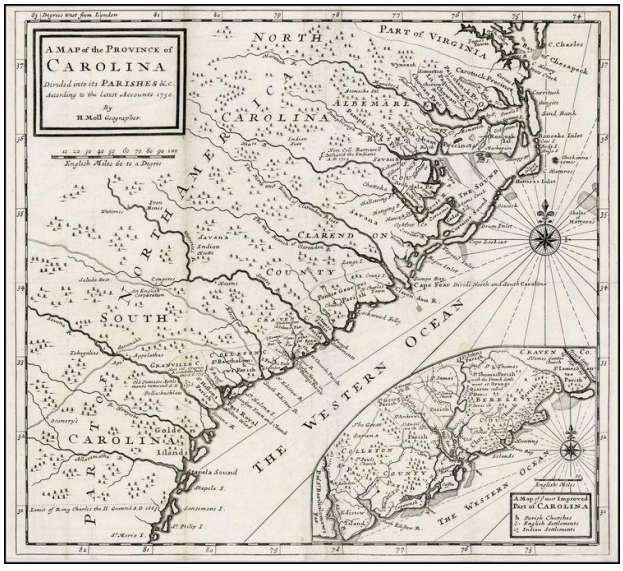
African American Classicism of Charleston

Within the African American community, there exists a myth that Classical and Traditional Architecture is a legacy of oppression and racism. While there is a negative association of this tradition to the plantations of the Old South, there is a positive reality to Classicism and the African American diaspora, particularly, in Charleston, South Carolina. The historical architectural record of Charleston is defined by remarkable structures that exemplify the best of American Classicism. From Georgian to Beaux Arts, buildings such as Miles Brewton House, Trinity United Methodist Church, and The U.S. Customs House. These buildings serve as examples of well-proportioned, durable architecture that have stood the test of time against fire, flood, and war. More importantly, virtually every structure in the city constructed before 1865 were built, detailed and to an extent designed entirely by the enslaved of Charleston. There was a deeply rooted understanding of building in relation to the human scale that derived as early as the great structures of Egypt. Centuries before arriving in British North America, Africans from various regions of the continent had developed building practices utilizing locally sourced materials including stone, mud, and wood to create communities. It was this knowledge, in addition to published Western European architectural treatises, that informed the creation of the City of Charleston as is loved in the present day.



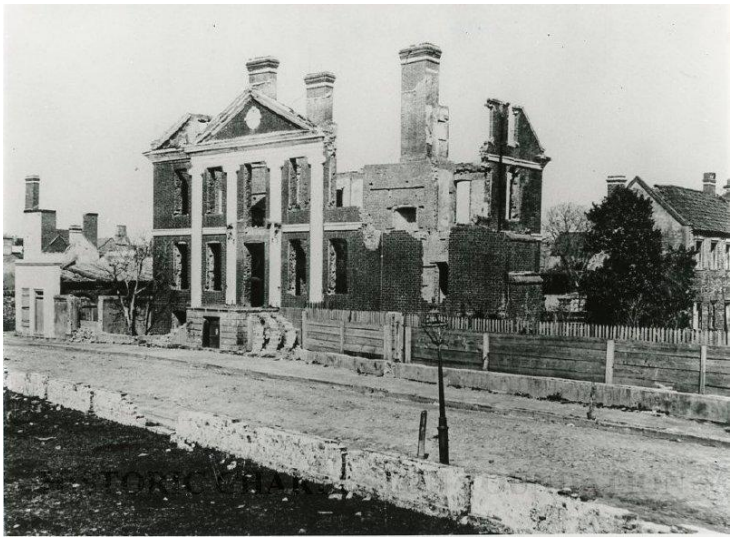
Following the Restoration of English monarchy after the English Civil War, Charles II signed the Charter for the Colony of Carolina (Figure 1) and granted a large tract of land to eight proprietors on March 24, 1663. By April of 1670, 150 settlers including one enslaved African sailed up the Ashley River and established Charles Town. Ten years later

the settlement abandoned this location and re-established Charles Town in its present location at Oyster Point. These new inhabitants of the colony, primarily the second and third born sons of wealthy Barbados sugar planters, brought with them their ambitions of wealth borne upon the legacy of exploitative plantation agriculture. Between 1680 and 1700 the enslaved population of Charles Town grew from 200 to 2,400 and by 1740 39,155 people of African descent were enslaved in the now Royal Colony of South Carolina.[1] A majority of these enslaved people originated in the Western African rice growing region that includes modern day Benin, Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Côte D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia, Senegal and portions of Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Importation of West Africans from this specified region was deliberate. It was discovered shortly after the establishment of the Colony that conditions were ideal for the cultivation of rice. An abundance of freshwater rivers and tidal creeks that responded to coastal tides and a subtropical climate that allowed for hot humid summers, and cool mild winters nearly mimicked the rice region of West Africa. These enslaved people had an extensive knowledge and deeply rooted agricultural traditions of rice cultivation and processing. And it was with this knowledge that the Colony of South Carolina thrived and became the wealthiest colony of the thirteen well through the Revolution. Successful rice plantations were established along the Ashley, Cooper, Wando, and Santee Rivers. Familiar names such as Drayton Hall, Middleton Place, and Wappoo Plantation not only produced thousands of pounds of rice and millions of dollars but also the founders of the United States. Arthur Middleton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, inherited Middleton Place in 1755. One hundred enslaved people labored for a decade to complete the main house and formal gardens. The original main was in the style of the English Country Tudor and Dutch influences which can be seen in the gable ends of the house. The brick structure was constructed by slave labor and the masonry used was produced on the property. Charles Pinckney, father of a signer of the Constitution, the advocate general of the Court of Vice-Admiralty and attorney general of the Province of South Carolina, was one of these men.

[1] Peter Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York: Norton, 1974)

Dr Tiffany Momon public historian and Assistant Professor of History and Mellon Fellow, Sewanee, The University of the South, and founder of the Black Craftspeople Digital Archive has conducted extensive research on the following. “Pinckney, as most rice planters, also held urban residences within the City of Charles Town, later Charleston with the start of the American Revolution. Uniquely, the Pinckney Mansion, destroyed by fire (Figure 2), was completed in 1746. Charles Pinckey tediously recorded all of the work being done at the site. He consistently mentions an enslaved man by the name of John Williams. Williams was born to an enslaved mother and a white father on the Wappoo Plantation, Eliza Lucas. Eliza inherited Wappoo and its slaves upon her father’s death and later married Charles Pinckney. John and Eliza had



successfully developed a method for the processing of indigo. Williams had created wooden indigo vats that allowed for raw indigo to cure in water, producing the finest dye that brought more than £225 per shipment, Williams was known for this exceptional skill in carpentry and joinery was approached by Charles in 1746 with a set of architectural drawings and a contract for his labor in the construction of the Pinckney Mansion.

Pinckney, like Jefferson, was a gentleman architect and had developed architectural plans that reflected his European travels and also took into account his accomplished carpenter John Williams. In that same year Pinckney wrote “An Account of Carpenters and Joiners Work Proposed to be done in a Brick House for Charles Pinckney Esq at the North End of the Bay of

Charles Town"[2] which documented designs for the woodwork of each floor of the house as well as specific rooms. He referenced examples found in other homes in Charleston to serve as precedent. On the ground floor, Pinckney requested "2 outside cellar door frames 4-1/2 feet wide, 6 feet 2 inches high with a beed and single architrave, 4 inner cellar cases with a beed—no architrave."[3] This "beed and single architrave" refers to bead and reel molding for the architraves of the door. Pinckney's request that the four interior cellar door frames have no architraves emphasizes the cellar's function as a working area rather than a formal space. On the first floor, Pinckney specified details such as "one large Venetian window upon the half pace of the stairs according to the plan…best parlour to be wainscotted on the Chimney side, with double cornice round, surbase, window seats and jambs… ."[4] This particular detail of the fenestration in the stair hall became a common element of mid to late 18th Century Charleston mansions. On the second floor, Pinckney specified details such as: "The dining room ceiling to be coved into the roof, so as to make this room at least 14 foot high in the clear."[5] Interestingly the Miles Brewton House, completed in 1769 features a near identical stair window in both proportion and height above the stair landing as well as the proportions of the dining room.

Pinckney's 1746 "Carpenters and Joiners Work Proposed" document suggests that John Williams was certainly a master carpenter. Not only did Williams complete a vast amount of the mansion's woodwork, but he supervised the work of at least eight men. Among them were the enslaved men Charles, Pompey, Patrick (Williams's apprentice), Caesar, Peter, Prince, and Archer, as well as a white man by the name of Charles Richmond Gascoynes who promised to pay off his debt owed to Pinckney through working under Williams's supervision.

The Pinckney Mansion's (Figure 3) architectural significance has often been compared to Drayton Hall (Figure 4), suggesting that Pinckney used the Ashley River plantation as a primary

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[2] Charles Pinckney, "1746 Nov 4 An Account of Carpenters and Joiners Work Proposed to Be Done in a Brick House for Charles Pinckney Esq. at the North End of the Bay of Charles Town," 4 November 1746, The Pinckney Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

precedent. However, dendrochronology tests have discovered that the roof timbers of Drayton Hall were harvested in the winter of 1747, giving Drayton Hall a construction timeline of 1748 to 1752. According to the Pinckney Papers, by October of 1747, the masonry work of the mansion had been complete, and by the end of that month bills for payment for the slate roof work had been submitted. Together, this indicates that the Pinckney Mansion pre-dated Drayton Hall by two years. For John Williams, this evidence indicates that Pinckney's architectural designs and Williams's execution of these designs may have influenced the design of Drayton Hall. They most certainly influenced the Miles Brewton House with its stair landing Palladian window and dining room nearly identical to the one in the Pinckney Mansion. Due to the striking similarity of these elements and the timeline of construction, it is thought that Williams very well may have been responsible for the carpentry of the Miles Brewton house as well. At the time of its completion in 1750, the Pinckney Mansion was one of the first Palladian villas to be built in Charleston and one of the earliest homes in the United States to have a temple front superimposed on its façade. The façade of the house consisted of five bays. The three center bays comprised the architectural focus of the Ionic temple front. Marble pilasters separated each of the three center bays and supported an entablature and pediment. It has been suggested that Pinckney not only introduced the pattern of the temple front into Charleston's architectural lexicon, but that he was also one of the first in the Colonies to emphasize the orders against a brick facade, a defining feature of American Georgian architecture.

On 12 May 1750, Charles and Eliza Lucas Pinckney granted Williams his freedom. Three weeks later, Williams placed an advertisement in the South Carolina Gazette for work as a carpenter and joiner, noting that he was a free man of color. Williams continued to work for Charles Pinckney after the completion of the mansion. In a June 1750 to April 1752 document titled "The Hon. Charles Pinckney Esq. to Jne Williams,"[6] Williams recorded the tasks completed by himself and men enslaved by Pinckney including Williams's former apprentice, Pompey. Williams noted tasks completed by himself and men enslaved by Pinckney, including altering dormer windows, putting on latches and locks, mending a table, putting up bedsteads, and carting cypress boards." Importantly, this document and others indicate that John Williams was not the only enslaved man to benefit from Williams's building talents. By teaching other enslaved men the carpentry and joinery trades and supervising their work, Williams equipped those men with skills that elevated them to the status of craftsmen. Because of Williams, these enslaved men were able to earn wages, contract work for themselves, gaining a degree of independence formerly unimagined.

Before the Pinckney's left Charleston for Britain in 1753, Charles recorded that Williams paid him £4 for "a Book of Architecture."[7] The book purchased from Pinckney was James Gibbs's *A Book of Architecture, containing Designs of Buildings and Ornaments*. Published in 1728, Gibbs opens his treatise by defining the nature of the publication and the audience. The collection of designs was "undertaken at the instance of several Persons of Quality who were of opinion, that such a Work…would be of use to such Gentlemen as might be concerned in Building, especially in the remote parts of the Country, where little or no assistance for Designs can be procured. Such may be here furnished with Draughts of useful and convenient Buildings and proper Ornaments, which may be executed by an Workman who understands Lines, either as here Design'd, or with some Alteration, which may be easily made by a person of Judgement." [8]This

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[6] Charles Pinckney and John Williams, "The Hon. Charles Pinckney Esq. To Jne Williams," 25 June 1750, The Pinckney Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.
[7] Charles Pinckney, "Account Book, 1753–1757," 1753, Pinckney Family Papers, 1708–1878, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
[8] Gibbs, James, James Gibbs, and James Gibbs. Gibbs Book of Architecture: An Eighteenth-century Classic. Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2008.

pattern book contained 140 plates including a double page perspective of St Martin in the Field's (Figure 5) floor plan, elevations, and sections. Including country houses and churches, the book offered a wide variety of buildings and decorative types, from chapels and university buildings, tombs, and sarcophagi, to chimneypieces, windows, door surrounds, niches, pavilions, obelisks, gates, vases, and sundials. Gibbs's architectural influence was apparent throughout Pinckney's designs for the Pinckney Mansion, most notably in his design for a coved ceiling in his dining room, which are featured heavily throughout Gibbs. Unknowingly, Gibbs declared that the designs found within his publication could even be built by an enslaved person, who were considered inferior in all aspects of 18th century society.

The importance of this treatise being purchased by Williams reaches much further than the Pinckney Mansion and its influence on domestic architecture in Charleston. It is well known that Gibbs's design of St. Martin's in the Field's, was the direct precedent for the design of St. Michael's Church, Charleston (Figure 6). The success of the book helped to establish St. Martin's was the prototype of many churches in the English-speaking world and by the 1730's the church had become the most compelling Protestant Church form. He introduced a monumental projecting hexastyle temple portico across the entire west front, allowing an unbroken continuity from its outer columns to the evenly spaced pilasters of the north and south elevations. And for the first time the spire rose directly from the pediment. The temple portico. multi-tiered steeple, and the treatment of the internal columns

and galleries became the rule rather than the exception, particularly in the newly founded North American colonies and St Micheal's was the first of colonial churches to follow the example of St Martin's.

Construction of St Michael's Church began in 1751 and from October 1752 to November 1754 Samuel Prioleau Jr., who was secretary of the church commissioners and was responsible for administering project funds provided by the provincial government, began recording tallies of enslaved workmen.[9] These tables (Figure 7) show not only the names of the enslaved who constructed St. Michael's brick walls, columns, and steeple, but also the number of days each worked and how many men were present each day and each month. Within these tally sheets, Charles Pinckney is recorded three times as having enslaved men working on-site at St Michael's. These men named Scipio, Joe, and Cudgeo, worked a combined total of 334 days, and on 7 August 1755 Pinckney received a certificate for £125 to cover this exact number of days at the rate of seven shillings and six pence a day. These enslaved men very likely worked closely with Williams during the construction of the Pinckney Mansion 3 years earlier. The training that they received under the supervision of Williams allowed them to effectively execute work on St. Michael's. Familiar with architectural details set forth by the requests of Pinckney, they would have little difficulty understanding the tectonics and composition of St. Michael's. Perhaps Williams himself, after purchasing the Gibbs treatise, served as an expert eye and offered advice, particularly in regard to interior woodwork and the extensive timber framing details within the roof and steeple.

Essential to the St. Michael's project was the masonry work and the production of brick. In late 1751, early 1752 deliveries of lime, sand, and bricks were made and the foundations of the church walls begun. Enslaved workmen were responsible for the erection of scaffolding, the burning of oyster shell for quick lime, the processing of mortar and the laying of load bearing brick walls and vaults. Furthermore, it was the enslaved on plantations such as Boone Hall

[9] Records of St. Michael's Church at the South Carolina Historical Society, folder 0320.05 (T) 01, located in St. Michael's oversized box 1

As Dr. Williams has shown in his history of St. Michael's, the latter half of 1751 and the first half of 1752 saw a flurry of activity at the construction site as According to the daybook of the secretary of the commissioners, also included in the St. Michael's collection, Governor James Glen laid the cornerstone at the southeast corner of the church on 17 February 1752. From the notations of the in the secretary's daybook, it appears that the brickwork of St. Michael's commenced in early 1752 and continued through August of that year. Owing to the destructive hurricane that arrived in mid-September 1752, however, construction ceased for several weeks.

Labor Tally Sheets for St. Michael's Church, Charleston, 1752–1754

Owner	Slave	Oct. 1752	Nov. 1752	Dec. 1752	Jan. 1753	Feb. 1753	March 1753	April 1753	May 1753	June 1753	July 1753	Aug. 1753	Sept. 1753	Oct. 1753
Isaac Mazyck	Sandy	10	3	20	16.5	8.5	27	23	16.5	0	0	0	0	8
B. Mazyck	Cain	8	11	19	14	11	24.5	23	24.5	23.5	25	23.5	25	24
R. Brewton	Blackwall	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
T. Doughty	Simon	10	0	0	15	20	27	23	25.5	22.5	26	16	25	24
T. Doughty	King	10	0	1	15	20	27	22.5	25.5	22.5	25	23.5	25	24
D. Bourget	Moses	0	13	19	17	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J. McCall	Harry	0	13	15	0	0	0	14	22.5	18.5	25	17	1	6.5
I. [or J.] Dobell	Simon	0	13	20	15	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M. M. Prioleau	Abram	0	3	13	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dr. J. Martin	Cuffee	0	2	20	16.5	14.5	27	23	22	7	26	9	7	24
T. Weaver	Wando	0	0	0	14	18	23	23	19	6	25	23.5	25	24
T. Weaver	Sancho	0	0	0	14	19	20	23	19	7	25	23.5	23	15
W. Backshell	June	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
W. Backshell	Jemmy	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	23.5	23.5	24
H. Sommers	Ben	0	0	0	0	2	27	23	8	0	0	0	0	0
H. Sommers	"Negroes"	0	0	0	0	0	0	(7) 40	(1) 8	0	(5) 86	(3) 24	(1) 7	(1) 9
H. Sommers	Oroonoko	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
H. Christie	Jack	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
H. Christie	Prince	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Timothy	Abram	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	19	16	26	14	4	24
J. Lewis	York	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	18	6	21	0	0	0
J. / Sarah Lewis	Milford	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	19	6	25	15	23	24
M. M. Prioleau	Jemmy	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	19	5	25	23.5	23	24
James Laurens	Jack	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	12	4	25	23.5	1	0
John Fleming	Quamina	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	17	0	0	0	0	0
S. Prioleau	Jehu	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11.5	14.5	24	21	15	12
Dan. Sopar	Michael	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	25	8.5	0	0
C. Pinckney	Scipio	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5.5	25	9	0	0
C. Pinckney	Joe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J. Parsons	[blank]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	0
S. Prioleau	Wooster [?]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0
S. Prioleau	Titus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
C. Pinckney	Cudgeo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J. Martin	Simon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
C. Dewar	Johnny	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
C. Dewar	Quash	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
W. Backshell	John	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. Sommers	Peter	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. Sommers	Cato	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	"White Men"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
John Pawley	"White Man"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. Pawley	[blank]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. Tucker	"White Man"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jacob	"White Man"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
John Miller	"White Man"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. Sommers	[blank]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monthly Total		47	58	127	142	140	202.5	327.5	306	168	472	303	227.5	279.5

The hurricane brought waist-high water around the church walls and carried away the wooden fences, timber, and lime.[2] The surviving tally sheets commence on 10 October 1752, presumably the day on which construction began anew.

John Williams is but one example of hundreds of enslaved black craftspeople who toiled in the construction of Colonial and Pre-Civil War America. In the case of Charleston, credit must be given to these craftspeople in developing not only the built environment but also the affluence of this city. The practice of hiring out enslaved people to build the great 18th to mid 19th century structures reinforces the notion that Classical and Traditional architecture is not a racist or prejudiced discipline of design. Yes, the institution of slavery has left a permanent stain upon

American society, but it was through this unfortunate practice that the traditions of continental Africa survived. Just as many aspects of American culture such as music, food, and visual arts have African American influences, so does architecture. American Classicism is rooted not only in the Greco-Roman, but in the richness of the village mindset of the African American community. The legacy of men like John Williams lives on through modern times. Eighty percent of African American sacred architecture derives from a Classical or Traditional precedent. The importance of the church in the African American Community has and continues to be paramount. As an institution, it is the heart of the community, the very place where prayers are made, and souls are inspired to change the world. Ninety percent of main administrative buildings of Historically Black Colleges and Universities are Classically designed. Leading institutions have modeled these central structures after Independence Hall. As we continue to have conversations around racial and social justice, we must remember that the Vitruvian triad of Firmitatis, Utilitatis and Venustatis leads us not only in the design of architecture but also in the design of New American society, where all men are indeed equal.

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