merchants in the various branches of American trade invited Garth to explain the Mutiny Bill and its likely implications to them. After the meeting, Garth informed the Committee
of Correspondence that the merchants “appointed a Select Committee to meet
every evening to consider of the most effectual method to avoid a measure so
oppressive in its tendency” and that they had asked him and another MP to press
the government to alter the bill.34

The eventual Mutiny Act, or Quartering Act, passed by Parliament in May
1765 exempted private houses from billeting troops, instead substituting empty
houses, stables, alehouses, and barns in their place. The act remained a source
of controversy, especially in New York, but Garth’s letters ensured that his em-
ployers in South Carolina’s government were fully informed of the merchants’
role in watering down its most contested element. On the Stamp Act too Garth’s
reports supplemented newspaper reports in South Carolina of the London mer-
chants’ activism. In December 1765 Garth reported that the Committee of Lon-
don Merchants—the group of twenty-eight traders including Crokatt, Green-
wood, Ogilvie, and Nutt that headed the campaign—had urged British boroughs
with manufacturing industries to alert their MPs to dire consequences if the
Stamp Act continued. Describing the parliamentary debates for the repeal of the
act in January 1766, he highlighted the merchants’ petitions against it.35 Aside
from Garth’s testimony and press reports, London’s Carolina traders sought to
impress upon their colonial correspondents their activism in overturning the
Stamp Act. On 22 February 1766, the same day that the Commons voted for re-
peal, they “very becomingly chartered a Vessel,” the optimistically named Speed-
well, to carry the good news to South Carolina. As it turned out, news of the
repeal of the Stamp Act arrived in Charles Town via a ship from Barbados on
3 May. A day later the Speedwell ran aground at the entrance to Charles Town
harbor, though its passengers arrived safely. The Speedwell’s clumsy arrival and
the preemption of the news it was carrying could not obscure, however, the ges-
ture of support that London’s Carolina merchants aimed to convey by chartering
and dispatching the vessel.36

Like their counterparts in other branches of trade to America, who were
reluctant to intervene in explicitly political matters, London’s Carolina mer-
chants acted on commercial expediency rather than political principle in lobby-
ing against the Stamp Act. Robert Raper’s letters to stir his London correspon-
dents into action had emphasized the impact that the closure of Charles Town’s
courts would have on their businesses. The preeminence of commercial factors
in motivating London’s North America merchants was evident in their own
appeals for action, appeals which were reproduced in the colonial press. A letter
from the Committee of London Merchants asking manufacturing towns and
ports across England to oppose the act appeared in the South Carolina Gazette
and Country Journal. “The present state of the British trade to North Amer-
ica, and the prospect of increasing embarrassment, which threatens the loss
of our depending property there; and even to annihilate the trade itself” com-
pelled concerted action, the letter began. There was no mention of the justice or
injustice of internal taxation, or of any of the other constitutional questions that were vexing their correspondents in South Carolina and elsewhere in North America. Another letter from a London merchant that was reproduced in the *Country Journal* noted that “nothing less than an ample importation of the produce of the foreign islands, and an unrestrain’d exportation of the produce of North-America, could enable the people to pay their debts in England.” Property and debts, it was made clear to Carolinians, were at the forefront of their advocates’ minds.

Regardless of their motivations, the London merchants’ efforts against the Stamp Act were commended in South Carolina. Gratitude was directed principally toward the leading political agitators for repeal: the Committee of Correspondence asked Garth to pass on the assembly’s thanks to “such of the members of both Houses of Parliament as have generously distinguished themselves in procuring the repeal.” The assembly prepared an address of thanks to King George III; most publicly it commissioned a statue of William Pitt to stand in Charles Town in thanks for his powerful eloquence in Parliament against the act. Although the London merchants’ intervention in the Stamp Act debates did not garner comparable public celebration in South Carolina, their role in the repeal campaign was not ignored. The *Country Journal* noted how a procession of London’s North American merchants, numbering some fifty coaches, had visited the king “to expression their Satisfaction at his signing the Bill for repealing the American Stamp Act.” The Committee of Correspondence also noted the merchants’ assiduous lobbying. “We also think ourselves exceedingly obliged to the London Committee and the several Corporations, Merchants &c. that exerted themselves upon this trying Occasion,” it told Garth, “and desire you will make known to them the grateful sense we retain of the important services they have done to America in General.”

“Incommissions & profits arising from such Trade”

In their campaigns against the Mutiny and Stamp Acts, London’s Carolina merchants had seemingly confirmed the efficacy of lobbying as a means of representing and redressing colonial grievances. Beneath the rhetoric in South Carolina that lauded their intervention, however, lurked a growing undercurrent of suspicion toward their business methods. Changing attitudes in South Carolina reflected a shift in commercial mind-sets in the colony, where merchants were increasingly reluctant to play the role of junior partners in Atlantic commerce. Despite their lobbying, London’s Carolina traders came to be regarded with increasing mistrust, as their interests and motives for lobbying were seen to diverge from those of their colonial correspondents. The charges against them included conspiracy to disparage Carolinian output, manipulating prices in London and thereby defrauding their Charles Town correspondents, and excessive profiteering in the trade.
The controversy resulting from London merchants’ attempts to compel their Charles Town correspondents to post bonds as guarantees of payment exemplified the growing divide. For Henry Laurens, efforts by two of London’s principal Carolina trading houses, John Beswicke & Co. and Sarah Nickleson & Co., to force their Charles Town correspondents to post bonds were both a novelty and a deep affront. The dispute had arisen in late 1763. James Poyas, a Charles Town merchant regarded by Laurens as an “honest punctual dealer” with a good capital foundation, sought to switch his custom from Beswicke & Co. to Nickleson & Co., importing goods on credit from the latter rather than the former. Beswicke had offended Poyas by asking him to post bond for his debts, a legal guarantee that his firm would rank first among Poyas’s creditors, above those owed money in the form of promissory notes or debts on account. The request reflected the mounting problems that London’s merchants faced in recovering debts in South Carolina. Changes in the composition of London’s community of Carolina traders and structural impediments to the collection of debts in the colony eroded trust on both sides of the Atlantic. During the 1760s the volume and value of South Carolina’s exports hit new heights, and the number of trading houses in Charles Town was greater than ever before. However, evidence from London trade directories, merchants’ petitioning, and later claims for prewar debts reveals that the number of trading houses in the capital’s Carolina trade did not grow accordingly. London’s end of the trade continued to be controlled by a handful of specialists who came to supply increasing numbers of Charles Town merchants and relied on trusted friends, family, and attorneys to chase up and secure repayment from their counterparties.

At the same time as networks of credit grew and spread, the personal links to Charles Town that had defined an earlier generation of London Carolina merchants became less pronounced. London’s leading Carolina traders between the 1730s and the 1750s—men such as Samuel Wragg, James Crokatt, John Nickleson, and John Beswicke—had all spent the early part of their careers in Charles Town, building expertise and, crucially, personal connections in the trade. In contrast, the merchants at the forefront of London’s Carolina trade in the 1760s appear not to have had comparable early commercial training in Charles Town. In the face of ever denser and more impersonal networks of credit and greater reliance on the law to reclaim debts, London’s Carolina merchants became increasingly frustrated by the obstacles they faced in calling in debts in the colony. John Beswicke’s attorney in Charles Town notified him of the advice from one lawyer in the town to a client not to pay debts to British merchants from any estates of which he was executor. If such debts were remitted in produce, the lawyer had explained, his client would find himself personally accountable to the other heirs and creditors for any loss on the consignments. “To prevent this practice of Correspondents or their Exors paying English debts here,” the attorney advised, “I would advise every Merchant in London to take a Bond from them to bind
themselves, their Heirs, Exors. & c. to pay in London.” Residents of Charles Town were, moreover, better placed than their London counterparts to receive advance warning of an impending default or insolvency in the town, allowing them to head the queue in pressing their claims. The same Charles Town attorney advised Greenwood & Higginson that “if any Merchant breaks here & delivers up, his Debts in this place [Charles Town] will always be paid & the creditors in England will in such cases suffer by taking what is left.” It was rational, then, for London principals to seek to push their debtors in South Carolina into contracts that provided them with greater security as creditors. What was to London’s Carolina traders a reasonable commercial arrangement had, however, more sinister connotations to their Charles Town correspondents.

Writing to Isaac King, a partner in Nickleson & Co., Henry Laurens unveiled a litany of Charlestonian grievances against London’s merchants. First, the demand to post bond was intrinsically an “Affront to the Character of a Merchant.” By implying doubt about a merchant’s ability or willingness to repay a debt, it impugned both his honor and his credit—the two essential characteristics of any worthy trader. Second, that such a demand was made after a debt had been contracted, rather than “at the commencement of their correspondence,” represented an abuse of the creditor’s power—and a sign of the systemic commercial “hold” that London’s principal traders had over their Charles Town correspondents to whom they exported goods on credit. Third, King had demanded that Poyas post bond, repeating Beswicke’s earlier demand—the reason that Poyas had moved his account from Beswicke to Nickleson & Co. in the first place. This savored, according to Laurens, “too much of combination.”

London’s leading Carolina merchants were in effect charged with exploiting structural conditions that allowed them to wield undue power over their correspondents: since the trade was concentrated among a small number of individuals and firms in London, the capital’s traders were able to act as a cabal in collaborating and fixing their terms. At a time when residents on both sides of the Atlantic were increasingly alert to the menace of monopoly in trade and clique in politics, “combination” was a powerful charge. The charge hinted at the deeper structural forces that permitted such a concentration—and “combination”—to occur: the compulsion through the Navigation Laws for South Carolinians, like other colonists, to send the bulk of their output to and to receive all their manufactured or processed goods from Great Britain. The requirement to post bond represented a fundamental shift in the contract between creditor and debtor, putting “more power into the hands of the Obligor than a Man ought to trust himself or another with & more than is intended to be countenanced by the Laws of the Land.” By locating the contract of the debt in London, the bond permitted the creditor to compound interest, a “modern mode of calculations & accumulations of Interest & Interest upon Interest” that Laurens judged “Illegal.”
Traders in South Carolina were, Laurens believed, suffering not just at the hands of avaricious individuals in London. They were as well inherently disadvantaged by their peripheral location in a legal-commercial system that promoted metropolitan over colonial interests. “Is not the advantage of proving your debts upon Oath before the Lord Mayor of London which is to be received in our American Courts as ample testimonials of the Sums due to you without canvassing of Books & examination of Witnesses, enough?” he complained. Here he pointed to the stipulations of the 1732 Colonial Debt Recovery Act, which in seeking to facilitate the recovery of debts owed to British merchants in the American colonies, reduced the burden of proof required in pursuing such claims. British traders could swear to their local mayors or magistrates to the value of the debts due to them, “as if the Person or Persons making the same Oath or solemn Affirmation . . . had appeared and sworn or affirmed the Matters contained in such Affadvit or Affirmation viva voce in open Court.”

Intended as a means of placing British creditors on an equal footing with their colonial counterparts by freeing them of the requirement to cross the Atlantic to present their claims in court, by the 1760s the Debt Act had come to be construed in a different guise: that of reducing the evidentiary burden on British creditors and further tilting the rules of trade in their favor.

For Laurens, the inequities that London merchants were trying to introduce to the Carolina trade were made even more obnoxious given the great riches they had derived from their business. The egregious wealth of London’s Carolina merchants obviated the need for bonded security, he complained. “The Carolina Agents or Factors to a Man have sustained as few Losses by their Trade to this Colony as have been felt or known in any trade whatever to America & also because they have in general & almost to a Man by means of their Commissions & profits arising from such Trade, risen from humble & moderate Fortunes to great affluence, from walking upon foot to the command of Conveniences which render their legs and feet almost useless. These are facts very notorious and on which I need not enlarge.” Laurens’s caustic remarks on the “great affluence” of London’s Carolina traders are borne out by their grand lifestyles as they profited handsomely on the back of South Carolina’s economic growth. The trappings of the principal partners in the six firms identified as “Carolina Merchant” in Mortimer’s Directory in 1763—James & Charles Crokatt, John Beswicke, Richard Shubrick, John Nutt, Sarah Nickleson, and Grubb & Watson—are illustrative. Besides his lordly Luxborough Hall estate in rural Essex, James Crokatt was able to bestow ten thousand pounds on his son Charles at his marriage, a union portrayed by no less an artist than Thomas Gainsborough.
most successful of London’s overseas traders, most often by the wealthiest West Indies merchants.

With the proceeds from trading careers begun in Charles Town reinvested and augmented in London, traders such as John Beswicke, John and Sarah Nickleson, and Richard Shubrick embarked on the path to landed gentility. John Nickleson was reckoned at his death to be worth some £20,000, with assets including a country retreat fifteen miles northwest of London at Great Stanmore, Middlesex. A few miles to the south, John Beswicke invested his proceeds from the Carolina trade in a large country mansion in Hillingdon. Conveniently placed near the highway from London to the fashionable spa resorts of Bath and Cheltenham, the appropriately named Little London was styled by Beswicke as his “Country Seat.” Besides his estate land and property, Beswicke had at least £20,000 in liquid assets at his death, including the £500 he left “to my Negroe Manservant, Anthony,” perhaps a former household slave brought from Charles Town. When Beswicke died in 1764, Little London and its adjacent estate passed to his nephew and business partner, William Greenwood. They were later auctioned at Christie’s, Pall Mall, and the sale advertisement revealed the estate’s desirability. Little London was an “Elegant Villa . . . with roomy Stabling, Coach-house, Offices of every description, attached and detached; excellent walled Garden; Lawn, Shrubby, containing about 31 Acres, and sun-dry rich Enclosures, comprising about 64 Acres . . . forming in the whole a desirable residence.” Also for sale was the freehold of “several substantial houses with their gardens, offices and land, in the whole about 200 acres,” which at the time was let to twelve tenants and produced an annual income of £550. In addition to his Middlesex estates, Greenwood amassed large landholdings in Yorkshire. For his part, Richard Shubrick owned properties east of London at Mile End and Greenwich, areas known for their mansions, gentility, and popularity with affluent merchants and mariners. On his death he left his widow and children several thousand pounds in government stock and cash along with his coach, chariot, and horses—abundant evidence of his elite lifestyle. His son, also Richard, owned a “very pleasant and desirable Villa” with gardens, orchards, and eighteen acres of land in Enfield, ten miles north of London.

This was wealth to put even their richest counterparts in South Carolina in the shade. In a sample of eighty-four residents of Charles Town District who died in 1774, the mean net worth of the ten richest was £11,078—a figure comprising the value of their land, slaves, and goods. Take out the richest, Peter Manigault—who had a net worth at death of £32,737—and the mean drops to £8,672. These Charlestonians were among the richest men anywhere in North America, but their wealth was modest in comparison to the capital’s leading Carolina merchants with their English country estates and City of London countinghouses. In the context of London commerce, the Carolina merchants’ city addresses denoted their elite status. Cannon Street had been the core locale
for London’s Carolina traders during the 1740s and 1750s but was eclipsed by still more prestigious commercial locations during the 1760s. Aldgate ward, on the city’s eastern fringe, became a particular nexus for Carolina merchants, as did Broad Street and Bishopsgate wards, east of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

At the heart of the city, a short walk from the Royal Exchange and the Carolina Coffee House, the streets and squares where the Carolina merchants congregated, such as Billiter Square and New Broad Street, offered some of London’s top business addresses, suggesting that the trade became increasingly lucrative during the 1760s. At his Cloak Lane premises, James Crokatt was the second highest rate payer in the precinct and employed at least four apprentices as clerks and bookkeepers at one time. By 1763 Crokatt had effectively retired from the Carolina trade and was only in nominal partnership with his son, but he still paid a very high £84 in personal tax and £14 in tax on his property. The same year Richard Shubrick paid £16.8s. in tax on his Barge Yard premises. The same year—and at the same time that he tried to make James Poyas post bond—John Beswicke paid rates of £20 on his Queen Street premises and £100 in personal tax. These tax returns placed both Beswicke and Crokatt easily among the wealthiest London merchants in overseas trade; only forty-three London merchants across all branches of trade paid £100 or more in personal tax in 1763.55

Descriptions of the merchants’ London houses shed further light on their wealth. Countinghouses also served as homes, at least during the working week, blurring the boundaries between merchants’ professional and personal lives. They commonly lived above their working quarters and shared living space with their families and with their clerks and apprentices. While London merchants were generally restrained in their displays of wealth, at least in their premises in the city, the capital’s leading Carolina merchants defied convention. William Greenwood’s countinghouse on Budge Row rivaled any City of London dwelling and marked him as a merchant of the highest rank. His was “a commodious, substantial brick dwelling house and offices, court yard, counting houses, and cold bath, [with] standing for two carriages and stabling for five horses.” Its grand interior included “fourteen bedchambers and dressing rooms; a genteel dressing room; breakfast and dining parlours; noble hall; principle and back stairs; a convenient kitchen, laundry and suitable connected offices and cellarge.”56 Charles Ogilvie’s house on Fludyer Street, Westminster, epitomized metropolitan gentility. On a fashionable residential street that linked Whitehall with St. James’s Park, it was richly decorated with “pea-green silk taboray curtains, sopha chairs and stools, elegant pier glasses and girandoles, a needlework carpet, fashionable sideboard of plate containing 800 ounces, fine household linen, china, a small library of modern books, wines, a large iron repository, and other valuable effects.”57 While he also kept premises at Billiter Square in the heart of the city, Ogilvie’s Fludyer Street house gave him easy access to the pleasures of London’s West End and to Parliament, where he was briefly an MP in the early 1770s.58
As London’s Carolina merchants lived more and more extravagantly on the back of their commerce, some in South Carolina began to harbor suspicions about the practices that generated their profits. The alleged treatment of Carolinian commodities in London was a particular grievance—and a challenge to the probity of London’s merchants, accentuating suspicions of metropolitan bias against South Carolina’s producers and exporters. The capital’s indigo traders were widely imagined to be bilking Carolinian producers through a cabal to disparage the quality of the product. “To the very great discouragement of the planters,” a report claimed in the Gentleman’s Magazine, “the dealers in that commodity [Carolina indigo] have combined to lessen and run down the value of it, till they get it at a very low rate, into their hands, and then sell it for French indigo; which they set a much higher value upon.” The charge was made publicly in Charles Town. As pronounced in the South Carolina Gazette by Moses Lindo, appointed by the colony as inspector general of indigo in an effort to raise the quality of exports of the dye, “It is beyond dispute that a Cabal has been formed in London, united with some who are obliged to this province for a great part of what they enjoy, to depreciate Carolina Indico.” Historians have shown that the poor reputation of Carolinian indigo, and the lower price it fetched...
compared to French and Spanish indigo, was for the most part deserved: it was the “serviceability” of South Carolina’s crop as a low-cost dyestuff for Europe’s textile sector that underlay the strong growth of South Carolina’s indigo production and exports in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless the perception of malign practices was real. London dealers’ “tricks of the trade” were more than simply economic slights.

For South Carolina’s indigo producers, used to the high esteem their rice garnered in overseas markets, the poor reputation of their dye represented a powerful challenge to their skills as planters. Conspiracy theories served subconsciously to absolve indigo planters from the imputations about their product’s low standing. London traders made an easy but genuinely held target. Claims of metropolitan sharp practice explicitly contrasted commodity markets in London with those in Britain’s regional ports. Henry Laurens complained of a “most extraordinary loss” of about nine percent in weight in the indigo he had shipped to Sarah Nickleson & Co. in April 1763. As the indigo had been in a “remarkably dry” parcel that he had packed himself, Laurens was convinced that the lost weight could only have been due to fraud in London. “Such a loss,” he lamented, “was unknown upon Indigo some Six or Seven years ago & thank God is still unknown (except where it has really been tampered with) in Bristol & Liverpool.” Indigo was falling prey, Laurens feared, to the swindles long suspected of London importers of other colonial products, such as naval stores. Again a distinction was drawn between the markets for pitch and tar in London and those in the regional ports. “A fact not to be denied,” he told Isaac King,
“[is] that if you divide a parcel of pitch weighing in Average 360lbs. Grose per Barrell or thereabouts when Shiped send one half to Bristol and the other half to London the former will hold its weight & produce a full Credit in your Account Sale & the latter will fall short at least 15 per Cent often 20.” Similarly, Laurens noted, “Purchase the very same barrel & transport it to Poole & it will be there as ponderous as it was in Carolina.”

Claims of fraud at the hands of London dealers were not unique to the 1760s, for either Carolinian or other colonial commodities. As with naval stores, systematic fraud was also held to be commonplace within the capital’s deerskins trade. Laurens had been on the receiving end of the machinations of London deerskin traders at the start of his career in the 1740s, a cautionary experience he would remember for the rest of his life. By the 1760s, however, sharp practices in the naval stores and deerskins markets paled in comparison to suspected malfeasance in the indigo trade. Naval stores and deerskins accounted for a decreasing share of South Carolina’s exports, and their economic importance to the colony had shrunk proportionately (tables 4 and 5). Indigo, in contrast, represented a growing and increasingly vital commodity for South Carolina, and was well established as the colony’s second most valuable export. Metropolitan conspiracy against Carolinian indigo therefore represented a far greater affront to South Carolinians. Depreciations of the character of Carolinian indigo simultaneously challenged planters’ self-conceived expertise and judgment. Neither planters nor merchants in South Carolina felt an equivalent personal pride in the naval stores or deerskins they sent to Britain. In economic terms, the greater value of indigo to the colony by the 1760s meant that falls in its price were—and were recognized to be—of much graver consequence.

Table 4: Exports of Naval Stores from South Carolina, 1740–72

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total exported (barrels)</th>
<th>Tar</th>
<th>Pitch</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1740–44</td>
<td>5,424</td>
<td>11,290</td>
<td>16,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1745–49</td>
<td>2,813</td>
<td>10,779</td>
<td>13,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1750–54</td>
<td>3,976</td>
<td>13,865</td>
<td>17,841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1755–57</td>
<td>3,141</td>
<td>4,630</td>
<td>7,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1758–61</td>
<td>1,891</td>
<td>5,696</td>
<td>7,587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1762–66*</td>
<td>2,894</td>
<td>8,393</td>
<td>11,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1768–72</td>
<td>4,363</td>
<td>6,158</td>
<td>10,521</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*no data available for 1767
Table 5: Exports of Deerskins from Charles Town, 1730–75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destinations</th>
<th>Skins exported</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Bristol</th>
<th>Other British</th>
<th>All others</th>
<th>All points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hogs-heads</td>
<td>% of total exports</td>
<td>Hogs-heads</td>
<td>% of total exports</td>
<td>Hogs-heads</td>
<td>% of total exports</td>
<td>Hogs-heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1730–34</td>
<td>84,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1735–39</td>
<td>112,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1740–44</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1745–49</td>
<td>147,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1750–54</td>
<td>134,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1755–59</td>
<td>137,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1760–64</td>
<td>112,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1765–69</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1770–75</td>
<td>52,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1758</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>503</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1759</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>614</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>546</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1758–60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1762</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>448</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>801</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean yrs. 1762–63</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1766</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

London’s dominance of the indigo market further aggravated the supposedly sharp practices in the trade. Unlike the rice trade, in which South Carolina’s planters generally sold their grain to commission merchants in Charles Town, larger indigo growers sent their produce on their own account and risk to London. This reflected the long-standing expertise in indigo dealing in the capital and the city’s preeminence as a center for distributing dyestuffs in Britain and to continental Europe. The first pamphlets to encourage indigo culture in South Carolina had asserted the primacy of the London market, trumpeting the capital’s standing as “the greatest and best Market for it [indigo] in the World” and advising that “the Buyers are mostly rich men.” In sending their indigo to London, planters hoped to achieve the good prices they felt their produce deserved, and the city became by far the largest destination for Carolinian indigo, receiving around nine-tenths of the colony’s indigo exports during the 1760s (table 6). Opportunities for South Carolina’s producers to divert their indigo exports to Britain’s regional ports were limited, and as an enumerated commodity, direct indigo exports to foreign markets were forbidden. The comparative advantages London possessed in the marketing of indigo left producers with little choice but to live with the supposed sharp practices of the capital’s dealers and traders.

In parallel to London’s overall control of the indigo trade in the British Empire, the trade in the dye within the capital was controlled by a handful of merchants. This further curtailed colonial sellers’ ability to circumvent unfair practices in London by sending their indigo to other buyers. Table 7 shows the dominance of a small number of London indigo importers. It draws upon the only surviving ships’ manifests from Britain’s eighteenth-century Carolina trade, collected by Charles Town’s naval office between January and March 1764 and sent to the Board of Trade in London. The forty-one manifests record the cargo carried by each ship, by whom in South Carolina it was sent, and to whom in London it was conveyed. They record eighteen ships embarking for Cowes, almost exclusively carrying rice for reexportation to northern Europe; fifteen for London; six for Gosport, another transshipment port for rice; three for Bristol; and one each for Falmouth, Liverpool, and Portsmouth. While the sample is small, these ships carried more than three-quarters of the indigo imported into England from South Carolina that year. Eleven of the London-bound ships carried indigo, in ninety-four separate consignments from Carolinian planters and merchants containing 293,828 pounds of the dye—79 percent of the total 372,900 pounds imported into England from South Carolina in 1764. Of the total indigo captured in the manifests, some 93 percent was consigned to just six firms: John Beswicke & Co., 37.5 percent of the total; Sarah Nickleson & Co., 15.6 percent; Charles Ogilvie, 10.8 percent; John Nutt, 10.2 percent; Grubb & Watson, 9.7 percent; and Charles Crokatt, 7.1 percent. These importers sold it in London to specialist dyers or to wholesale grocers in exchange for cash and exportable goods.
The domination of London’s indigo imports by a small number of merchants is further evidence that London’s Carolina trade was concentrated in fewer hands than other branches of London’s Atlantic trade were.

Suspicions in South Carolina of London business practices were echoed by verdicts on the character traits of the capital’s principal Carolina merchants. John Nutt was regarded by one Charles Town correspondent as “a right down London merchant” who had “as much religion in him as merchants of London in general have.” Even trusted correspondents were felt to pose corrupting influences to the many Carolinian youths sent for education in England. Henry Laurens declined to ask his London “trading Friends” to receive his seven-year-old son Henry Jr. when he went to be schooled in London in 1771: “I dread their Kindness to our Youth, because of the Effects of such Kindness, which are commonly loose manners and morals, waste of Time and very idle Expences.” He repeated the point in several letters to friends, associating the “superabundant Kindesses” of “City Friends and Acquaintances” with the laxity and immorality that had “so often proved pernicious to our Carolina Youth.”

“Join to quench the growing Evil”

Ongoing commercial activism by London’s Carolina merchants during the late 1760s and early 1770s did little to mitigate the growing skepticism of their business practices. With support from a number of the traders, Charles Garth asked Parliament in 1767 to lift temporarily the duty on rice imported into Britain. Duties on imported foodstuffs were designed to protect domestic cereal producers, but a poor harvest in Britain the previous year had raised cereal prices and made rice a valuable dietary substitute. To increase supplies of provisions and to lower their cost, Parliament agreed to suspend the duty in May 1767 and extended the suspension the following year. In February 1770 eighteen of the capital’s Carolina traders petitioned Parliament to reduce the rice import duty permanently. Their appeal again carefully fused domestic and colonial interests with fiscal, commercial, and strategic concerns. The increase in rice imports and consumption in Britain that would result from the measure would, they argued, compensate for the lower duties, while the greater availability and lower price of the grain would help the poor. The petitioners further emphasized the benefits of an expanded trade to British shipping, the economic benefits for the colonies, and the greater demand for British manufactures this would therefore bring. The same month fifteen of London’s Carolina traders joined Charles Garth in successfully appealing for another seven-year extension to the indigo bounty. In both cases Garth relayed the merchant activism to the Committee of Correspondence.

London’s Carolina traders were continuing to prove assiduous lobbyists on commercial issues where metropolitan and colonial interests were closely aligned. Higher exports of rice from South Carolina resulting from the liberalization
### Table 6: Destinations of Indigo Exported from Charleston, 1758–72

**Destinations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Bristol</th>
<th>#3 British port</th>
<th>Other British ports</th>
<th>All others</th>
<th>All points</th>
<th>Total exported from SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lbs. (000s)</td>
<td>% of exports</td>
<td>lbs. (000s)</td>
<td>% of exports</td>
<td>lbs. (000s)</td>
<td>% of exports</td>
<td>lbs. (000s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1758</td>
<td>397.1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>L’pool</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1759</td>
<td>508.1</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>123.6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Chester</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>439.7</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>L’pool</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1762</td>
<td>252.1</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dundee</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763</td>
<td>426.8</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cowes</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean yrs. 1760–64</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1766</td>
<td>404.4</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Leith</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean yrs. 1765–69</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1770</td>
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<tr>
<td>1771</td>
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<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean yrs. 1770–72</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Clowse, *Measuring Charleston’s Overseas Commerce*, 70–71, table B-41.

Note: The table shows the proportionate share of Carolina indigo imports between British ports in the four years during the 1760s—1760, 1762, 1763, and 1766—for which statistics survive. In these years 88 percent of South Carolina’s indigo exports went to London in 1760, 96 percent in 1762, 93 percent in 1763, and 81 percent in 1766.
### Table 7: London Traders’ Share of Indigo Exports, January–March 1764

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Date of clearing Charles Town (1764)</th>
<th>No. of consignments</th>
<th>John Beswicke</th>
<th>Sarah Nickleson</th>
<th>Charles Ogilvie</th>
<th>John Nutt</th>
<th>Grubb &amp; Watson</th>
<th>Charles Crokatt</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>6 Jan.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15,902</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,454</td>
<td>4,144</td>
<td>23,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince of Wales</td>
<td>7 Jan.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15,763</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,698</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Carpenter</td>
<td>24 Jan.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8,224</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,631</td>
<td>14,991</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>4,225</td>
<td>30,747</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>31 Jan.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19,752</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,539</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,362</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23,653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George</td>
<td>13 Feb.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,903</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6,764</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune</td>
<td>[undated] Feb.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12,495</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3,238</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>17,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>18 Feb.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51,630</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,232</td>
<td>4,422</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,873</td>
<td>1,153</td>
<td>61,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>24 Feb.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29,889</td>
<td>12,094</td>
<td>9,115</td>
<td>2,566</td>
<td>2,902</td>
<td>56,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little William</td>
<td>10 Mar.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,997</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>6,272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart of Oak</td>
<td>29 Mar.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>24,401</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6,406</td>
<td>4,272</td>
<td>3,864</td>
<td>6,243</td>
<td>46,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Prince</td>
<td>31 Mar.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,462</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2,462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  | Total consignments                 | 94                  |                |                 |                 |           |               |                 |        |       |
|                  | Individual total (lbs.)            | 110,306             | 45,743         | 31,751          | 30,061          | 28,378    | 26,794        | 20,795          | 293,828|
|                  | % of total indigo imported         | 37.54               | 15.57          | 10.8            | 10.23           | 9.66      | 9.12          | 7.08            | 100    |

of the British market, for example, promised financial rewards for planters and for traders on either side of the Atlantic, as well as dietary benefits for Britain’s hungry poor. As Laurens foresaw the suspension of the rice import duty in 1767, “the Carolina Planter will get an advanced price of all the saving of Duty, upon his Rice” while, taking a rather idealistic and romantic view of English attitudes toward the American colonies, he wrote that the “English Farmer & Labourer will not get a grain of Rice extraordinary nor one farthing the cheaper, but he will have the satisfaction of paying to America, what otherwise he would have contributed to the Revenue.”

In their hopes that London merchants would take action on more contentious political issues—hopes perhaps raised by the merchants’ responses to the Stamp and Mutiny Acts—Carolinians would be disappointed, however. The London merchants’ ambivalence in the face of the British government’s clampdown on South Carolina’s coastal shipping is a case in point. Historians have long identified the tightening of customs administration in Charles Town in the mid-1760s as a signal moment in radicalizing the town’s merchants and planters. Customs officials had earlier turned a blind eye when coastal vessels moved between Charles Town and lowcountry plantations without having completed all the necessary paperwork. From 1765 they began prosecuting this technical breach of the Navigation Acts, seizing vessels and fining their owners. This represented a direct challenge to the autonomy of the colony’s planters and traders—an imperial intrusion into hitherto routine local practice. Although Charles Garth raised the matter with the Board of Trade and the British Treasury, British merchants failed to back up his protests, suggesting a lack of interest in essentially internal Carolinian matters and a growing divergence with their counterparts in Charles Town. Had London traders sought to persuade the government to intervene, they might have again demonstrated the efficacy of merchant lobbying as a means of representing and addressing colonial grievances and sent a renewed signal of their own commitment to South Carolina; the absence of such efforts compounded their correspondents’ grievances.

Amid widespread fury in Charles Town over alleged racketeering and venality by customs collectors in applying the laws, Henry Laurens felt particularly victimized. Three of his coastal vessels were impounded in 1767 and 1768 by the vice admiralty court, first introduced to America in 1764 to render verdicts on alleged breaches of customs regulations and, most controversially, presided over by a judge without a jury. Besides attacking British officialdom in the town’s courts and press and in pamphlets that were distributed throughout the colonies, Laurens tried to galvanize transatlantic unity among merchants in both Charles Town and Britain. He stressed that not only did the onerous regulations and their zealous enforcement put his own business concerns at stake, but so too they threatened cross-sectional interests within South Carolina and in its transatlantic trade, including the local merchants whose costs were raised and exchanges
interrupted, the planters whose crops were hindered from reaching markets, the tradesmen whose services oiled the wheels of commerce, and by implication, the Carolina merchants in Britain who would suffer higher knock-on costs.

Laurens’s efforts show again how Carolinians understood the role of their metropolitan correspondents. Besides their commercial activity, London’s Carolina merchants had particular access to and influence with government. Using this access and influence was both their responsibility to their colonial partners and in their own personal interest. After the seizure of his vessel _Ann_ in June 1768, Laurens encouraged his connections in London to pursue his case through political and legal avenues. Spelling out his aspirations for their advocacy, he hoped the case would “not be call’d Mr. Laurens’s but the Case of the British Merchants trading to America in the Case of the Ship _Ann._” To galvanize the support of Britain’s American traders, Laurens sent copies of the vice admiralty court’s proceedings to merchants in London and Bristol, “& to many great Personages at the West End of that Great City [Westminster].” He explained, “We hope that the Merchants in England in general will stir up their Friends in Parliament to reconsider some Measures lately established for the Regulation of the American Trade, which otherwise will in all probability become the Ruin and destruction of that Trade. When I say We, I mean the principal Merchants as well as almost every individual sensible Person in this Town.”

Laurens devoted much time in 1769 to orchestrating a British lobby against both the cause and the effect of the abuses by Charles Town’s customs officials and the vice admiralty court. Sending copies of the court proceedings against him to the London merchant Richard Grubb, he was sure that Grubb would agree that “such proceedings of Tyrannical, Insidious, Perjured, and Temporizing Officers ought to be made Public. I make no doubt of your consulting with some of your Brother Merchants upon the most effectual means to make them so; and that you will at least put one or both the papers into the hands of some of Your honest acquaintance at t’other end of the Town [MPs at Westminster].” His letters repeatedly stressed the consonance of Carolinian and British commercial interests in opposing the courts and their corruption, and he urged coordinated action. “Wise and prudent therefore (in my humble opinion) would it be for Merchants on both sides of the Water to exert their utmost abilities to bring some Amendments in, if not a total abolition of, the modern Jurisdiction of that Court [vice admiralty court] before it be so well established as to stare them in the face with prescription,” Laurens proposed to the slave traders Ross & Mill. Writing to the Liverpool slave trader John Tarleton, he highlighted the danger posed to British traders of over powering officialdom in the colonies: “the danger of Vesting any one Man with exorbitant Powers, which danger I think you Gentlemen in Great Britain trading to this part of the World are as much exposed to as we who reside here.” Again the lobbying of British merchants—not just those in London but also those in regional ports—would be pivotal: “We shall feel the
Laurens’s calls for British merchants to make a concerted campaign against the depredations of the vice admiralty court fell on deaf ears, however. There is no evidence that Carolina traders, whether in London, Bristol, or Liverpool, petitioned on the matter. Their passivity stood in stark contrast to the unanimous resolve among Charles Town’s merchants, 111 of whom signed a letter to Charles Garth protesting against the behavior of the port’s customs collector.

The failure of British merchants to agitate against the vice admiralty court’s abuses was matched by their relative quietude on the Townshend Duties. Introduced by the British government in 1767 alongside changes to American customs and courts, the Revenue Act imposed new duties on colonial imports of tea, glass, lead, paints, and paper. London’s Carolina merchants reacted passively to the new duties—known as the Townshend Duties because of their introduction by Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend—as did their counterparts in other branches of North American trade. The contrast with the merchants’ earlier activism against the Stamp Act was pronounced. Not until 1770, when a coordinated effort in the colonies to force the government to withdraw the duties had led to a campaign for the nonimportation of British goods, did London’s North America merchants petition Parliament for the Townshend Duties to be revoked. Even then they made it clear that the merchants were motivated by commercial factors, rather than any constitutional opposition to Parliament taxing the colonies. Charles Garth reported to the Committee of Correspondence in February 1770 that a merchant petition against the duties was in the offing, and a month later he described how it was presented to Parliament. By this point, however, Lord North’s government had already made clear its intention to repeal the duties, with the exception of the duty on tea, highlighting the belatedness and timidity of the London merchants’ petitioning efforts.

Without pressing economic grounds to intervene in the disputes surrounding the customs and the vice admiralty courts or, until nonimportation began to bite, against the Townshend Duties, British merchants showed their reluctance to jeopardize their access to government by protesting on matters of political principle and colonial rights. They had cultivated their relations with government over time, facilitating lobbying on the economic issues that did matter greatly to them, such as the regulation of the rice and indigo trades. In his letters to the Committee of Correspondence in early 1770, Garth signaled where the merchants’ foremost concerns lay by devoting far more words to their commercial lobbying than to their involvement in the petitioning against the Townshend Duties. For the London merchants, the storm over the vice admiralty courts presented no immediate or direct threat to their commercial interests; for all Laurens’s apocalyptic rhetoric, it was hard for them to envisage closer regulation of intercoastal shipping and spats between Charles Town traders and imperial officialdom seriously threatening Atlantic trade as a whole. Moreover, the vice
admiralty courts dispute was rooted in political controversy. It had its basis in the British government’s attempts to enforce the Navigation Acts more stringently and raise revenue in the colonies—attempts that in Charles Town had become suffused with personal intrigue and charges of corruption, venality, and scapegoating. If Britain’s merchants had lobbied the government on the matter, it would have implied a critique of imperial policy and unwarranted interference beyond their business interests. They were not willing to risk their role and influence as commercial interlocutors on matters of political principle, especially where these matters seemed to have little bearing on their own trade.

Despite their advocacy on commercial matters such as rice import duties and the indigo bounty, Britain’s Carolina merchants were consistently reluctant to intervene in the political disputes of the late 1760s and early 1770s. Their resistance to the Stamp Act had been motivated by the direct threat that it, or rather the Carolinian response of boycotts and obstructionism, posed to their trade. Though their opposition was welcomed in Charles Town, it implicitly revealed the causal link between commercial interest and political mobilization. The contrast between the British merchants’ willingness to lobby on commercial issues and their hesitancy on political issues as Anglo-American relations deteriorated emphasized this link. British traders’ slowness to take up the cudgels on the Townshend Duties until threatened by the economic sanction of nonimportation, together with their apparent ambivalence toward the alleged abuses of the customs commissioners and vice admiralty courts, suggested a divergence of political interest with their Charles Town trading partners. Growing suspicion of London business practices and resentment at the egregious profits the capital’s merchants were seen to be making from the trade, at the same time that they were exerting ever greater credit-based control over their trading partners in South Carolina, fed Carolinians’ burgeoning sense of inequality within the trade and revealed to them a divergence of interest with their counterparts in Britain. The escalating political tensions of 1773 and 1774 would expose these fault lines.

“I don’t know that we have a Zealous friend or Advocate among the Merchants”

By 1774 nearly all of London’s Carolina merchants were regarded as politically hostile toward the American colonies. Living in London as he oversaw his sons’ European education, Henry Laurens assessed those merchants’ politics firsthand. He reflected to his brother, “I don’t know that we have a Zealous friend or Advocate among the Merchants in our Walk [Carolina walk of the Royal Exchange], one or two excepted.” Laurens was not alone: his words were echoed by other Americans in London. In February 1775 Josiah Quincy Jr., a young Bostonian whose travels took him to both Charles Town and London in the early 1770s, noted just eleven London merchants whom he did not consider “bitter enemies” of America. The capital’s Carolina merchants were implicated by their
abundance: none figured among the eleven non-enemies on Quincy’s list. The same month the radical Virginian William Lee, then living in London, identified the leading Carolina merchants John Nutt and Christopher Rolleston as particular foes to the colonies. They were men, he wrote, who “should be stigmatized in America.”

The Carolina merchants in the capital who were identified as enemies of the colonies did not have the direct personal connections to South Carolina that a previous generation of London’s Carolina traders had. Up to the early 1760s the likes of James Crokatt, John Beswicke, John Nickleson, Richard Shubrick, and Samuel Wragg had spent formative spells in South Carolina, building their businesses and immersing themselves in the colony’s commercial and public life. As former residents, they could claim a natural sympathy with South Carolina, with their landholdings in the colony reinforcing their personal and commercial attachments. By the mid-1760s all these figures had left the trade. Wragg died in 1749 and Nickleson in 1754, leaving his commerce to be continued by his wife, Sarah, and her new business partner, Isaac King. John Beswicke died in 1764 and was succeeded in trade by his nephews, William Greenwood and William Higgenson. Richard Shubrick seems to have left his trade in the hands of his son, also Richard, after his death in 1765. James Crokatt retired from trade in about 1760. His son Charles and son-in-law John Nutt took on much of his trade, and he allowed his son to call his firm James & Charles Crokatt to lend it his personal prestige. Charles Crokatt lacked his father’s commercial acumen, however. Amid a number of misguided commercial ventures and a disastrous attempt to run for Parliament, his business foundered. Nutt would be Crokatt’s principal legatee in trade, inheriting many of his father-in-law’s connections in Charles Town.

James Crokatt retired largely to Luxborough, his country estate in Essex, spending just Wednesdays and Thursdays in London by the mid-1760s. With the same “improving” spirit with which he had promoted diversification in South Carolina, at Luxborough he adopted the lifestyle and interests of an English gentleman farmer, growing wheat, beans, potatoes, and fodder for his horses and cattle; building dams on the local river for irrigation canals; and encouraging like-minded agricultural innovators to visit his estate to see his trials of a new drill plough. As his focus on domestic agriculture increased, Crokatt began to wind down his investments in South Carolina as he sought to simplify his portfolio of investments. He did so with customary assiduity, castigating his agent in the colony for minor errors in his accounts and taking the unusual step of bypassing him altogether to harass his debtors in Charles Town personally. “You should have left this Affair entirely to myself, or any other,” the agent replied in exasperation, “as you cannot be a judge of people’s circumstances here so well as me.” Some of his Charles Town properties sold quickly; intractable tenants and the extensive repairs needed in several houses made it harder to dispose of others.
South Carolina continued to figure in Crokatt’s thoughts. As late as 1770 he joined fellow London Carolina merchants in donating to a fund for the bells at St. Michael’s Church in Charles Town. Coming after his retirement from commerce, it seems to have been a donation motivated by altruism rather than commercial expedience. In 1772 he was visited by Henry Laurens, his former apprentice, who was by then largely retired from Atlantic trade and visiting Europe to supervise his sons’ education. Two men who had been at the forefront of South Carolina’s mid-century transatlantic trade, had grown rich on it, and had epitomized the colony’s mid-century Atlantic connections once again came face-to-face. Any resentment from Crokatt’s failure to offer Laurens a place in his business twenty-five years earlier had long since passed. For his part, Laurens reflected that Crokatt had been “misguided” by the other apprentices also seeking partnership. His former mentor was contrite: “with great affection pressing my hand in his, [Crokatt] declared he was Sensible he had used me very Ill,” Laurens recalled, “& that he Should never forgive himself.”

Laurens’s moving report of the encounter suggested a mellowing in Crokatt’s notoriously brusque demeanor. More symbolically, their meeting embodied the personal and commercial bonds that had yoked the colony and the mother country together but which by the early 1770s were being increasingly tested by political and ideological divergences. Crokatt would not live to see the final rupture between South Carolina and Great Britain. His death in March 1777, “in the 76th year of his age,” was reported widely in the London press. Perhaps more than any other figure, he had cultivated and capitalized on the commercial potential of the mid-century Carolina trade. His commercial acuity had propelled him to the forefront of trade, first in Charles Town and then in London.

For the most part, the leading Carolina merchants in London from the mid-1760s had not cut their teeth in South Carolina in the same way as had their forebears in business such as Crokatt. The capital, not Charles Town, had been their commercial proving ground. Cousins William Greenwood and William Higginson had trained in London with their uncle John Beswicke. Originally from Yorkshire in northern England, John Nutt had not had a colonial apprenticeship; instead his trade advanced through his family connection in the capital to James Crokatt. The younger Richard Shubrick and Charles Crokatt had both been born in South Carolina but had moved to London before the age of ten and spent their adult lives in and around the capital.

There were exceptions. Benjamin Stead had relocated his business from Charles Town in 1759 and continued as an export-import merchant in London’s Carolina trade until the American Revolution. He was noted for his pro-American sympathies and was regarded by Laurens as “without Exception” one of the “best men in our Carolina Trade.” Charles Ogilvie, with his peripatetic trading and plantation-building career, was in London in the early 1770s. Though he would suffer after 1783 for his wavering political affiliations during the Revolutionary
War, before the outbreak of war he was not singled out as being notably hostile to America. Instead, and showing a further link between commercial experience in South Carolina and pro-American sympathies, Ogilvie was one of only four London merchants involved in trade to South Carolina to petition the king in October 1775 urging conciliation with the American colonies. The others were Benjamin Stead; Edward Bridgen, well known for his pro-American views; and Joseph Nicholson, a former Charles Town merchant who had relocated to London in 1764. But traders such as Stead and Ogilvie were in a minority. Overall, by the eve of the Revolutionary War, London’s Carolina merchants matched their counterparts in other branches of the capital’s North American trade more closely than ever before—merchants who had been trained and spent their whole careers in the capital. As such they lacked the personal bonds, experiences, and sympathies toward South Carolina that had been the hallmark of their leading predecessors’ careers.

John Nutt was one of the new generation of London’s Carolina traders to be identified as both a profiteer from the trade and an implacable opponent to America. Although he sat on merchant committees that drafted pro-American petitions before the war, this contradiction was less paradoxical than it seems. London’s largest Carolina merchants, having proffered the most liberal credit to South Carolina before the war—both a mark of their commercial scale and a means of cementing their share of the market—were the most overextended in the colony. They were well aware of this. Typifying the unease, Nutt complained in January 1774 to a Savannah partnership indebted to him for goods imported on credit that their “two Store accounts are now very large and embarrassing.” His fellow London traders Graham & Clark sought to confine their trade to Georgia to a smaller and more reliable circle, having been similar victims of overexposure. Writing to acknowledge their reluctance to take on any business with his new partnership, the Savannah merchant James Habersham observed that they were “contracting until you have wound up your Affairs to a Narrower Compass, and got them in the hands of punctual Correspondents.” With extensive monies owed them in South Carolina and Georgia, Nutt and his counterparts had good reason to urge conciliation: they foresaw that a breakdown of Anglo-American relations would leave them with uncollectible and crippling debts in South Carolina. But among Charlestonians increasingly quick to perceive conspiracy between British merchants and the British government, the merchants’ actions spoke louder than their conciliatory words. Once-routine transactions took on new, pernicious dimensions.

“Parties in the attempt against us”

Nutt’s involvement in the arrival of East India Company tea in Charles Town in December 1773 earned him particular and widespread obloquy in South Carolina. Together with Greenwood & Higginson, Nutt had written to the East India
Company earlier in the year to propose merchants in Charles Town who might receive and market the company’s tea and for whom he would be guarantor. Nutt nominated Roger Smith, a major trader in the town; Greenwood & Higginson put forward their associates Andrew Lord and William & George Ancrum and even provided a ship to carry the tea to Charles Town. For those in the colony seeking confirmation of metropolitan conspiracy, the ship, the London, was appropriately named.\(^{104}\) The tea arrived in Charles Town on 2 December to a reception that echoed the conflagrations in New York, in Philadelphia, and most momentously, in Boston. With tea invoked across the colonies as a symbol of unwarranted British taxation, Parliament’s legislative tyranny, and the East India Company’s pernicious influence, Charles Town residents were encouraged to make an example of the consignment. Newspapers reprinted anti-tea polemics from the Philadelphia and Boston press and, two days before the tea’s arrival, ominously relayed reports from New York of the vilification and burning in effigy of the city’s tea commissioner William Kelley.

New York’s example gave the words of “Junius Brutus,” writing in the South Carolina Gazette, extra weight: “As to the gentlemen who, it is said are appointed commissioners to receive and distribute the Stampt Tea, they are so well known among us,” he warned, “that scarce a single inhabitant can be persuaded to believe, they will descend to an acceptance of the detestable consequences.”\(^{105}\) After widespread debate in Charles Town as to how best to respond, the town’s residents behaved with more restraint than their counterparts further north. The nominated tea commissioners required little persuasion in deciding to decline the consignments. The London was prevented from unloading its cargo. “In imitation of the northern towns, declarations were made that it should not be landed” was Governor William Bull’s measured report on the dispute to the Earl of Dartmouth, secretary of state for the colonies. Later in December the 257 chests of tea on board were taken ashore without public affray and impounded in the basement of the town’s Exchange. “There never was an instance here,” the Gazette observed proudly of Charles Town’s considered and peaceful resolution of the problem, “of so great a Number of Packages, being taken out of any Vessel, and thus disposed of, in so short a Time . . . the People, though not pleased with seeing it landed at all, were perfectly quiet.”\(^{106}\)

For Ralph Izard, a scion of one of the lowcountry’s oldest and wealthiest planter families, the consignment of the tea to Charles Town demonstrated how commerce and politics were indivisible in Britain’s oppression of her American colonies. Writing from Europe, where he spent much of the 1770s, to Thomas Lynch, who was representing South Carolina at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Izard charged that “the tea, which has occasioned so much trouble, would never have been sent to America, had not many of these gentlemen [London’s American traders] offered themselves as security for it . . . the merchants, who ought to have been the natural guardians of the interests of America,
submitted to the infamy of becoming parties in the attempt against us.”107 The yoking of trade and politics as combined instruments in oppressing America legitimated commercial boycotts in return as means of political resistance. Izard advocated targeted boycotts of individual merchants in London. These would serve as a powerful demonstration of Carolinian grievances and a means of punishing those felt to be particularly responsible for the commercial-political oppression of the colony. He explained that “every friend to America, ought solemnly to engage to have no more dealings with them [the consigners of the tea]. There is no doubt, but our present unhappy situation, is in a great measure owing to them. One of them [Nutt], I know, owes his existence to the gentlemen of Carolina; and when a man repays favors, with such infamous ingratitude, it is not only weak, but criminal to support him. There is a ridiculous notion propagated, that he sells indigo better than other people. This I cannot believe; but were it true, it is a very insufficient reason why he should be placed in a state of princely magnificence, and by that means, be the better enabled to exercise with credit and authority, his enmity against us.”108

Made in October 1774, Izard’s demand for a special boycott of Nutt and Greenwood & Higginson for their role in exporting the tea to Charles Town was overtaken by events. Within weeks of his call, a nonimportation campaign came into effect across the colonies, reviving the strategy adopted in response to the Stamp Act in 1765–66 and the Townshend Duties in 1768–70. Nonimportation placed a blanket ban on imports from British merchants, affecting all traders equally, regardless of whether they were perceived to be sympathetic or implacably hostile to the colonies. Selective retaliation would be deferred until after American independence.109 Besides his far-sightedness in regard to targeted boycotts, Izard’s critique of London’s Carolina trade is revealing in its analysis of the terms of trade and the political connotations that the trade had assumed. Credit—the lifeblood of Anglo-Carolinian commerce—had come to represent commercial repression and, through it, colonial subservience. According to Izard, who was hardly a political radical, Nutt’s “princely magnificence,” the commercial standing he owed entirely to Carolinian customers, and his extension of credit were entwined, allowing him to retain a mercantile “hold” over the colony. By the eve of the American Revolution, commercial subservience had come to represent in microcosm the imperial control against which Charlestonians increasingly chafed. London’s traders became associated with hostile government policy and were seen as agents in delivering it. Moreover, for the many residents in South Carolina—from Atlantic traders to urban artisans—who were tied into the webs of credit emanating from London traders such as Nutt, this control was not a matter of abstract political philosophy but a personal daily experience.

There is little evidence that London’s Carolina merchants actively took political stances that merited the censure directed toward them. Instead, and in marked contrast to their commercial activity, which was viewed by Carolinian
observers as inherently oppressive by the mid-1770s, it was the traders’ political inactivity until at least late 1774 that heightened Carolinian suspicions. Qui
etude was interpreted as acquiescence in or tacit approval of ministerial policy, particularly given the stark contrast with the vigorous Stamp Act repeal campaign mounted by London merchants in 1765–66. When the British government responded to the Boston Tea Party and other colonial resistance by proposing the Coercive Acts—or “Intolerable Acts” to many in America—in the first months of 1774, it was London’s community of expatriate Americans, rather than the capital’s American traders, who stepped up to campaign against the proposals. Most controversially, the punitive acts set out to close the port of Boston until recompense was made for the destroyed tea, to subject Massachusetts to the direct control of the British government, and to transfer the trials of British officials from Massachusetts to Great Britain or elsewhere. Henry Laurens attended a large meeting at London’s Thatched House tavern—a regular haunt of the government’s opponents—on 24 March 1774. Laurens expected it to be “a large Meating of Merchants & other[s] . . . to petition Parliament to forbear or at least Suspend Such dangerous Severity until the Supposed offenders have been called to answer for their Conduct.” British merchants trading to New England would support the petition, he believed, since they stood to lose the one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand pounds they had advanced in credit to Bostonians, “for when all the priveledges of Trade are taken from that Town & Country, there will be no means . . . for paying old Debts, & all America will take the Alarm.”

Laurens was prescient, but in a different way than he imagined. After the war many British merchants would be forced to write off thousands of pounds of debts in America. In the immediate term, however, the threat of the losses that would be incurred by the closure of Boston’s port did not trigger any concerted response from London merchants against the coercive legislation. How many merchants attended the Thatched House tavern meeting is unknown, but the petitions to Parliament that emerged from the meeting gave an indication. Rather than being drawn up by the merchants whom Laurens had expected to be in the vanguard, the petitions were instead composed by “several Natives of North America.” Reflecting the profound disquiet that the Boston Tea Party had caused within London’s commercial sector, city merchants were conspicuously reluctant even to sign the petitions. While South Carolina was more heavily represented among the petitions’ signatories than any other colony, this was largely because of the number of young Carolinians being educated in London. The South Carolina Gazette proudly reported that “of the Twenty-nine Gentlemen who dared to inscribe their Names to the Petitions presented to both Houses of Parliament, against the Boston Port Bill, there are no less than eleven Natives of this Province,” whom it went on to name. Sixteen of the thirty-one signatories to a petition to the king protesting against the coercive legislation, drawn up on 31 March 1774, were South Carolinians. Having failed in their
opposition to the Boston Port Act in March, “several Natives of North America” petitioned the House of Lords on 11 May against the Massachusetts government and administration of justice bills then before Parliament. Numbering fifteen of the thirty signatories, South Carolinians were once more to the fore in a petition that again conspicuously lacked the support of British merchants. At the moment when merchant advocacy and interaction with the British state were most wanted, they failed to materialize.

Behind the British merchants’ ambivalence was an unwillingness to take a stand against the Coercive Acts while American resistance was couched in ideological or constitutional terms. Before the onset of nonimportation later in 1774 and in the absence of targeted boycotts against specific merchants, there were simply no sufficiently compelling economic grounds for them to oppose government policy. The quietude of London’s Carolina merchants, none of whom either signed any of the petitions or participated in the campaigning in 1774, confirmed the earlier suspicions that Laurens and others had about their true loyalties. Ralph Izard typified the views of many when he summed up merchants’ complaisance or—more sinisterly—their acquiescence in British government policy. “The merchants, notwithstanding the situation of affairs in America, dreadfully alarming as they are,” he complained, “sit perfectly satisfied and contented.”

Only six months later, in January 1775, with the looming threat of a total dislocation of Anglo-American trade, did London’s North America merchants meet to discuss a collective response to the Coercive Acts. Nonimportation in the thirteen colonies had begun the previous month. Nonexportation, a far more worrying prospect for British traders with sizable debts in America since it would prevent them from receiving produce in payment for debts owed to them, was due to take effect in September 1775. A committee was formed, comprising the leading merchants in each branch of London’s American trade, to prepare a petition alerting Parliament to the “alarming State” of the trade. Including merchants with a spectrum of views on the American crisis, the committee was ostensibly a remarkable cross-sectional grouping. South Carolina’s representatives appeared to epitomize this. The colony’s five members were William Greenwood, John Nutt, and Christopher Rolleston—each reputedly hostile to colonial interests; the moderate William Baker Jr.; and incongruously, the Virginia native and pro-American firebrand William Lee.

To Carolinians, however, the four petitions addressed by London’s merchants to Parliament and then to the king between January and March 1775 were too little too late. The merchant petitioning, Izard told Thomas Lynch, was incoherent, “ill-timed and will prove ineffectual.” The merchants’ failure to make common cause with the protests of expatriate Americans in London reflected their divergent interests: while the expatriates saw profound ideological and political issues at stake, most merchants would protest government policy only
on economic grounds. For Izard, the lack of solidarity not only undermined the effectiveness of any petitioning—which was necessarily weakened when undertaken by separate groups—but also once again revealed that merchant criticism of government policy was guided purely by self-interest. “The truth is,” he reported to Lynch, “they are, in general, puffed up with pride and unmindful of the interest of their employers.” His choice of words betrayed a deeper conception of merchant agency and Atlantic political economy: the “employers” were American colonists. It was to this group that London’s Carolina merchants—and by implication their peers in all the North American trades—owed their eminence and their fortunes; because of this, they should also owe them their allegiance. For Izard and other Carolinian observers, however, the reverse had been true. London’s Carolina traders had profited unduly from their trade, finagled their correspondents with sharp business practices, and lured and then oppressed them with credit. When their agency was most required, they treated their “employers” with contempt. As Carolinians took increasing pride in their ability to harness their environment to productive ends, supplying the commodities on which London’s traders relied, their understanding of their relationship to their metropolitan counterparts changed. No longer was South Carolina an outpost in the Atlantic wilderness, and Carolinians no longer were nor should be the dependent partners in the imperial-colonial relationship. Their reliance on the agency of merchants in Britain was invalidated. A system of representing colonial interests and grievances that had served their purposes in a time of political tranquillity was exposed by imperial crisis as being fundamentally untenable and counterproductive.