

Origins of the Charleston Mechanic Society

White Labor Activism and Slave Competition in Charleston,
South Carolina, in the Early National Era

THOMAS BROWN

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the North American colonies experienced increasing class stratification in the major urban areas, setting the ground for labor activism.¹ When the working class did begin to organize, it was around the interest of specific trades, and led by the elite members of those trades. Furthermore, competition from slaves and free people of color—not class stratification—was often the motivating factor for labor organization in the early national period. This process manifested with particular clarity in Charleston in the 1790s. This chapter examines the interaction between race and class in early labor activism.

Scholars of white labor in eighteenth-century Charleston, South Carolina, have portrayed Charleston's mechanics as part of a broader middle class, downplaying and even ignoring class divisions among non-elite whites. A number of misleading assertions appear in the literature, including that Charleston's mechanics in the early national era did not develop class consciousness, ceased participation in outdoor politics after the revolution, and never formed an organization that unified mechanics as a class for political purposes. Previous scholars have deemphasized or even ignored the role of slave competition in motivating white labor organization, and paid even less attention to the political ramifications of class divisions among the Charleston mechanics.²

In 1794, Charleston artisans from various trades came together to engage in collective action against competition from slaves. This essay will analyze the emergence of the Charleston Mechanic Society, demonstrating

that Charleston mechanics engaged in political action not unlike that of their counterparts in other cities of the South during the early national era.³ It will demonstrate that, contrary to claims by previous scholars, Charleston mechanics did develop class consciousness and did organize as a class, did engage in outdoor politics, and did develop their own organic leaders. Slave competition was the primary proximate issue motivating Charleston's mechanics to organize and engage in politics.

The Revolutionary War's end was a boon for tradesmen, who were needed to reconstruct Charleston's ruined buildings. Rising wages were to the disadvantage of the planter elite, who called for wage regulation, and for bringing in mechanics from the northern states or Europe. Charleston's mechanics reacted with anger to plans to increase competition or otherwise hold down their pay. They also complained of slave competition and of planters refusing to pay old labor debts.⁴

For the white laboring class as a whole, slave workers were competition, driving down wages. Slaves were competition for skilled as well as unskilled white laborers, although some journeymen could find work supervising a slave crew of mechanics. However, a class cleavage among mechanics created different perspectives on slave labor within the mechanic class. Wealthier mechanics faced a different set of incentives. Slave-owning mechanics could train and sell skilled slave artisans to planters. They could keep their trained slaves and use them to increase their own business's productivity. They could hire out their skilled slaves, or even allow the slaves to conduct business on their own account. The manufacturing tradesmen—saddlers, cabinetmakers, coachmakers, and silversmiths among them—were the most likely to profit directly from slave labor, and members of these trades were least likely to be involved in political action against slave competition.⁵

Those who suffered most from slave competition were coopers and members of the building trades. A Carpenters Society formed in 1783, amidst concerns over slave competition. Thirty-six carpenters and bricklayers petitioned the state legislature, complaining of "having Scarce had employ Sufficient to Support their families, owing to the number of Jobbing Negro Tradesmen, who undertook work for little more than the Stuff would Cost." They asked for a law prohibiting black tradesmen from hiring themselves out. The city council responded by requiring slaves on hire to obtain a badge from the city, and by preventing slaves from hiring out on their own account.⁶

Both the South Carolina house and senate formed committees to address the petition, including several wealthy master mechanics in the legislature who owned slaves themselves. The committee report endorsed the mechanics' petition. It recommended an ordinance prohibiting any slave from working "at any Mechanical Occupation except under the direction of some white Mechanic" and instituting fines for violators. However, reflecting the interests of the wealthy mechanics on the committee, the report also permitted any mechanic to employ his own slaves "in doing any Necessary private work or business of [his] own" without penalty. The legislature rejected the recommended ordinances and instead revived a colonial act from 1740 that permitted an owner to hire out his slaves by giving written permission.⁷ Legal restrictions on slave mechanics were rarely enforced, as evidenced by petitions to the South Carolina legislature from white mechanics concerned about slave competition. The South Carolina state archive preserved at least thirteen such appeals.

In 1793, amid concerns over a rumored slave rebellion, a group of white shoemakers in Charleston published a notification that they would report neighbors who were illegally renting space to slaves for the purposes of commerce. The white shoemakers believed that some slaves had an unfair economic advantage in obtaining raw goods below market value, and that in any case the right to engage in these professions belonged "to freemen only." The shoemakers offered a reward of two pounds for any offender they could convict of illegally renting to slaves.⁸

The white shoemakers' concerns were a response to slaves such as Friday. When Friday escaped from his owner, the runaway ad described Friday as "a shoemaker by trade. He has carried on that business in a small house near the New-Market."⁹ Friday's enterprise was illegal, but his owner showed no qualms about describing it in the newspaper ad—even though the owner should have been subjected to a fine for allowing Friday to run his own business in a house on his own account. Such public candor suggests that slave businesses were not uncommon and rarely regulated.

The white tailors responded in agreement with the shoemakers. The tailors argued that slave competition was "prejudicial to the true interest of South Carolina in general, and of the tradesmen in particular; and that they operate very much and very unfairly to the disadvantage of the handicraft citizens of this state." The tailors complained that "the honest, industrious and fair tradesman, who is bound to pay the state tax, city

tax, poor tax, road tax, and all other legal assessments . . . is in justice entitled to privileges which the slave, who is liable to no such duties, can have no claim to.” The tailors offered their own two-pound reward for the conviction of white offenders who rented to slave entrepreneurs or who otherwise violated the restrictions on slave participation in the trades.¹⁰

Hairdressers published their own similar grievance, as did a group of painters, glaziers, and paper hangers. In late 1793, meetings were organized to bring a number of these trade groups together, and to “invite those that are not incorporated” to organize and attend.¹¹ This emergent labor activism resulted in white coopers taking their grievances to the state legislature. In December 1793, “in behalf of the Whole,” eight members of “The Society of Master Coopers of Charleston” petitioned the legislature, complaining about the “inattention” given by local authorities to the laws regulating slave commerce. “At present as well as for considerable Time past,” the coopers observed, “the Slaves of Charleston have been privileged (although illegally) to sell traffick and barter, as well as to carry on different Trades and Occupations free from the Direction or Superintendence of any white Person whatever.” The coopers complained that the slave mechanics worked “to their own Emolument and the great and manifest Injury of the mechanical part of the Community, selling their Commodities and working at their Trades much lower and at much cheaper Rates, than those persons who are privileged by their Citizenship.” The coopers argued that such “Privileges encourage Negroes in Stealing as well as destroy that Subordination which the Situation of this State requires from the Slave towards his master and all other Citizens.” The coopers asked the legislature for an act of incorporation, with “Privileges and Rights as are usually granted in such Cases.”¹²

In January 1794, scarcely a month after the coopers’ petition, the Charleston City Council repealed its law forbidding slave owners and overseers from permitting slaves to “carry on any mechanic or handicraft trade of themselves, in any shop or otherwise in this city.” The city council justified this move by resolving that “the operation . . . of the above ordinance has been found highly injurious to the citizens of Charleston.”¹³ The Charleston elites had responded to the white coopers’ petition with a resounding rebuke. Not only had the coopers failed to gain any ground—but the city government had taken away the entire legal basis for their grievance. As a result, labor activism would come to a boil in 1794.

Two months later, in March 1794, the “committees of the different branches of mechanics” began organizing a “Mechanical Society” to represent their broader interests as a class.¹⁴ A month after that, in April, the new society submitted a petition to the city council, which rejected it. The mechanics called another meeting to discuss the setback.¹⁵ The society appointed a committee to draft a petition “for redress of their grievances” to the state legislature, and then met again a few days later to discuss the draft petition.¹⁶ On April 19, the entire society held a meeting at Harris’s hotel to sign the petition.¹⁷ The society’s petition to the legislature has not been preserved in the state archive, but it would appear to have failed. Nonetheless, the society continued to meet monthly at Harris’s hotel, establishing rules, requiring dues to be paid three times a year, holding elections, and otherwise giving all appearances of an established organization.¹⁸ The following year, it held half-year and anniversary dinners, drawing a hundred attendees.¹⁹

In 1794, as Charleston’s mechanics were organizing, the city’s elites might have had good reason to pay closer attention to the white working class’s grievances. During the summer of 1793, refugees from Saint-Domingue arrived in Charleston with eyewitness horror stories of the slave rebellion under way. The island’s fall had been hastened, in part, by the French elite’s refusal to consider the needs of their own white working class.²⁰ The whites of Charleston were also outnumbered by slaves and free people of color and had comparable reasons to be concerned about potential slave revolts. White Charlestonians needed a united front that would discourage slave rebellions before they started. Still another security threat stemmed from the recent international hostilities between the French and British, which the locals feared would affect Charleston.

These security concerns created an opening for the new Mechanic Society to engage in symbolic politics. The mechanics exploited the opportunity by constructing a new wooden fortification in the city, donating the labor. While Congress provided some federal funding, the new fortification expanded beyond the original plans due to “mechanical labor being done gratis by the carpenters of the city.”²¹ The white mechanics’ donation was successful in winning them notice and acclaim from the elite class. In November 1794, the Mechanic Society formally presented its donation to Governor Moultrie in a public ceremony. The governor named the new structure “Fort Mechanic” to honor its builders.²²