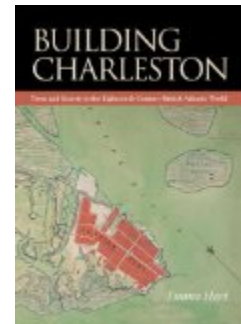


Emma Hart. *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. xii + 274 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2867-8.

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History from the Middle Up: Recovering Colonial Charleston's Forgotten Middle Class

This book examines the history of Charleston from its founding in the 1670s through the era of the American Revolution. It makes a number of important and intersecting arguments: that Charleston's rapid mid-century growth, though triggered by the rice trade, was actually propelled by the city's own internal urban dynamic; that middling tradesmen, not elite merchants and planters, sustained this dynamic and were thus the real builders of Charleston; and that cultural tensions between middling and elite Charlestonians fueled political squabbling over civic improvement that eventually spilled over into the imperial arena, where radicalized tradesmen found in the Revolution a way to advance their own class interests. Thus in Hart's telling—and contrary to the prevailing historical assumptions—Charleston was more than a colonial entrepôt shaped by South Carolina's staple economy, and much more than the playground of genteel planters and enterprising merchants or the seedy haunt of slaves and poor whites. It was, rather, a provincial city not unlike many others scattered across the British Atlantic, a place whose geography, economy, and society were shaped as much by industrious middling folk as by elites and slaves, if only for a season.

Town life was a central feature of South Carolina from its inception. Inspired by the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666, Lord Shaftesbury envisioned a colony with carefully ordered, modern urban spaces and made provisions for such towns in Carolina's *Fundamental Constitutions*. The Goose Creek Men built

on this model when they centralized the Indian trade in Charleston instead of the interior, as did early Huguenot settlers, many of whom were merchants and artisans who clustered together for economic, cultural, and religious purposes. In the ensuing decades, however, urbanization fell prey to disease, disaster, Indian war, and political conflict with the proprietors, all of which made for a sluggish provincial economy centered on the Indian trade and provisioning the West Indies. This, in turn, inhibited the growth of a thriving middling class and dampened the urban movement. Until the 1740s, that is, when two key developments—the preeminence of rice and the fire of 1740—brought a wave of tradesmen into Charleston and set in motion a period of rapid urban development.

To be sure, Charleston would have been little more than a provincial shipping point if not for the phenomenal commercial success of rice. As rice and slaves were added to provisions, naval stores, and deerskins as profitable commodities, shipping increased exponentially, as did the demand for carpenters, caulkers, shipwrights, blacksmiths, butchers, rope and sail makers, and tavern-keepers. And as the profits from rice and slaves enriched lowcountry planters and fueled the expansion of plantation enterprise, conspicuous consumption increased and tradesmen of every stripe converged on Charleston to service the planter class. Hart thus gives rice its due. Yet while she does not challenge this staple narrative outright, she does complicate it. For example, Henry Laurens's spectacular fortune was made possible in part by

the artisans who built and repaired his rice milling machines, serviced his boats, cobbled together shoes for his slaves, sawed his lumber, kilned his bricks, and forged his indigo vats. Similarly, shopkeepers offered local manufactures and secondhand items alongside imported and luxury goods, adding new layers to the existing “empire of goods,” transforming Charleston from a provincial entrepôt into a bustling “domestic marketplace” and even a “regional service center” connected to a vast hinterland (p. 40).

Such middling tradesmen were more than a simple corollary of the plantation enterprise; rather, they were developers in their own right, generating an independent source of wealth by sustaining a vigorous urban land market. Hart’s strongest chapter describes the dynamic nature of urban development after 1740, which was driven by stricter and more complex building codes (to prevent fire damage), a move toward more orderly urban planning, growing specialization and professionalization among builders, and a new, more creative way to finance construction: the building lease. This financial instrument enabled an owner to lease property to a builder, who would pay a fixed rent to the owner but would develop the lot and keep all profits from it during the period of the lease. The building lease encouraged risk taking by middling tradesmen of limited means, generating more wealth and in turn stimulating more growth. This and other innovations and developments—the use of general contractors, increasing regulation, the demand for high-quality craftsmanship to meet the prestige needs of affluent clients—created an urban land market that generated as much income as the exports of grain, livestock, and sundries combined. As a result, Charleston became the second-fastest growing city in North America between 1740 and the Revolution. Nor was Charleston unique in following this pattern of dynamic urban development; both the building lease and the move toward tighter regulation and planning were developed in London and imported by numerous provincial cities across the British Atlantic.

These literal builders of Charleston are the heroes of Hart’s narrative: sturdy, hard-working middling folk; innovative, entrepreneurial; no victims of postwar economic depression these, nor mere beneficiaries of elite patronage, but people looking for the main chance, seizing opportunity; resourceful, experimental, disciplined, and thriving. Moreover, as they built and invested in Charleston, living in it year-round and staking their livelihood to it—and here the argument gets slippery—these middling sorts began to acquire a sense of them-

selves as a class apart. The making of Charleston’s middle class came out of the building of Charleston, not out of economic conflict with elites. To be sure, these class lines were blurred. Some tradesmen mimicked the genteel manners and dress of the gentry while others made possible the leisure pursuits of elites by servicing their assemblies and balls or making and selling their objects of refinement. But on the whole Charleston’s middle class valued hard work, frugality, and clean living; they formed mutual aid and benevolent societies and joined dissenting churches that decried elite pretensions, waste, leisure, and vice. Yet unlike Rhys Isaac’s Virginia evangelicals, Charleston’s middling sorts did not use culture as a proxy for class revolt. What they wanted, rather, was bourgeois respectability, to order and discipline their town, especially the rowdy sailors and slaves who drank too much, swore too loudly, and caroused too late at night. In the 1770s, frustrated by elites’ unwillingness to adequately police the morals of the lower classes, middling tradesmen flocked to the Sons of Liberty, where they could both blame the ruling class for the imperial crisis and seek power to impose their class interest on urban affairs. Thus in a unique twist of the urban crucible argument, Hart highlights Charleston’s contribution to the independence movement as a Revolution from the middle up.

Building Charleston is a smart, ambitious study that engages a number of important questions. It challenges the old binaries of class conflict that have dominated early American urban historiography for a generation, focusing instead on the soft middle class whose consciousness formed without economic conflict or exploitation. It uses the Atlantic world as its framework, locating the roots of colonial Charleston in patterns of urban development originating in the metropole, not in the staple-producing periphery. It credits urban growth to the industrious petty tradesmen who scattered across the British Atlantic, not to the merchants, planters, and slaves whose more muscular history has captured historians’ attention for far too long. Admittedly it is a rosy story, and Hart is usually too enthralled with her heroes to notice their flaws, much less how their success depended in large part on the structural inequalities of a slave society. Nor is she altogether convincing in depicting the middling culture. Her links between conflict over civic improvement and the Revolution are speculative, and her discussion of middling values and evangelical Protestantism just scratches the surface, focusing almost exclusively on evangelicalism’s ethical dimension and omitting its all-important experiential dimen-

sion. But her economic history is rock solid, and she has clearly compromised the staple narrative of Charleston's growth and given a voice to its silent white majority. This book is a must-read for graduate seminars on the British Atlantic, early American history, and U.S. urban history.

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