

Redefining Henry Laurens

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Over eight years after the battles of Lexington and Concord, three American representatives found themselves in Paris to settle peace terms following the patriots' military victory in the American Revolution. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay negotiated with Britain's representatives to obtain official British recognition of American independence and to secure boundaries that would allow for the new nation's expansion westward.¹ On the final day of treaty negotiations, a battered South Carolinian arrived at the negotiating table—Henry Laurens had been a state prisoner in the Tower of London after the British intersected his ship en route to Europe on a diplomatic mission.² The British had agreed to release Laurens from the Tower at the conclusion of the war, and Congress had requested he attend the peace negotiations in Paris.

Upon his belated arrival to the negotiations, Laurens offered a single addition to the nearly completed document: he stipulated that British forces refrain from “carrying away any Negroes,” when they evacuated the United States.³ Though last minute, both sides agreed upon Article VII, especially as the American negotiators were well aware that planters had lost slaves as runaways to British lines.⁴ Of the American diplomats at Paris, Laurens had been the most invested in the slave-holding southern plantation economy. Laurens's contribution to the Treaty of Paris not only reflected his lifetime involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, but expressed his unwavering support of slavery even as an elderly man. Laurens imported more African slaves into the British North American colonies

¹ “Treaty of Paris (1783),” www.ourdocuments.gov, accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=6>.

² Arnett G. Lindsay, “Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Great Britain Bearing on the Return of Negro Slaves, 1783-1828,” *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 4, (Oct., 1920): 394; Gregory D. Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John Laurens and Henry Laurens,” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 3 (Aug., 1997): 526.

³ “The Definitive Treaty of Peace 1783,” *U.S. National Archives & Records Administration*, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=6&page=transcript>, accessed March 5, 2017; Draft Peace Treaty Presented by Richard Oswald to the American Peace Commissioners, Nov. 25, 1782, *The Papers of John Adams*, 18 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003-2016) 14: 89 n8.

⁴ Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (London, BBC Press, 2005) 139.

than any previous trader, owned slaves, and expressed support for the institution of slavery through a variety of means throughout his lifetime. Laurens's addition of the provision regarding slaves confirmed his unwillingness to change the status of slavery in the nascent United States. After spending over one year imprisoned in the Tower of London, Laurens still did not hold sympathy for the thousands of Africans he, and other slavers, had imprisoned for life.

Historians have grappled with Laurens's stance on the morality of slavery, considering him a slave trader who, later in life, advocated against the institution. The historian Joseph P. Kelly recognizes that Laurens was not the humanitarian that previous historians claimed. Kelly argues that Laurens faced guilt over his practices regarding slaves, but recognizes that Laurens was unwilling to go against the southern status quo of supporting the practice of slavery.⁵ Kelly's portrayal of Laurens mirrors the well-known Jeffersonian struggle—belief in slavery's inherent violation of human liberty and natural equality, yet failure to initiate progress to liberate enslaved African-Americans. While historians have interpreted Laurens as a slave-trader-turned-good, or at least as remorseful in his later years, Laurens's actions do not reflect a struggle over the morality of trading and owning slaves; instead, his actions reveal an active maintenance of those institutions, especially in his quest to amass personal wealth.

Untangling Historiography

Although historians have not disputed Laurens's scale of involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, scholars have struggled to understand his conscience regarding his business dealings. Past scholars have painted him as a slave trader who realized the trade's immoralities later in his life, but Laurens's actions fail to support this claim. Kelly argues that if Laurens had overcome the southern normalization of slavery, his guilt would have guided him to criticize the system and mend his abuses.⁶ Laurens's business letters, however, do not contain content questioning the trade, and his personal letters reveal only some mentions of the trade. There is little evidence that demonstrates any expression of remorse regarding the institutions of slave trading and slave holding. Rather, he supported the slave trade and slavery to obtain wealth and status in the South Carolina elite. Upon examination of the cases where Laurens appears to have a bothered conscience, it becomes clear that his concerns were not heartfelt but meant to create a supposed façade of empathy.

Since the American Civil War, historians, activist groups, and other organizations have used Laurens's August 1776 letter to his son John as the key piece of evidence for his supposed sentiments on slavery. In this

⁵ Joseph P. Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience in History," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 107, no. 2 (April 2006): 121.

⁶ Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience," 121.

letter, Laurens wrote that he detested slavery, making it appear that he was a humanitarian opponent of the institution. The Zenger Club, a New York-based historical society, published Laurens's letter to his son in an 1861 pamphlet, as follows:

“You know my Dear Sir. I abhor Slavery, I was born in a Country where Slavery had been established by British Kings & Parliaments as well as by the Laws of that Country Ages before my existence, I found the Christian Religion & Slavery growing under the same authority & cultivation_ I nevertheless disliked it... not less than £20000. St^g would all my Negroes produce if sold at public Auction tomorrow, I am not the man who enslaved them, they are indebted to English Men for that favour, nevertheless I am devising means for manumitting many of them & cutting off the entail of Slavery_ great powers oppose me, the Laws & Customs of my Country, my own & the avarice of my Country Men_ What will my Children say if I deprive them of so much Estate? These are difficulties but not insuperable I will do as much as I can in my time & leave the rest to a better hand.”⁷

The Zenger Club used the above edited version of the letter, and omitted the preceding paragraphs in which Laurens protested that Parliament had been employing Englishmen to “steal those Negroes from the Americans,”—slaves he saw as his and other white men's property.⁸ The Zenger Club's edited version of the letter failed to reveal that Laurens wanted to maintain the status quo of owning slaves in the South or that he had been facilitating the very thing he blamed on the English.

The Club misused the edited letter as a case study to demonstrate the broader southern perspective on slavery during the American Revolution, suggesting that all slave owners were morally opposed to slavery, yet had been thrust into its trade out of economic necessity. In arguing that the entire Revolutionary South struggled with the ethics of slavery, the nineteenth-century northerners argued that the Founding Fathers had the same internal conflicts. According to the Zenger Club, it was the antebellum slave owners whose normalization of slavery was contrary to the Founding Fathers' plans for the country, making the 1776 letter useful in their northern, Civil War context.⁹ The Club used one letter to portray Laurens as mentally grappling with the institution, but failed to reveal that

⁷ Henry Laurens to John Laurens on Aug. 14, 1776, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 16 vols. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968-2003) 11: 224. From now on I will refer to these papers as *PHL*. Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers Jr. edited *The Papers of Henry Laurens* volumes 1-5; Rogers and David R. Chesnutt edited volumes 5-10; Chesnutt and C. James Taylor edited volumes 11-16.

⁸ Henry Laurens to John Laurens on Aug. 14, 1776, *PHL* 11: 224, quoted; passage on p. 224-225.

⁹ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 86-87.

Laurens's son, to whom he was writing, was an early abolitionist. Laurens was aware that his son was sympathetic to those enslaved, and it is possible he felt he had to dilute his complaints by following them with a statement of his hatred of slavery. As there is essentially no further historical evidence to reveal Laurens's hatred of the institution, he could have written this key paragraph to appease his eldest son. The Zenger Club was the first group to misuse Laurens's letters by failing to reveal the entirety of the letter, his extensive involvement in the slave trade, and his other actions that reinforced slavery.¹⁰

It was not until 1910 that Laurens's letter condemning slavery resurfaced in the *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* (SCHM). Instead of including Laurens's 1776 letter to John, the SCHM used one of John's writings, which incompletely quoted his father's letter regarding slavery. John's letter presented his father as a staunch advocate against the institution of slavery. David Duncan Wallace, a prominent South Carolina historian, used the SCHM letter, along with the Zenger Club's argument, when he authored *The Life of Henry Laurens, with a sketch of the life of Lieutenant-Colonel John Laurens*. Wallace had "been the custodian of Laurens's reputation" for the past ninety years and presented what today would be considered a controversial point of view on the transatlantic slave trade and a naïve perspective on Laurens.¹¹ Wallace claimed that African slavery was inevitable, suggesting that Africans were destined to be subservient to others.¹² He failed to recognize the atrocities that Laurens committed as a slave trader and painted him as a progressive, anti-slavery humanitarian instead. Kelly defends Wallace, arguing that Wallace was the first historian to cypher through Laurens's thousands of letters and other documents, and therefore should be applauded and not solely criticized. However, he criticizes Wallace for taking the Zenger letter at "face value" for Laurens's beliefs and further misusing his writings.¹³

The skewed interpretation of Laurens's 1776 letter continued into the 1940s. At the conclusion of World War II, the Freedom Train travelled the United States carrying "crucial documents of democracy for public display."¹⁴ The Train's goal was to remind the American people that their free government could not be taken for granted in a period of rising threats of "foreign ideologies," particularly Russian communism. Displayed beside the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, the edited version of Laurens's 1776 letter to John was the third document regarding

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience," 87.

¹² David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens; with a Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant-Colonel John Laurens* (NY and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915): 27, Internet Archive, online at <https://archive.org/stream/lifeofhenrylaure00walluoft#page/n7/mode/2up>. Accessed on Oct. 10, 2016.

¹³ Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience," 87.

¹⁴ Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience," 82.

slavery on the moving museum.¹⁵ Kelly argues that by only displaying these three documents in this “self-congratulatory” exhibit, the Freedom Train disgracefully represented the history of slavery in the United States.¹⁶ The exhibit misrepresented crucial national history by failing to include evidence of American support for slavery, or evidence of the results of the institution, such as the Civil War, scientific racism, Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux Klan. Not only did the exhibit selectively portray the country’s complex history of slavery, but Laurens’s 1776 letter to John does not compare to the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment as a document to end slavery or better the condition of African-Americans in the United States.

The Zenger Club, the SCHM, and the Freedom Train were only some of the major groups to incorrectly represent Laurens. Only in the last two decades have historians like Joseph P. Kelly and Gregory D. Massey come to see Laurens as a multifaceted figure who was not a staunch moral opponent of slavery. Laurens’s younger years are characterized by his desire to succeed in the South Carolina economy and his lack of questioning the slave trading business. At the end of his life, he failed to manumit his approximately 260 slaves. The 1776 letter to John was edited and repeatedly used to portray Laurens as struggling with slavery’s morality, which inaccurately represents its author.¹⁷ Laurens did not leave written evidence expressing qualms over the ethicality of the slave trade while he was engaging in it.¹⁸ Lauren’s letters to English merchants were purely business, never mentioning they were bargaining over human beings. While there is no written evidence of Laurens’s questioning the institution’s morality as he sought to enter the trade, Kelly claims there is no way Laurens came into the business “innocently” because the morality of the slave trade was already a topic of discussion in the colonies and in Britain.¹⁹ Disregarding increasing condemnation of the slave trade, Laurens seemed eager to become a top name in the business and reap the profits. Emphasizing that the colonial slave trader was “more avid than the planter in the race for wealth,” not even Wallace shied away from Laurens’s desire to become rich.²⁰

Success in the Slave Trade

Henry Laurens’s path to becoming the largest slave trader in British North America started in 1747 when he was twenty-three years old. Laurens received merchant training at the slave-trading house of James Crottatt, one of the foremost London merchants, and expected to receive an offer

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷ David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor, *Introduction*, *PHL* 16: xxi.

¹⁸ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 76.

of partnership at its conclusion.²¹ After communicating with Crokatt for months, Laurens found that Crokatt “had given his word to another Person” to form a business partnership.²² Laurens was clever, however, and had already accepted a partnership with another trader in case the opportunity with Crokatt failed. This revealed Laurens’s early shrewdness for business. Thus began Laurens’s partnership with George Austin, a merchant of an established trading firm in Charles Town. Crokatt charged Laurens with “Cruelty & ingratitude,” and cleared all of his engagements with the young Laurens.²³ Once working with Austin, Laurens wrote that slaves “would sell at a monstrous price” in Charles Town, and in another letter he wrote, “there is a prospect of pretty good Sales.”²⁴ These instances represented Laurens’s priorities—entrance into the trade to gain wealth.

Laurens was a self-made man, working his way to the top of the slave trade with astuteness and skill. Unlike his close friend Christopher Gadsden, Laurens had no capital to invest in his own shipments.²⁵ Just as Laurens was seeking to form business connections in the trade, his father died in 1747, leaving him an inheritance worth about 5,000 pounds. Laurens’s father did not leave him 5,000 pounds in currency, however, but in property and material items, which still left him cash poor.²⁶ Without hard cash of his own to invest or immediate ties with people involved in the slave trade, he needed Austin, who had ready cash, accumulated capital, and established trading connections.²⁷ As the junior partner of Austin and Laurens, Laurens stayed busy making connections, learning the business, and amassing wealth.

Focused on making profits instead of being concerned for the lives of African slaves, Laurens and his partners accumulated huge profits from 1751 to 1769 in the transatlantic slave trade.²⁸ Kelly calculates the firm’s total net profit from slaves at a rough estimate of 160,000 pounds, though this may even be a conservative figure. They imported around 7,600 enslaved Africans during this boom period, and each ship brought in hundreds of Africans for sale.²⁹ From a 1755 voyage of the *Pearl*, five healthy male slaves sold for 290 pounds each, while the bulk of the ship-

²¹ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 104.

²² Henry Laurens to Elizabeth Laurens, Dec. 16, 1748, *PHL* 1: 179.

²³ Henry Laurens to George Austin on Dec. 17, 1748, *PHL* 1: 182.

²⁴ Henry Laurens to John Knight on Jan. 20, 1748, *PHL* 1: 205.

²⁵ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, quote on p. 105. Kelly’s number is in South Carolina currency, in which Laurens’s clients paid his firms. I use the word “pounds” to indicate the SC currency. The SC currency ratio to pounds sterling was 7:1, thus 5,000 pounds in SC currency was 715 pounds sterling.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 112. From 1751-58 his company was ‘Austin and Laurens,’ from 1759-61, the company was ‘Austin, Laurens & Appleby.’

²⁹ *Ibid.* The value in pounds sterling was 22,860.

ment was sold for 270 or 280 pounds each.³⁰ From 1751 to 1761, Laurens's companies brought in 61 cargoes of slaves into Charles Town and paid 68,010 pounds for duties on these human imports. The next highest paying merchant paid 43,127 pounds in duties, revealing that Laurens's companies were greatly exceeding the imports of their competitors; he was achieving his goal of prominence and wealth.³¹

While Laurens would become the most successful slave trader in the British North American colonies, his business was not immune to the effects of war, struggling markets, or shipping catastrophes. These times of pressure highlighted Laurens's anxiousness to keep amounting profit at the expense of the enslaved. When war broke out between England and France in 1756, trade to and from the British North American colonies suffered.³² Laurens's business and wealth depended on British protection, so he was one of the traders who advocated that Carolina was as important as Barbados and Jamaica, hoping the, "Measures on the Continent will be alter'd... and a Campaign will be open'd in the Spring," to defend the colony's slave property, land, and shipping.³³ Not only did the merchants fear invasion of South Carolina and French economic intervention, but rice crops were "much short of former years," which made Laurens eager to take the "first tolerable offer" to sell his cargo.³⁴ During this period of wartime unease, Laurens was concerned about his investments in the transatlantic slave trade, not the lives lost en route to the colonies or the souls that were degraded in bondage.

Laurens demonstrated further apathy toward the fate of African slaves when the 1755 *Emperor* voyage nearly resulted in economic disaster. When Austin and Laurens invested in the *Emperor*, the South Carolina merchants took a huge risk to maximize potential profit. The cost of the ship was above average, but their plan to pack 570 slaves on board the ship, rather than its maximum of 435, would offset the higher purchase price. The ship's captain, Charles Gwynn, managed to purchase only 390 slaves.³⁵ Laurens wrote to Captain Gwynn that he could still make "a Glorious sale" of the cargo if he were to sail to Charles Town.³⁶ Disaster struck the *Emperor*, however, when the ship encountered "a violent Gale of Wind" that forced Captain Gwynn to stray away from South Carolina and head to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

³¹ Robert Higgins, "Charles Town Merchants and Factors Dealing in the External Negro Trade 1735-1775," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 65, no. 4, (Oct. 1964): 206. In pounds sterling Laurens paid 9,716.

³² Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers Jr., *Introduction*, *PHL* 2: xvii.

³³ Henry Laurens to Stephenson, Holford & Co. on Dec. 29, 1756, *PHL* 2: 386.

³⁴ Henry Laurens to Jacob Cooper on Nov. 26, 1756, *PHL* 2: 364.

³⁵ Henry Laurens to John Knight on June 26, 1755, *PHL* 1: 270; Henry Laurens to Law, Satterthwaite, & Jones on Dec. 14th 1755, *PHL* 2: 38. 7,100 pounds sterling and 3,000 pounds sterling, respectively.

³⁶ Henry Laurens to Charles Gwynn on June 12, 1755, *PHL* 1: 263.

Jamaica. One hundred and twenty slaves died during the seven-day period of the storm and “a great many were disorder’d.”³⁷ In Jamaica, Gwynn sold the slaves that had survived the Middle Passage and seven long days of being battered by the storm.³⁸ Laurens estimated he lost around 14,000 pounds from the poor sales of the *Emperor* voyage. Kelly notes that Laurens took this economic failure with “his characteristic optimism” when he wrote to the ship’s owners, “’tis fruitless to think of what can’t be remedied.”³⁹ Laurens did not seem to care that lost lives, of course, could not be remedied. Only concerned with the lost profit, Laurens exhibited a “complete lack of conscience” when he failed to show any remorse over the fatal *Emperor* voyage.⁴⁰

Deciphering Sentiments: Failure to Act on the Grounds of Morality

Laurens continued to rise to wealth not only through the transatlantic slave trade, but through increasingly implementing slave labor. His personal ownership of hundreds of slaves further undermines Wallace’s characterization of Laurens as a “southern man of conscience,” and a firm opponent of slavery.⁴¹ In May 1756, Laurens made his first land purchase of a 1,250-acre plantation called Wambaw on the Santee River.⁴² By 1768, Laurens had purchased five more plantations in South Carolina and Georgia: Mepkin, Broughton Island, New Hope, Turtle River, and Wright’s Savannah.⁴³ In 1768, Laurens admitted that the properties he owned “denominate me a greater planter than ever I had an idea of becoming.”⁴⁴ Regarding the treatment of his slaves, Massey acknowledges that Laurens demonstrated behavior and language that could deem him both a paternalistic and patriarchal slave owner.⁴⁵ In 1765, Laurens wrote to his overseer Abraham Schad to “remember that he [a slave] is a human Creature” and

³⁷ Henry Laurens to Devonshire, Reeve & Lloyd on June 24, 1755, *PHL* 1: 267.

³⁸ Henry Laurens to John Knight on June 26, 1755, *PHL* 1: 270.

³⁹ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 110; Henry Laurens to Devonshire, Reeve, & Lloyd on July 4, 1755, *PHL* 1: 286. Laurens lost 2,000 pounds sterling.

⁴⁰ Kelly, “Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience,” 112.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1. Kelly used this title sardonically, as his paper disproved this false identification.

⁴² Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers Jr., *Introduction*, *PHL* 2: xviii.

⁴³ Gregory D. Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John Laurens and Henry Laurens,” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 3 (Aug. 1997): 497; Philip Morgan, “Three Planters and Their Slaves: Perspectives on Slavery in Virginia, South Carolina, and Jamaica, 1750-1790,” in *Race and Family in the Colonial South*, ed. Winthrop D. Jordan and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 55.

⁴⁴ Henry Laurens to Richard Oswald on Apr. 27, 1768, *PHL* 5: 668.

⁴⁵ Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery,” 498, note 9.

deserves to be treated with care.”⁴⁶ This acknowledgment of humanity is shocking, considering Laurens’s ambivalence to the thousands of slaves he imported into South Carolina to make his fortune. Perhaps his physical proximity to, and long-term interaction with, the slaves he owned made him acknowledge their humanity. As a slave owner, Laurens did not approve of “tareing assunder” families in the process of buying or selling slaves for his personal ownership unless it was an “irresistible necessity.”⁴⁷ While Laurens’s orders to Schad depicted him as a caring and kind slave owner, yet still a slave owner, he seemed to control his slaves with the hand of a patriarch. He insisted that an overseer be present with the slaves at all times, and he recommended they “chastise...the most stubborn slaves...severely.”⁴⁸ If kind treatment did not placate his slaves, Laurens did not hesitate to reveal his strict sense of authority and use violent punishment.

Laurens made it clear that his economic endeavors were his priority in a pamphlet war between him and Egerton Leigh, a judge of the vice-admiralty court. In 1767, Leigh published a pamphlet called *The Man Unmasked*, in which he declared Laurens a hypocrite for ceasing slave trading at the supposed nagging of his conscience, yet keeping all of the “jewels” he made at the expense of enslaved souls, including the slaves he continued to hold as property.⁴⁹ Leigh felt obligated to expose a man “who cherished a passion so evil and pernicious in its nature and effects.”⁵⁰ In the wake of attack or criticism, elite southern society expected men to defend and uphold their honor; Laurens could not stand to be called a hypocrite.⁵¹ Naturally, Laurens crafted his response to Leigh in the form of a pamphlet. In *Appendix to the Extracts from the Proceedings of the High Court of Vice-Admiralty*, Laurens condemned Leigh for criticizing his private affairs in the eye of the public, picked apart his “BAREFACED FALSEHOODS,” and condemned his “*Malignity*.”⁵² Most importantly, Laurens listed the reasons for his withdrawal from the slave trade in 1763—all of which he described as economic. He did not claim to cease trading on the grounds that he believed it was immoral. In fact, just one year after his cessation of business in the transatlantic slave trade, Laurens “spoke boldly against” a three-year prohibition of the importation of slaves into the colonies.⁵³ His protest against a prohibition of slave importation was likely due to his desire to maintain the South’s economic prosperity, but the root of his protest advocated for

⁴⁶ Henry Laurens to Abraham Schad on Aug. 23, 1765, *PHL* 4: 666.

⁴⁷ Henry Laurens to Elias Ball on Apr. 1, 1765, *PHL* 4: 595.

⁴⁸ Henry Laurens to John Smith on May 30, 1765, *PHL* 4: 633.

⁴⁹ Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery,” 500; *The Man Unmasked* by Egerton Leigh, 1767, *PHL* 6: 528, quoted.

⁵⁰ *The Man Unmasked* by Egerton Leigh, 1767, *PHL* 6: 527.

⁵¹ Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery,” 500.

⁵² *Appendix to the Extracts from the Proceedings of the High Court of Vice-Admiralty* by Henry Laurens, Aug. 3, 1776, *PHL* 7: 17, 44.

⁵³ Henry Laurens to George Appleby on Oct 18, 1764, *PHL* 4: 479.

the maintenance of the institution of the slave trade and slavery within the colonies.

Kelly points out that if Laurens were opposed to the trade due to weight on his conscience, he would not have been unique, even within elite South Carolina. While the majority of elite South Carolinians did not question slavery, there were plenty of men who refused to participate in the slave trade due to its evil nature, such as Laurens's brother, James, and Gabriel Manigault.⁵⁴ Laurens's son, John, went a step further when he advocated against slavery and expressed an ardent desire to lead a regiment of black soldiers in the Revolution.⁵⁵

As the War for Independence unfolded, Laurens continued to make decisions that reinforced the institution of the slave trade and slavery. The wartime period made it clear that Laurens valued the success of the Revolution over the lives of slaves. As the President of the South Carolina Council of Safety, Laurens grumbled that the British were protecting slaves who escaped to their lines and were promoting slave raiding of coastal plantations. Refusing to be undermined by the British and the fleeing slaves, Laurens ordered a raid of a camp of runaways on Sullivan's Island in 1775. The raiders disguised themselves as Native Americans and burned down the shelters, injuring three or four men and leaving another four dead.⁵⁶ Laurens later wrote that he hoped the attack would "humble our Negroes in general."⁵⁷ There is no written evidence to suggest that Laurens struggled with his decision to order the sack of the runaway camp for the greater cause of independence.

Apart from Laurens's 1776 letter to John, there is another case in which Laurens appears to express concern over slavery, but his following statement undermined his supposed worry. In 1768, Laurens wrote a private letter that conveyed he had withdrawn from the slave trade five years earlier "because of many acts, from the Masters & others concerned toward the wretched Negroes from the time of purchasing to that of selling them again."⁵⁸ This statement contradicted his previous claims of quitting the trade for economic reasons in his pamphlet to Egerton Leigh. In the following sentences, however, Laurens stated that he had never witnessed an act of cruelty toward an enslaved African that was equal to the horrors "exercised upon those poor Irish."⁵⁹ He continued by expressing that enslaved Africans were better off than Irish immigrants because they received white paternal care in the colonies, while the Irish were transported there without attention to their welfare during the voyage or upon their disembark-

⁵⁴ Kelly, "Henry Laurens: The Southern Man of Conscience," 114.

⁵⁵ Massey, "The Limits of Antislavery," 512.

⁵⁶ Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journey's of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2006) 23.

⁵⁷ Council of Safety to Richard Richardson on Dec. 19, 1775, *PHL* 10: 576.

⁵⁸ Henry Laurens to William Fisher on Nov. 9, 1768, *PHL* 6: 149.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

kation.⁶⁰ Laurens's qualifying statements undermined his supposed claim that he withdrew from the slave trade due to its immorality. He abated the evils of the institution of slavery and failed to recognize that being enslaved was entirely different from being a poor immigrant. If Laurens had regrets about his participation in the slave trade and was "an advocate of universal emancipation" by 1776, as Wallace claimed, his behavior and words did not demonstrate this attitude.⁶¹

Conclusion

Thirty-five years before Thomas Jefferson first expressed his 'wolf by the ear' trope, Laurens came to a similar conclusion: in a letter to Alexander Hamilton, he recognized that the "southern states are not at this moment in a disposition to be persuaded" to bring an end to slavery, and hoped that "God forbid our conversion by too long a Delay, shall be the Effect of a Direful struggle."⁶² Like Jefferson, Laurens understood the challenges that would arise upon the emancipation of slaves, not only for South Carolina but for all of the colonies, and later for the country. Laurens's inaction points to his inability to look past the difficulties of maintaining a functioning economic system and the elite southerners' way of life without slave labor. Laurens economically, socially, and politically supported slavery, and thus cannot be placed on a pedestal as a man who upheld morally progressive ideas, especially as his contemporaries were actively protesting the institution. He did not break away from the general acceptance of importing slaves and exploiting slave labor, but defended it in order to gain wealth and maintain the elite southern society. Toward the end of his life, Laurens claimed to have offered freedom to a handful of his slaves, but they "declined the Bounty" to remain living under his care.⁶³ At his death, he freed one slave.⁶⁴

For over the past century, historians and American institutions have portrayed Laurens as a slave trader who came to stand morally above his peers regarding his sentiments toward the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the colonies. Only recently have scholars examined his complexities. In reality, Laurens did nothing to halt the advancement of slavery, but further embedded it into the southern economy. Laurens was not an early abolitionist, as Wallace suggested, nor was he plagued with guilt over bolstering the southern slave economy by importing thousands of enslaved

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 445.

⁶² Thomas Jefferson, Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes on April 22, 1820. *Founder's Online*, National Archives, online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1234>, accessed on Nov. 1, 2016; Henry Laurens to Alexander Hamilton on April 19, 1785, *PHL* 16: 555.

⁶³ Henry Laurens to Alexander Hamilton on April 19, 1785. *PHL* 16: 554.

⁶⁴ David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor, "Introduction," *PHL* 16: xxi.

people from Africa. Laurens's practices not only revealed the reality of the slave trade and slavery, but his true attitude toward the institutions, which contradicted his written condemnation in his 1776 letter to his son. Though the writers of history have historically pointed to Henry Laurens with pride, it is another matter entirely whether they honestly believed in his supposed abhorrence of slavery, or whether they viewed his actions as morally wrong.

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