

# COASTAL HERITAGE

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Rise and Fall  
and Rise...  
South Carolina's  
Maritime History

# CONTENTS

3

## RISE AND FALL AND RISE...SOUTH CAROLINA'S MARITIME HISTORY

*South Carolina's maritime trade has ridden a roller coaster of success and failure.*

12

## GEORGETOWN PORT

*The Georgetown port, once stymied by silting, continues its revival.*

12

## MARITIME TRADE RESUSCITATED

*South Carolina's maritime trade is thriving, but now the challenge is to stay on top.*

14

## EBBS AND FLOWS

### ON THE COVER

Patrick Cook, living history coordinator for the S.C. State Park Service, climbs a shroud on the Adventure moored at Charles Town Landing State Historic Site, "South Carolina's Birthplace." This wooden reproduction 17<sup>th</sup>-century vessel will undergo a major rebuilding in 2003 and 2004. Site visitors can learn about the maritime heritage of Charleston and the skills of early Carolinians. Call (843) 852-4200 for more information. PHOTO/WADE SPEES



**OFF LIMITS.** Port proponent David Blair opens the gate to land near Charleston that the State Ports Authority acquired a decade ago. The land has remained undeveloped after community activists fought port expansion on Daniel Island. PHOTO/WADE SPEES



*Coastal Heritage* is a quarterly publication of the S.C. Sea Grant Consortium, a university-based network supporting research, education, and outreach to conserve coastal resources and enhance economic opportunity for the people of South Carolina. Comments regarding this or future issues of *Coastal Heritage* are welcomed.

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# Rise and Fall and Rise...

## South Carolina's Maritime History

**BIG RIG.** A container ship docks at the Wando Welch Terminal in Charleston harbor. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

By John H. Tibbetts

*South Carolina's maritime trade has ridden spectacular heights and plumbed poverty-stricken depths.*

In 1940, the grand old city slumbered. Charleston was known as “buzzard town” because of the vultures circling slowly over the city dump. Visitors complained about the terrible smell wafting down from fertilizer plants that processed fish and chemicals north of the city. At the port of Charleston, wharves and warehouses rotted, and ship hulls decayed on undredged mud flats. Most days, the harbor was eerily quiet, the channel between Fort Moultrie and Fort Sumter empty of ship traffic, as waves slapped against tugboats in their berths.

Charleston and its port had been deteriorating for decades. A New York consultant studied the port's prospects in 1921. “Most of the Charleston waterfront,” reported Edward J. Clapp, “is wholly useless save as an historical relic.” The city's economy was not much better.

The port limped on after World War II despite vast federal sums poured into the nearby Charleston Navy Yard. Throughout the 1950s, Charleston was “still a backwater port,” says Thomas Larry Young, vice-president of Stevedoring Services of America, a privately owned builder of shipping terminals. In 1959, Young started working part-time on the docks at the age of 15. Young remembers when stevedores held second jobs

because the docks couldn't provide enough work. “Long-shoremen got a couple of calls a week, and that was it.”

This was a humiliation for the once-famous port city that had dominated maritime trade in the American South in colonial and early antebellum days.

From the 1730s to the early 1800s—the golden age of deep-water sailing ships—South Carolina's plantation economy thrived on maritime global trade and the hundreds of ocean-borne vessels that docked in Charleston each year to load rice and cotton for European markets. International trade spawned the wealth that built the grand historic homes and gardens of Charleston, Beaufort, and Georgetown.

Charleston and the lowcountry grew rich in the eighteenth century largely due to favorable trade winds in the North Atlantic Basin. Since Columbus's early voyages, mariners had known that prevailing winds blow in a circular, clock-wise fashion around the North Atlantic. Seamen of this era rarely traveled due west from Europe across the Atlantic to the New World; they would have headed into the wind's teeth. Besides, square-rigged merchant vessels were unsuited to tacking upwind. Squat and slow, designed to carry heavy cargo, they needed wind at their backs.

A merchant vessel sailing roundtrip from London to the English American colonies would first travel southwest to the Azores, west of Portugal. Next, trade winds would then carry the ship along the southerly route across the Atlantic toward the West Indies; this was the same path that Columbus took to America.

The ship might pause at an English West Indian port-of-call. England enjoyed lucrative commerce with its sugar colonies in the Caribbean. Or the ship might pass straight through the West Indies to the Florida Keys, where the captain would turn north, following the Gulf Stream along the eastern shoreline of North America.

If a ship were aimed for New York or Boston or Philadelphia, the vessel might stop at Charleston to take on food and supplies or load and unload cargo.

Charleston was a primary North American destination for English ships. After trading in Charleston, a ship would sail up to Cape Hatteras before veering northeast across the Atlantic to Europe. This transatlantic route, historian George C. Rogers pointed out, “was a great circle and Charleston was on its western edge.”

By the 1720s, the slave trade from Africa to Carolina also flourished. European ships traveled to West Africa, where they picked up slaves and sailed for the New World. From 1716 to 1807, the Holy City was the port-of-entry for an estimated 121,500 slaves, about 22 percent of all slaves legally brought into North America, according to William S. Pollitzer, a professor emeritus of anatomy and anthropology at the University of North Carolina. Ships from South Carolina carried rice, cotton, and other goods back to Europe.

In the years before the American Revolution, Charleston was the fourth largest city in British North America but easily the richest. Its wealth dominated the rest of the raw southern outback, with perhaps the exception of Virginia. Visitors were awed by the city’s glittering society.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, however, the lowcountry’s prosperity faltered.



**PAST TIES.** During the antebellum era, Charleston’s maritime trade spawned demand for slave artisans, including ropemakers, carpenters, and shipwrights.  
PHOTO/WADE SPEES

Ports competed fiercely for new business, and New York and other northern cities won at Charleston’s expense.

Charleston’s decline as a major international seaport came surprisingly quickly. Decades before the Civil War, the city was on the defensive, fighting abolitionist criticism and northerners’ vigor and business savvy. Lowcountry planters, rich and self-satisfied, were determined to keep modern ideas and influences at bay. Charleston became an increasingly insular place, more of an aristocratic playground than a thriving city.

From the 1730s, when Charleston blossomed into a major port, until 1800, when the city began to fade, it was transformed, wrote Rogers, from a place “that had looked outward to one that henceforth looked inward.”

## SUGAR AND RICE

Founded as a British colony in 1670, Charleston soon became a maritime trading partner and cultural heir of the hugely profitable British West Indian sugar colonies.

During the 1620s, English colonialists built rough new settlements in the Caribbean islands, including Barbados, St. Christopher, and Nevis. At first, the English adventurers barely scratched out a living. But in the 1640s, sugar cane was introduced into Barbados, and sugar quickly became the island’s most important export. European consumers lapped up the sweetener and its byproducts rum and molasses. Within 20 years, a small Barbadian elite gained control of the most productive land, becoming spectacularly wealthy.

The Barbadians were the first English colonialists to exploit African slaves on a massive, brutal scale to produce a cash crop for export. Within a generation, other British West Indian colonies followed the Barbadian economic blueprint, as did the next important new settlement on the North American continent: Charles Town.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, western European monarchs were sponsoring colonies in North America. Monarchs offered land grants to developers who would finance settlements, exploit natural resources, and gain profits through sea trading.

In 1665, King Charles II of England granted a charter to the Absolute and True Lords Proprietors for control of the new colony of Carolina. The Lords Proprietors—eight well-connected Englishmen—invested in Carolina’s first permanent settlement christened Albermarle Point, soon renamed Charles Town. Most new immigrants were poor people from England and Barbados. Within a year wealthy Barbadian sugar planters and their



**BREEZE WAY.** Trade winds helped Charleston become rich in the eighteenth century. Sailors knew that prevailing winds blow in a circular, clock-wise direction around the North Atlantic. Ships traveling from England to North America took the southerly route through the West Indies to Charleston. Even ships headed for New York or Boston usually stopped in Charleston to pick up food, supplies, or load and unload cargo.

slaves also arrived in Charles Town to escape the constant threat of slave revolt, hurricanes, and disease epidemics in the Caribbean.

Carolina settlers searched for commodities to sell to Europe and the West Indies, and the new port was the center of the colony's economy. Colonialists bartered with Indians, offering trinkets, cloth, and hatchets for deerskins and beaver skins. Carolina exported animal pelts to furriers and hatmakers throughout Europe. Settlers and their slaves harvested naval stores from coastal forests—turpentine, pitch, lumber, tar, and staves—and raised cattle in the longleaf woods.

By the mid-1670s, settlers traded meat, lumber, and Indian slaves to the West Indies for black slaves, rum, sugar, and trinkets. Colonialists shipped lucrative naval stores to England for the growing ship building industry. In return, the new colony received English manufactured goods. In 1683, a French Huguenot settler remarked that “the port is never without ships and the country is becoming a great traffic center.”

South Carolina's maritime traders found dramatic success in the early eighteenth century after lowcountry settlers discovered their most profitable cash crop: rice.

The demand for South Carolina rice was greatest in northern Europe. Most Americans were not rice consumers, so “Carolina Gold” rice was produced for overseas markets. By the 1720s, more than half of the value of all of the colony's exports came from the rice trade. A decade later, 500 deep-sea vessels a year sailed into Charleston's port to trade. In 1739, eight privately owned wharves had been built from Bay Street into the Cooper River to serve the shipping industry.

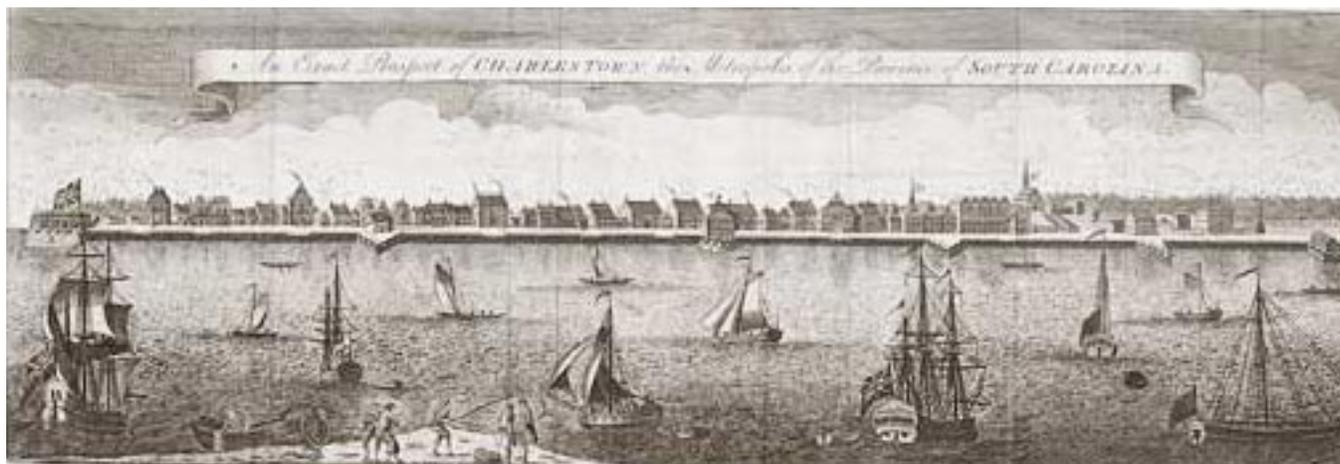
Georgetown, founded in 1730, officially became a port the following year, though it remained a tiny village until after the Revolution. The Beaufort-Port Royal area, though, grew rapidly just before the Revolution. But Charleston always dominated the coast politically and economically.

Lowcountry South Carolina was not a complete maritime society like coastal Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Most South Carolinians looked inland,

not to sea. “In the Northeast, if you lived near the coast, your livelihood was connected to the water,” says Charlie Sneed, executive director of the S.C. Maritime Heritage Foundation. “In our part of the country, people were more likely to make their living in farming and plantations.”

Charleston was blessed with an excellent harbor, yet South Carolinians built and invested in few seagoing vessels. Instead, they depended on ships owned by Londoners or Bostonians. New Englanders increasingly dominated American shipbuilding and maritime investing. Bostonians bought vessel shares in the way that modern investors buy corporate stock shares.

P.C. Coker, an independent scholar of local maritime history, has described the thinking of a typical colonial Carolina merchant who had 1,200 pounds to invest in the 1730s. With that sum, a merchant could build and outfit a 200-ton seagoing vessel, but he would risk his investment with storms, wars, fires, groundings, and pirates. Or he could pour his money into a dozen slaves and a 500-acre plantation, where he could grow rice and indigo, which fetched high prices. The choice was simple: purchase slaves and a plantation and charter



**BYGONE DAYS.** This engraving provides a view of the Cooper River waterfront of the late 1730s, when the lowcountry's maritime trade surged. PHOTO/COURTESY OF CHARLESTON MUSEUM

someone else's ship to send produce to Europe.

## CAROLINA'S SHIPBUILDERS

Although South Carolinians built a small number of ocean-going ships, they constructed thousands of shallow-draft vessels that plied lowcountry rivers and coastal waters.

Settlers needed reliable vessels built for local conditions, quickly realizing that deep-draft European ships were impractical in shallow waters behind sea islands. It was costly and time-consuming to saw planks for small European-style vessels. So they learned from Indians how to use dugout crafts from the plentiful bald cypress trees along coastal waterways. The dugout, writes shipbuilder and author William C. Fleetwood, Jr., was the Model T of colonial ships—"seemingly everywhere and used for every purpose."

By the 1720s, colonialists modified dugout crafts—called periaguas—to move goods downriver from Indian trading posts to coastal towns. At first, the periagua was a flat-bottomed, fairly narrow barge with a hull made from two cypress logs. Four to six men, usually slaves hired from their owners, rowed the typical periagua. There was a small cabin aft for stowing valuables; trade goods were covered by tarpaulin. On tidal waters near the coast, periaguas used sails. In the 1760s, boat builders made larger periaguas with live oak framing members and wide pine plank. More than 100 barrels of rice, each weighing about 560 pounds, could be transported by one of the bigger periaguas.

The boats and canoes of the lowcountry were crewed primarily by slaves. Slave watermen enjoyed considerable autonomy from their masters. Slaves were also crew and

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often captains of plantation-owned vessels that sailed coastal waters. Watermen could stay out of sight of their masters for long periods. Traveling throughout the lowcountry, slave bondsmen made extra money by trading goods with field hands and other plantation slaves.

Many large plantations had their own shipyards for vessel construction and repair. At first, planters hired European shipwrights to build primarily sloops and schooners. Colonial sloops and schooners were nimble, easy-to-manuever, relatively small vessels—ideal for shoal-infested coastal waters. In the mid-eighteenth century, the typical schooner weighed about 20 tons. By comparison, the *Friendship*, one of the largest ocean-going ships built in South Carolina before the Revolution, weighed 260 tons.

Schooners were used for coastal transportation and trading and later for trips to the Caribbean and South America but not for transatlantic

voyages. According to Coker, about 140 schooners were registered and built in the Charles Town area between 1735 and 1760. Meanwhile, 32 ocean-going ships were registered, though some were not built here, having been captured from French and Spanish privateers.

Planters often hired out their slaves as carpenters and other tradesmen. European shipwrights taught slave apprentices, who became skilled shipwrights themselves and trained other slaves. White artisans, however, complained that slave artisans were too prevalent in South Carolina, depressing wages and making jobs scarce. In 1744, Andrew Ruck petitioned the Carolina Commons House of Assembly for relief from the large number of slaves "employed in mending, repairing, and caulking ships. . . and working at the Shipwright's Trade." In 1751, the Assembly placed a tax on imported slaves, and one-fifth of the revenue was used as a bounty to encourage shipwrights to move to South Carolina. But three years later, the state



**RUSH HOUR.** This 1856 illustration of Charleston shows an oar-powered plantation boat (lower left), a topsail schooner, and a side-wheel, ocean-going steamer.  
PHOTO/COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

dropped the bounty because Charleston was prospering and shipwrights were moving in from Europe and New England.

Before the Revolution, four active shipyards were located in the Charles Town vicinity, including the largest at Hobcaw Creek, a deep-water site across the Cooper River from the city.

Port Royal enjoyed its maritime glory years before the American Revolution as the most important shipbuilding site in the southern colonies. Port Royal shipbuilders had access to excellent timber, particularly live oak, invaluable for use in curved structural parts of ships such as framing. But the Revolution devastated the Port Royal-Beaufort area, and recovery was slow. Moreover, Port Royal was situated far from the center of economic life in Charleston, hampering its growth.

By 1800, South Carolina's shipbuilding industry could not compete with New England's. Slaves on large South Carolina plantations probably did most of the ship repair and construction.

Free artisans, who could not work as cheaply as slaves, migrated to northern shipbuilding cities. Some Carolina shipyards shut down, victims of slaveholders' dominion over labor and capital.

### DECLINE AND FALL

By 1800, Charleston was steadily losing maritime trade to other cities. Greater precision in navigation and improved vessels allowed ship captains to sail directly from Europe to New York. Ships no longer had to travel the southerly route via the Caribbean and Charleston. The faster transatlantic route between New York and Europe left Charleston out of the loop.

Many British and New England merchant firms in the 1820s began avoiding Charleston because free black seamen could not enter the city without a hefty bond being posted.

New Orleans meanwhile grew fabulously rich by trading produce pouring down the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Every major port on the eastern seaboard, hungry for a piece of that action, sought to extend

transportation networks to the west. But the Appalachians blocked the efforts of merchants who wanted to move goods east over the mountains to sell to the world.

New York was the first eastern seaport to skirt the Appalachians. In 1825, the Erie Canal was completed from the Hudson River at Albany to Buffalo on Lake Erie. This massive public-works project allowed barges to travel from the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal to the Hudson River and south to New York. Hence the Erie Canal was the first waterway linkage between an Atlantic port and the agricultural lands beyond the mountains. New

York became the primary trading linkage between Europe and the northern Ohio River Valley. The Erie Canal caused an explosion of wealth in the country's northern tier, creating closer economic and social ties between the Great Lakes and the northeastern states. Philadelphia and Baltimore soon followed suit, creating transportation links through the mountains.

South Carolina's leaders also sought to improve waterway connections from inland areas to Charleston. In 1800, the Santee Canal connected the Santee River to the headwaters of the Cooper River. As a result, the interior country's crops were brought downstream to Charleston, but this cut off the Georgetown port's potential growth. Interior farms and plantations once served by Georgetown's port now sent their produce to Charleston. But the Santee Canal was plagued by low water levels and by 1840 it was out of business.

In 1818, the General Assembly provided special appropriations to build eight canals linking waterways in nearly every district in the state. Political decisions, however, trumped engineering analyses, and poor routes were selected. The public wouldn't use

the canals, so revenues could not pay for lockkeepers' salaries. By 1838 six of the eight canals were abandoned, according to Walter Edgar, a historian at the University of South Carolina.

In the 1820s, the upstart Savannah port was growing rapidly at Charleston's expense, benefiting from steamboats loaded with cotton coming down the Savannah River. But Charleston fought back. In 1827, the state chartered the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company, and over the next six years it laid track from Hamburg in the Edgefield District to Charleston. The idea was to draw Savannah River cotton traffic to the Charleston seaport, a route of 136 miles, at that time the world's longest railroad under a single management.

Yet the conservative lowcountry elite, determined to maintain Charleston as an elegant retreat, outlawed steam engines within the city limits. "People in Charleston didn't want the noise of the engines downtown," says Edgar. The railway tracks therefore stopped cold at Line Street. It was a self-destructive ordinance. At a costly surcharge, freight had to be transferred from rail cars to wagons, then hauled through the city to the waterfront. "Every time you handle cargo, you (drive) up the price of it," notes Edgar. Savannah, by contrast, allowed a railway built directly to its waterfront.

When South Carolina rice and cotton dominated the marketplace, Charleston enjoyed its greatest success. In 1821, South Carolina was the leading cotton-producing state. On the eve of the Civil War,

however, it had fallen to seventh. Productive lands had opened up in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, then Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. Cotton from the new southwest was shipped via Mobile and New Orleans instead of Charleston. Meanwhile, lowcountry rice planters faced competition from Burma, Bengal, Java, and other rice-growing European colonies.

Before the Civil War, South Carolina failed to build a railroad link to the South beyond the Appalachians. "People talked about it, they dreamed about it," says Edgar. "But it was never completed."

A healthy port, after all, must rely on a thriving hinterland and an effective transportation network to feed it. Hemp grown in eastern Kentucky, for example, was used to bundle southern cotton. But to reach South Carolina, the hemp had to be



**HEAVY LOAD.** Dockworkers, in this undated photograph, moved cotton from a railcar to prepare it for export. Charleston had its greatest political and economic leverage when South Carolina cotton and rice dominated the marketplace. But South Carolina faded as a cotton producer after 1820 and as a rice producer after the Civil War. Cotton, however, remained the state's leading money crop until the mid-1950s, when it was outpaced by tobacco. PHOTO/COURTESY OF S.C. STATE PORTS AUTHORITY

sent north by rail to the Great Lakes, by barge to New York, and then by coastwise vessels to Charleston. In this era, “New York has a hinterland that stretches west to Indiana” and into the South itself, says Scott Reynolds Nelson, a historian at the College of William & Mary. “South Carolina has a hinterland that doesn’t get to Tennessee.”

In the mid-1840s, Charleston repealed its restriction against steam engines within the city, but railroad tracks still stopped at the edge of town. By then, the port had lost its edge. “Charleston was seen as a terrible port starting in the 1840s,” says Nelson. Its shallow harbor could not accommodate the new transatlantic steamships with deep drafts. The most sophisticated shipping merchants and technologies were found in the North. About 60 percent of South Carolina’s exports had to be sent in the coastwise trade to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, where the major transatlantic lines were located.

The least industrialized major city in the United States in the late antebellum years, Charleston, travelers noticed, lacked the verve and energy of other seaports. Lowcountry planters held anti-business attitudes, with the exception of agricultural commerce. A southern gentleman made his money in agriculture and owned slaves. A gentleman did not own textile factories—thus benefiting from the South’s leading export—and hire white workers who could upset the order of a slave society.

By contrast, Yankee entrepreneurs in this era got rich by shrewdly adding value to raw materials carried by rail and river into their ports. New York, for example, built grain mills and became the flour capital of North America.

## HITTING BOTTOM

The Civil War ravaged the South’s rural economy, and for years the region had little to export. Charleston’s network of private wharves rotted in neglect, later to be damaged by fires, major hurricanes, and a catastrophic earthquake. In 1885, a major hurricane smashed the Cooper River waterfront, destroying piers, wharves, offices, and vessels.

By 1881, northern financiers purchased the bankrupt South Carolina Railroad. Rails were extended—finally—through Charleston’s streets to the waterfront. Northern syndicates purchased other bankrupt South Carolina railroads and completed links between the Northeast and the Southeast. Holding monopoly power over rail transport in the state, northern financiers manipulated freight rates for the benefit of New York trading interests. Sending a bale of cotton via rail to New York cost three times less than to Charleston. During the 1890s, the volume of trade handled by the Charleston port dropped from \$98.5 million to \$29.5 million.

Yankees, however, were not to blame for Charleston’s troubles. An elderly, hidebound leadership stymied the city’s development. “They were older men, and the way things were done 40 to 50 years earlier was good enough for them,” says Edgar. “They didn’t want to change anything.” City leaders refused to invest in infrastructure improvements. It took the federal government, for example, to pay for deepening the harbor’s shipping channel in 1878.

The phosphate trade was important to both Port Royal and Charleston after the Civil War. Charleston and Georgetown also exported vast amounts of lumber products to the Northeast. Until World War I, despite advances in steel ships and steam power, some shipping companies still used schooners for the coastwise trade. Schooners carried bulk, low-grade commodities such as New England ice, Middle Atlantic coal, southern “hard” pine, naval stores, and phosphate ore.

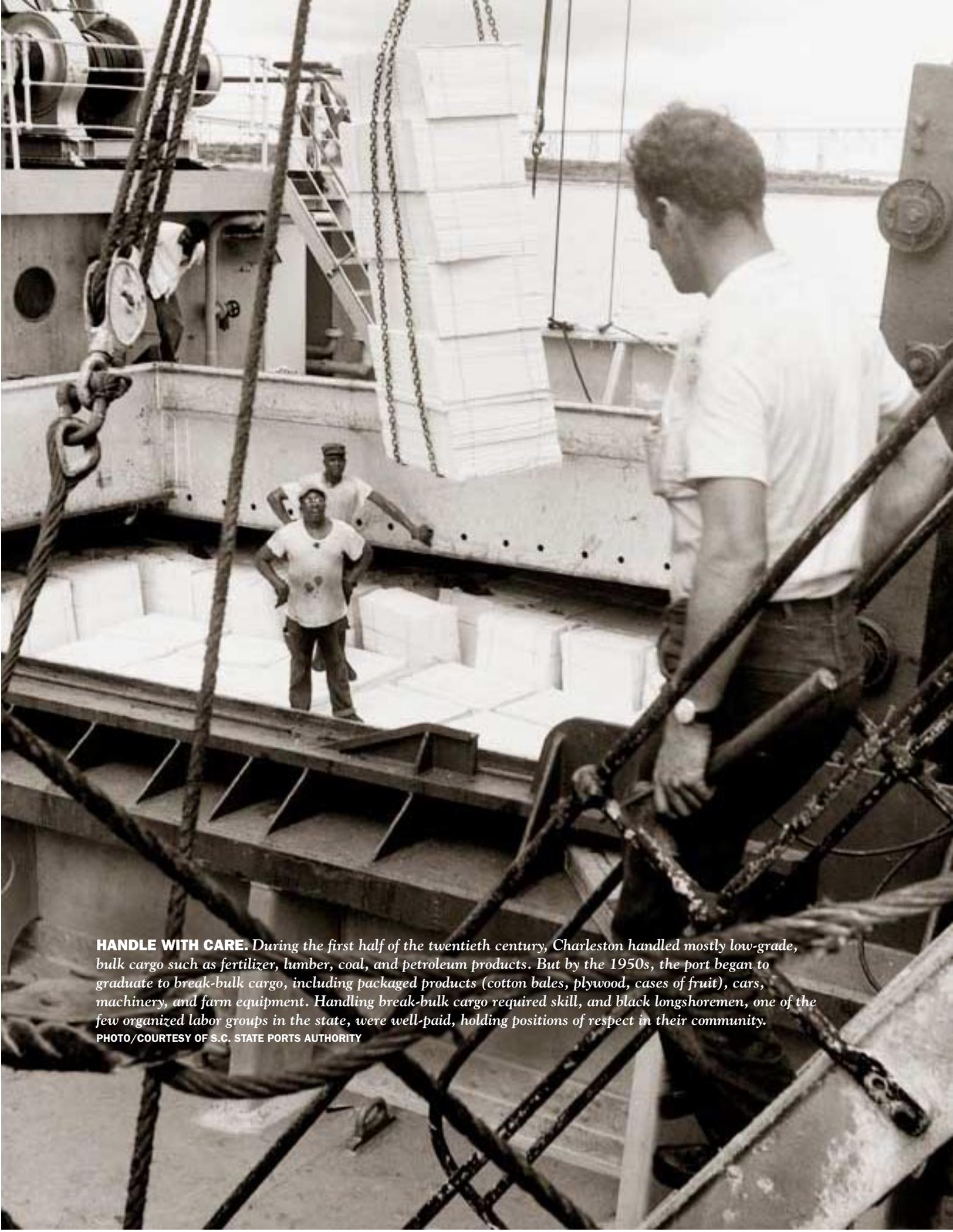
Charleston’s port continued in the deep minor leagues through World War I. The city could not escape discriminatory rail freight rates, and its leadership was paralyzed. Railroad systems with financial interests in the ports of Savannah, Norfolk, Mobile, and New Orleans had acquired Charleston’s wharves, warehouses, and cargo-handling equipment, which continued to decay. Railroad syndicates funneled business to Charleston’s competitors. Some lowcountry politicians tried to stem the port’s downward spiral. Battles erupted between the still-powerful planter class that sought stasis and a business community that wanted to rebuild Charleston into an international port city.

In the 1920s, Charleston Mayor John P. Grace tried to jump-start the port. Under his leadership, the city purchased waterfront property and equipment, repaired wharves, and pursued new business. The tonnage and dollar value of cargo handled through the port doubled during the decade.

But Charleston remained a third-rate port handling bulk cargo, the least valuable of seaborne shipments. It required more than 200 longshoremen, sometimes working for a week, to unload or load a single ship. Laborers used shovels, picks, big hooks, and oversized wheelbarrows called “Georgia buggies” to move bulk cargo from ship to boxcar. Bulk cargo included Peruvian guano, bone meal, and fish scraps. “After you worked a day unloading fish scraps. . .you stank something terrible,” reminisced retired port worker John Harleston.

In the 1930s, the Depression killed Charleston’s gains during the previous decade. “When the Depression hit and no ships came into the port for about six months, we almost starved to death,” Harleston said.

Charleston limped on through the 1930s, dreaming of its glorious past—only to be awakened at mid-twentieth century by World War II and a resurgent, industrializing South. ♡



**HANDLE WITH CARE.** During the first half of the twentieth century, Charleston handled mostly low-grade, bulk cargo such as fertilizer, lumber, coal, and petroleum products. But by the 1950s, the port began to graduate to break-bulk cargo, including packaged products (cotton bales, plywood, cases of fruit), cars, machinery, and farm equipment. Handling break-bulk cargo required skill, and black longshoremen, one of the few organized labor groups in the state, were well-paid, holding positions of respect in their community.

PHOTO/COURTESY OF S.C. STATE PORTS AUTHORITY



## Georgetown port

Some of the richest families in North America in the years before the Civil War lived in the Georgetown area. Yet during the region's greatest prosperity, Georgetown's port on Winyah Bay remained an adjunct of Charleston's. Each year a fleet of vessels from New England would sail down to haul Georgetown's rice to market in Charleston or New York.

Georgetown's port was stymied by silt. In 1838, a survey showed that Winyah Bay's passage to sea was crooked, difficult to navigate, and only seven and one-half feet at low tide, too shallow for oceangoing ships. So it remained a secondary port for coastal trading.

After the war, Georgetown's rice plantations never completely recovered. Over the next 50 years, South Carolina rice planting died out from repeated hurricanes and competition from other rice-growing areas.

But the Georgetown area's lumbering business remained an important mainstay for workers and maritime trade, with periodic valleys caused by overproduction and low prices. The industrial and shipbuilding Northeast used massive amounts of southern "hard" pine in bridges, wharves, shipbuilding, and houses. Turpentine, pine tar, pitch, and rosin were exploited from the lumber.

In 1942, the South Carolina State Ports Authority took over responsibility for the Georgetown port, and after World War II it worked to improve shipping access. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed deepening of the Winyah Bay channel to 27 feet in 1951, and the Georgetown port began a revival that continues today.

# Maritime Trade Resuscitated

*Today, South Carolina's sea trade is peaking again. Can we sustain momentum this time?*

South Carolina's maritime trade revived in fits and starts after World War II. The Charleston Navy Yard had expanded in the late 1930s as the federal government got ready for war, then mushroomed after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The U.S. Army also built a large embarkation port north of Charleston. The old port city was soon surrounded by military installations, and thousands of newcomers poured in for jobs. State leaders meanwhile realized that South Carolina needed to rebuild its maritime trade, and in 1942 the General Assembly created the S.C. State Ports Authority (SPA). The Ports Authority enabling legislation mandated development of ports in Charleston, Georgetown, and Port Royal.

After the war, the Ports Authority received surplus property of the Army Port of Embarkation north of Charleston, which became the important North Charleston Terminal. The authority also received the crumbling docks in downtown Charleston. The Ports Authority upgraded facilities, installed modern equipment, and established sales offices in New York to gain new business.

"The SPA made the difference" in reestablishing Charleston as an important port, says Walter Edgar, a historian at the University of South Carolina. "The port was no longer just for Charleston. The port was (rebuilt) to create a pipeline for the entire state. The SPA, in many cases, was run by people who were not Charlestonians. They were from different parts of the state." But the port also benefited from innovative Charleston mayors, says Edgar, "who realized that Charleston had to change."

During the mid-1960s, thousands of small and medium-sized manufacturing firms fled south from northern states where unions were strong and wages high. South Carolina, with its anti-union, low-wage environment, was a beneficiary of this influx. The state also recruited

multinational corporations from overseas, which exported goods through Charleston.

The Ports Authority, by then, had received state appropriations to purchase additional waterfront property and enlarge its berthing and storage facilities. The Ports Authority aimed to catch a technological wave transforming maritime commerce: the standardized, six-sided shipping container. During the 1960s and 1970s, shippers reduced labor costs and improved efficiency with containerization, creating a revolution in how goods are transported around the world.

Today's container ships are much larger than ships of the 1950s, and ports can unload cargo far more quickly than before. Fifty years ago, it often required several days' time to unload or load a ship. Now a ship can be unloaded or loaded in hours. Time is money for shipping firms. When ships are tied up in docks, their owners are losing out. The most efficient ports win contracts for further business.

In 1966, the port handled its first standardized container, and suddenly after 150 years of maritime decline Charleston could take full advantage of its port.

One advantage of Charleston's port is that it's nearer the ocean than those in Savannah, Wilmington, and Jacksonville. "We're a seaport, and they're river ports," says Randall Swan, a retired harbor pilot who began his apprenticeship in 1955. "All things being equal, if you're closer to the ocean, you're going to save time, and that gives us a competitive advantage." Charleston harbor also has a wider channel than some other southeastern ports. Giant ships can pass two abreast almost anywhere in Charleston harbor's channel; they don't have to wait offshore or at the dock for the channel to clear.

Charleston has become the busiest container port after New York on the East and Gulf coasts, and the fourth busiest in the nation. It's also one of the most efficient ports in the world. As a result, experts say, Charleston draws the best in

oceangoing vessels—container ships on a regular line of service.

South Carolina leaders used long-range planning, practical management, public investment, and technological innovation to make the state's largest port successful again. Even so, "people don't realize how much we rely on the port," says Al Parish, an economist at Charleston Southern University. "The port is one of the top three or four reasons that manufacturers cite in locating in South Carolina. The port helps the state maintain manufacturing jobs that pay much more than service jobs and help bring up incomes for the working class." International trade through the Ports Authority facilities provides more than 83,000 jobs in South Carolina and pumps \$10.7 billion in sales into the state economy each year.

In 1999, the Ports Authority proposed a massive expansion plan for Charleston harbor facilities on Daniel Island called "The Global Gateway." The Ports Authority said that the expansion was needed to sustain the growth in trade anticipated over the next several decades and to improve the state's economy.

But the expansion proposal angered many lowcountry residents, who argued that it would harm nearby neighborhoods. Critics denounced the Ports Authority as arrogant and dismissive of community concerns. The port's recent success seemed to alarm many Charleston-area residents who wanted to put brakes on the region's growth.

Citizens seemed most alarmed by the projected increases in port-related truck traffic. "When you really got down to it, the greatest concern was the impact of the port on the local highway infrastructure," says John F. Hassell, president of Charleston's Maritime Association and a member of the Ports Authority board. Trucks are a small percentage of metropolitan traffic, he says, "but trucks are visible."

In response to community criticism, the Ports Authority scaled back its plan to expand on Daniel Island. Yet community coalitions argued that Daniel Island should not be developed for any port facility, though the island juts into the harbor, an ideal location for maritime trade. Activists called for a port expansion on the Cooper River's west bank near an existing rail system.

Local quality-of-life issues have often stymied the development of Charleston's port. Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Charleston lost trade to other seaports, and the lowcountry consistently failed to exploit its maritime potential. Now some wonder if the Charleston area could repeat this history.

To historian Edgar, the recent controversy echoes the Charleston elite's attitude toward noisy port-related traffic in the nineteenth century. "It's almost the same thing as not allowing the train to come to the docks" from the 1820s to the 1880s, says Edgar.

Earlier this year, the state General Assembly passed a port expansion bill that instructed the Ports Authority to build a container terminal on the west side of the Cooper River. The likely site for expansion is the southern end of the former Navy Base in North Charleston near existing rail lines.

"Probably the strongest natural resource that South Carolina has is Charleston harbor," says Parish. "If we aren't going to take advantage of it, then our standard of living is going to go down." ♡



**LEADING THE WAY.** Randall Swan, a retired Charleston harbor pilot, leans against a piling at the Cooper River pilot house. "What Charleston gets today is the cream of the crop, the best ships, as far as ocean shipping goes," Swan says. The port's efficiency, wide shipping lanes, and near-to-ocean facilities have made Charleston stand out against fierce competition from other southeastern U.S. ports. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

# EBBS & FLOWS

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