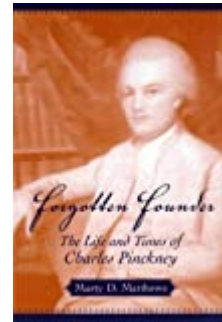




**Marty D. Matthews.** *Forgotten Founder: The Life and Times of Charles Pinckney.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. xix + 186 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-547-0.



**Reviewed by** Jennifer L. Goloboy (Independent Scholar)

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## Evolution of a Republican

South Carolina historian Mark Kaplanoff wrote that it would be impossible to write a biography of Charles Pinckney, because there were too few sources surviving (p. xix). Given the few personal documents available, Marty D. Matthews has done an admirable job of fleshing out Pinckney's career, political opinions, and personality. His biography is a welcome addition to the political history of South Carolina in the post-Revolutionary era. It could be paired with George Rogers's classic biography of William Loughton Smith, as *The Evolution of a Republican*.

Charles Pinckney's resume is so striking that the lack of a previous biography is surprising. A member of the state legislature in colonial South Carolina when he was only twenty-one, Pinckney went on to serve in the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention. Back in South Carolina, he was the president of the state constitutional convention, and was elected governor for multiple terms. He served as a U.S. senator from South Carolina and minister to Spain. After a term in the state legislature, he ended his political career as a U.S. Representative.

In an era when the blatant pursuit of political power was anathema, Pinckney was generally seen as pushy, self-centered, and dangerously ambitious. Matthews argues that this was an unfair characterization, traceable to James Madison. However, Pinckney accumulated enemies wherever he went, including most of his political contacts, the Charles Cotesworth Pinckney side of his family, and the man who managed his estate while he served as ambassador to Spain. Despite his political successes, few men were willing to speak well of him publicly. As we know from Jack Greene's brief biography of Landon Carter, a man does not have to have been pleasant company to be a worthwhile subject of biography; I often felt that if Matthews had been less eager to defend his subject, it would have improved his book.

Matthews also fails to demonstrate that Pinckney was a major contributor to the political thought of his day. Though Pinckney often articulated useful and important ideas, Matthews is unable to demonstrate that anyone adopted his proposals. Neither does Pinckney seem to have been an original political thinker.

Charles Pinckney's primary gifts lay in an area that

the early republic figures thought it did not need—he was a talented political organizer. An ardent Republican, he was able to help deliver South Carolina for Jefferson, even though most people believed that native son and Charles Pinckney cousin Charles Cotesworth Pinckney would undoubtedly carry the state. As he told Jefferson with characteristic modesty, “Most of our friends believe that my exertions and influence owing to the information of federal [i.e., Federalist] affairs I gave them, has in great measure contributed to the decision and [been] indispensable to your success” (p. 104). His relatives never forgave him for working for a Republican victory, but Jefferson rewarded him with the ministry to Spain. Unfortunately, Pinckney retained his skill at annoying his colleagues. Pinckney’s secretary soon complained that Pinckney had abandoned him, without paying his salary, to take a recreational trip to Italy.

Why was this unlikable man so good at getting out the vote? One reason was that Pinckney understood how to appeal to the yeoman farmer. As Matthews writes, “In 1790, unlike almost any other politician in South Carolina, Pinckney foresaw what the next few years would bring in the state and on the national scene. Unlike his lowcountry family and friends, he recognized the economic and political potential that existed in the backcountry” (p. 70). Pinckney supported the needs of backcountry farmers, such as trade and education, early recognizing that the power center of South Carolina was drifting westward.

A second reason was that Pinckney skillfully used the power of the press. He was close to many newspaper publishers and editors. In his later years, Pinckney regularly met with Peter Freneau, printer of the *City Gazette*,

and Ebenezer Thomas, who was the editor of the paper (p. 125). His son, Henry Laurens Pinckney, became editor of the pro-slavery *Charleston Mercury* (p. 129). Pinckney recognized, and historian Jeffrey Pasley has demonstrated, that the press was central to political power in the Early Republic. During the election of 1800, Pinckney wrote, collected, and distributed pamphlets to local and national Republican figures. Matthews’s biography is thus an intriguing window into an understudied political world, showing how politics operated on the ground in post-Revolutionary South Carolina.

Matthews’s biography is also valuable because Pinckney was involved in South Carolina’s response to the Haitian Revolution, and especially in the suppression of a supposed “French-instigated invasion of the state by black troops from the West Indies” in 1798. (p. 92) Pinckney responded as if invasion was imminent, by investing money in the defense of the state (including \$2,000 for powder), and by forming alliances with the governors of North Carolina and Georgia, which garnered approving comments in the *City Gazette* (p. 93). As far as I know, this incident has gone almost completely unnoticed in South Carolina history. Given the recent debate over the true character of the Denmark Vesey rebellion, attention to this earlier racially charged incident seems very worthwhile.

Despite Mark Kaplanoff’s fears, Marty Matthews has admirably succeeded in reconstructing the life of the forgotten founder, Charles Pinckney. Matthews’s biography is most interesting as a history of the rise of Republicanism. His book is worth reading for people interested in the political history of South Carolina in the early republic.

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