



## **Industrious or Iniquitous?: Virtue and Vice in the Colonial South Carolina Backcountry**

Matt Bersell  
*Monmouth College*

### **Abstract**

*In his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that the gradual westward expansion and settlement of the American frontier, the nexus between European civilization and what he called Indian savagery, played a central role in American social development. Writing during a time of unprecedented economic ascendancy within the United States during the late nineteenth century, Turner argued that the harsh conditions of the western frontier led to the development of a set of uniquely American characteristics. While it was common for frontier inhabitants to be rugged and stalwart as a result of their proximity to Indian lands, Turner continued, many were also good-natured and demonstrated virtuous qualities of individualism, resourcefulness, and practicality. In contrast to Turner’s idealistic view of the American frontiersman, frontier inhabitants and visitors such as Anglican minister Charles Woodmason viewed the frontier, specifically South Carolina’s western interior, as a place of violence, thievery, and drunkenness. The purpose of this research is to examine South Carolina’s frontier region, more commonly known as the backcountry, during the mid-eighteenth century and to analyze how those within the backcountry observed the region’s moral deficiencies and attributed it to the region’s lack of dominant religious institutions.*

### **Introduction**

Occupying a unique place in both American history as well as American historiography, Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” examines the gradual westward expansion, colonization, and development of the American frontier. In a work that Martin Ridge called “the most logical choice for the most influential piece of American historical writing,” Turner theorized that the expansion and settlement of the frontier, the nexus between what he called Indian savagery and European civilization, played a central role in the development of uniquely American social characteristics. During an era where many American citizens saw the eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century settlers of the frontier as a primary reason for American prominence, Turner argued that, while it was common for frontier inhabitants to be rugged, stalwart and resistant as a result of their proximity to Indian lands, many western settlers were also good-natured and demonstrated virtuous qualities of individualism, resourcefulness, practicality, and inquisitiveness.<sup>1</sup>

By constructing his idealistic view of the American frontiersman which was theorized during a time of unprecedented American economic ascendancy in the mid-1890s, Turner ignored the testimony of both frontier inhabitants and visitors, most notably eighteenth-century Anglican itinerant minister Charles Woodmason, who viewed the frontier, specifically South Carolina's western interior, as a place rampant with irreligion, social depravity, and societal vices. The purpose of this research is to examine South Carolina's frontier region, more commonly known as the backcountry, during the mid-eighteenth century and to analyze how both settlers and visitors of the backcountry and its central settlement of Camden attributed the western interior's perceived moral deficiencies to the region's lack of dominant religious institutions. Through the close examination of both Turner's essay and Woodmason's journal, which each provide distinct historical interpretations and perspectives of the American frontier, it is evident that the journal entries recorded by Woodmason, a first-hand observer of South Carolina's frontier, in which the Anglican minister described the backcountry as a region of "Depressing Vice" where "True Genuine Christianity is not to be found," are considerably different from the more idealistic and simplistic assertions made in Turner's essay more than a century later. In this valuable primary source account of frontier society, Woodmason attributed the backcountry's perceived vices and immoralities as products of religious ignorance among the region's settlers who were "without any Religion at all."<sup>2</sup>

### **Examination of Turner's Essay and Recent Historiography on the Frontier Thesis**

In his famous essay on the development of the American frontier that additionally serves as the first chapter of his 1921 book *The Frontier in American History*, Turner argued that incremental settlement of the American frontier directly led to the development of multiple social characteristics that were unique to the frontier's settlers. According to Turner, "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society furnish the forces dominating

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 4-38.; Martin Ridge, "The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 41, no. 1 (1991): 3.
2. Charles Woodmason, "Part One: The Journal of Rev. Charles Woodmason," in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 10, 13, 43.

American character.” Turner also asserted that the frontier was the most rapid and effective form of Americanization in that its “wilderness” transformed the European settler into “a new product that is American.” This particular example of the transformative nature of the American frontier thus represents the gradual movement “away from the influence of Europe” and a “steady growth of independence on American lines.” As seen in the later examination of the South Carolina backcountry, the isolation of the American frontier settlements only increased the frontier’s “peculiarly American tendencies, and the need of transportation facilities to connect it with the East called out important schemes of internal improvement” that ultimately resulted in the development of a distinct self-consciousness exclusive to the frontier.<sup>3</sup>

In his subsequent analysis how the American frontiersman forged and promoted a uniquely American national identity, Turner wrote that while the population that inhabited the Atlantic seaboard was predominately of English stock during the early periods of colonization, groups such as the Scots-Irish and the Palatine Germans “furnished the dominant element in the stock of the frontier.” Turner additionally notes that freed indentured servants also accompanied these ethnic groups to the western frontier following the expiration of their service contracts. According to Turner, “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics.” For the individuals of this ethnically diverse group of frontier settlers, Turner wrote that the harsh conditions of frontier life led directly to the development of “intellectual traits of profound importance.” In his detailed account of the extraordinarily unique traits that the American frontiersman possessed, Turner noted that qualities such as coarseness, practicality, acuteness, determination, and dominant individualism “are all traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.” As a result of the notable development of frontier individualism, the steady advancement of American frontier settlement led to the manifestation of modern ideologies such as democracy and nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

In his book that closely examines Frederick Jackson Turner and the frontier thesis, Ray Allen Billington not only provides much-needed historical context regarding the era in which Turner’s essay was originally published but also offers valuable insight into the initial reactions to Turner’s essay during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Billington wrote that “Americans for generations had been aware that a frontier existed and that it had altered their lives and institutions.” Even at the earliest stages of the American nation-state, notable political leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson claimed that America’s western frontier was needed as a “safety valve” in order to attract the surplus of laborers from the Atlantic coast where land and employment were becoming increasingly scarce. According to Billington, Franklin and Jefferson “had linked cheap lands with democracy and had speculated on the uniquely

3. Turner, 2-4, 6, 9-10.

4. Turner, 22-3, 30.

American traits mobility, inventiveness, individualism, optimism, impatience with authority traceable to the frontiering experience.” In an 1865 essay titled “Aristocratic Opinions of Democracy,” E.L. Godkin further described the uniquely American characteristics developed on the frontier by postulating that the three centuries of western exploration and settlement gave Americans a faith in democratic governance, an individualistic disdain towards central authority, a healthy respect towards practicality, and a commitment toward material pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

According to Billington, when Frederick Jackson Turner first introduced “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in July 1893, Turner was a “complete unknown” and the overall message of his thesis seemed “incomprehensible” to leading historians of the time. In the three years following the initial presentation of the frontier thesis, neither Turner nor his essay were mentioned in prominent American journals. By the late 1890’s however, Turner’s thesis began to gain support from both historians and the American public who soon believed Turner’s theories “not only explained what was happening to the United States in the 1890s and 1900s, but promise that the best of the American past would persist into the twentieth century.” Once Turner’s thesis had gained increasing acceptance from the American intellectual community, public support toward the essay continued to grow for the next quarter-century. Billington additionally asserts that the defining feature of Turner’s frontier thesis was its sense of optimism that directly appealed to the American public at an unprecedented time in American history at the turn of the century. At the close of the nineteenth century, the frontier and its promises of cheap land and exploitable natural resources was diminishing, but the experiences shared by countless American settlers and pioneers for centuries “had bred into Americans not only values, judgements and beliefs that elevated them above lesser peoples, but a hardihood and an aggressive spirit that would allow them to protect their way of life.” As a result of America’s exploration and settlement of its western frontier and its wilderness, the United States and its citizens were now able to “fashion a new civilization embodying the best of their pioneer days but benefiting from the new industrialism.”<sup>6</sup>

In “The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis,” an article that specifically examines the contributions that Turner essays has made in the overall field of American historiography, Martin Ridge argues that the “Significance of the Frontier in American History” is a historical “masterpiece” and “it more, than any other piece of historical scholarship, most affected the American’s self and institutional perceptions.” From the time it was originally published in the late nineteenth century, Ridge writes, Turner’s essay has “been the one piece of American historical writing that historians have praised, denounced, and tried to ignore.” While the validity and significance of Turner’s claims are still widely debated among American historical scholars to this day,

5. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), 108.

6. Billington, 184-86.

Ridge asserts that the frontier thesis's central themes regarding the development of American society and character "have effectively captured the American public's imagination and are now so deeply woven into the American consciousness that it may still be part of the American mentality a century from now." Recent articles in both *The New York Times* and the *U.S. News and World Report* that further critiqued Turner's essay almost a century after it was originally published provide evidence for Ridge's assertion that "No other historical interpretation of American society has left so lasting a legacy."<sup>7</sup>

### **Historical Overview of the Settlement and Development of the Colonial South Carolina Backcountry**

Writing during the final years of the nineteenth century, Turner described the American frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" while also highlighting the virtuous and industrious traits that settlers of western regions possessed. When closely examining frontier society, specifically the South Carolina backcountry during the late eighteenth century, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the political, economic, and social conditions of the American frontier were significantly more complex.<sup>8</sup> Through an examination of James Cook's 1773 map of colonial South Carolina, it is clear that the southern province was divided into two distinct geographical regions. On the eastern side of the colony, one can observe the markings of multiple coastal towns, houses, and churches, and the roads that connected them to the region's largest city of Charleston.<sup>9</sup> Extending one hundred miles inland from the Atlantic seaboard, South Carolina's coastal lowcountry "consisted near the ocean of sand, swamps, and pine barrens, and along the river valleys of the combination of soil and water needed for rice plantations," as Richard Hooker noted.<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of colonial South Carolina, Rachel Klein writes that during the preceding seventeenth century, the lowcountry was settled by a combination of English, French, and Barbadian immigrants who found that the region's fertile lands were ideally suited for the production of both rice and indigo.<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Lewis emphasizes that the coastal lowcountry's accessibility to the nearby Atlantic Ocean led to the promotion of commercial agricultural production at the end of the seventeenth century in which the large scale growth and exportation of rice had emerged as the staple of the colony's growing economy. The lowcountry's sudden entry into the commercial market also allowed the region to develop a plantation economy where "agriculture

---

7. Ridge, 2-3

8. Turner, 3.

9. James Cook, *A Map of the Province of South Carolina*, ed. Cartography Associates (1773), in the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

10. Richard J. Hooker, ed., "Introduction," in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), xxi.

11. Rachel N. Klein, "Ordering the Backcountry: The South Carolina Regulation," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (October 1981): 663. Accessed April 10, 2016.

was carried out on a large scale employing large numbers of slaves.”<sup>12</sup> According to Robert Weir, the South Carolina lowcountry was the richest society in colonial America, as a large proportion of its population enjoyed a high standard of living as a result of a dominant planter, merchant, and professional class.<sup>13</sup> By the mid-1760s, the lowcountry’s central port of Charleston had firmly established itself as the social, political, economic, and religious center of the entire colony.<sup>14</sup>

According to Mark Groover and Richard Brooks, the lowcountry’s western counterpart and the central focus of this study, the South Carolina backcountry, was “a distinct geographical region during the colonial period, recognized as a specific place by the region’s inhabitants throughout the eighteenth century.” When compared to the eastern side of Cook’s colonial map of South Carolina, the territorial dimensions of the province’s western backcountry were significantly larger than its eastern counterpart on the coast, but this region did not contain nearly as many symbols that signified the presence of settlement and European civilization.<sup>15</sup> The backcountry itself extended from a line fifty miles inland from the coast, west to the Blue Ridge Mountains, and north to the border of North Carolina. Prominent geographical features of the South Carolinian backcountry include the Sandhills, the Inner Coastal Plain, and the Piedmont.<sup>16</sup> Klein further describes the backcountry’s geography as “a pine belt, sandhill, and red-clay region that rose gradually into a fertile piedmont plateau” that was connected to the coast by the Savannah, Santee, and Peedee river systems.<sup>17</sup> In his own evaluation of the backcountry’s geographical features, Hooker wrote that the South Carolina’s western frontier was a region of fertile land, river valleys, and dense forests that was “separated by a wide gulf from the coastal plantation strip that looked to Charleston as its center.”<sup>18</sup>

The historical origins of colonial settlement of the South Carolina backcountry can be traced to the early eighteenth century when the region was inhabited by the Yamasee Indians who were soon violently removed from the area by European colonists following the conclusion of war in 1717.<sup>19</sup> Colonial migration into the South Carolina backcountry officially began in 1731 when Governor Robert Johnson introduced a plan that called for the establishment of eleven frontier townships that were to be strategically placed at locations where major interior rivers intersected with trails leading to the provincial capital

---

12. Kenneth E. Lewis, “The Metropolis and the Backcountry: The Making of a Colonial Landscape on the South Carolina Frontier,” *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 5. Accessed April 10, 2016.

13. Robert M Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 214-18.

14. Klein, 663.

15. Cook.

16. Mark D. Groover and Richard D. Brooks, “The Catherine Brown Cowpen and Thomas Howell Site: Material Characteristics of Cattle Raisers in the South Carolina Backcountry,” *Southeastern Archaeology* 22, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 93. Accessed April 10, 2016.

17. Klein, 663.

18. Hooker, xxi

19. Klein, 663.

and central port of Charleston.<sup>20</sup> In order to encourage settlement of the newly established townships in the backcountry region, South Carolina's colonial government reserved western lands specifically for immigrant families who were "to receive a town lot as well as fifty acres of outlying land for each member." In his work on the colonial history of South Carolina, Robert Weir writes that the provincial government in Charleston also paid the costs of surveying frontier land along with providing immigrants with the necessary tools, food, and transportation to the backcountry.<sup>21</sup>

In his archaeological analysis of the region, Lewis argues that while South Carolina's provincial government promoted the settlement of the backcountry region for the purpose of maximizing the area's potential wealth and incorporating the peripheral area into the larger world economy, it also encouraged frontier settlement in order to ensure the stability of an economically successful colony whose enormous wealth rested on the commercial production of rice and indigo through the utilization of slave labor. Seeking to effectively address security risks to coastal plantations and population centers in the lowcountry, the colonial government's conscious effort to provide incentives for white European settlement of the frontier was implemented for the purpose of protecting the colony from external threats of the Spanish in Florida, the French in the Mississippi Valley, and the numerous Indian tribes residing along South Carolina's western boundary. The colonial government also anticipated that in the event of a large-scale internal rebellion staged by the lowcountry's West African slave majority, European settlers in the backcountry would assist their coastal compatriots in suppressing a potential uprising.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the several incentives included in the colonial government's township plan, South Carolina's interior remained mostly uninhabited until the 1750s when settlers from western Virginia and Pennsylvania migrated to the backcountry after their respective frontiers became increasingly exposed to Indian attacks. Following the conclusion of the Cherokee War of 1760-61 and the French and Indian War, immigration to the South Carolina backcountry swelled as an increasing number of immigrants took advantage of the land grants offered by the government in Charleston.<sup>23</sup> By the late 1760s, the backcountry region contained between thirty and thirty-five thousand settlers and about three-fourths of the colony's white population.<sup>24</sup> It was also during this time period that the overall population of South Carolina increased from 30,000 to 80,000 inhabitants, largely due to the influx of backcountry settlers and enslaved West Africans.<sup>25</sup> According to Woodmason in his journal, the general population of the South

---

20. Groover and Brooks, 93.

21. Weir, 208.

22. Kenneth E. Lewis, "Frontier Change, Institution Building, and the Archaeological Record in the South Carolina Backcountry," *Southeastern Archaeology* 28, no 2 (Winter 2009): 185. Accessed April 12, 2016.

23. Hooker, xxiii.

24. Klein, 663.

25. Groover and Brooks, 93.

Carolina backcountry consisted of “A mix’d Medley from all Countries and the Off Scouring of America.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the predominately English and West African population of the coastal lowcountry, the diverse population of the South Carolina backcountry included German, Swiss, French, Irish, English, Scottish, and Welsh immigrants in addition to West Africans and local Native Americans.<sup>27</sup>

In the early entries of his journal, Woodmason provided a detailed description of the religious diversity that accompanied the various ethnicities of the South Carolina backcountry’s population. In one of the first entries of the journal that he kept during his tour of South Carolina’s western frontier in the late 1760s, Woodmason wrote that inhabitants of the backcountry “are of all Sects and Denominations.”<sup>28</sup> Weir writes that in contrast to the coastal lowcountry, where Anglicanism was the predominate faith practiced among the region’s inhabitants, the overwhelming majority of backcountry settlers were members of congregations that dissented from the Church of England.<sup>29</sup> Woodmason additionally recorded that backcountry religious groups included “Baptists, New Lights, Presbyterians, Independants, and an hundred other Sects.” In this same entry that was recorded in January, 1767, Woodmason argued that the sheer multitude of different religious groups within the South Carolina backcountry was a prominent reason why the frontier region lacked strong religious institutions that could shape the morality of the interior’s settlers. Woodmason wrote that “among the Various Plans of Religion, they are at Loss which to adapt, and conqently are without any religion at all.” The Anglican minister further noted that coupled with the absence of a predominant religious doctrine, many backcountry settlers were apathetic to the idea of organized religion overall. Woodmason claimed that the inhabitants of South Carolina’s frontier “Came to Sermon with Itching Ear only, not with any Disposition of Heart, or Sentiment of Mind, Assemble out of Curiosity, not Devotion, and seem so pleas’d with their native Ignorance, as to be offended at any Attempts to rouse them out of it.” According to Woodmason, “Among this Medley of Religions, True Genuine Christianity is not to be found.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite its ethnic and religious diversity, the South Carolina backcountry was relatively homogenous economically. Weir notes that most backcountry inhabitants were part of small farming households that worked the land they received in grants from the provincial government. Although the South Carolina backcountry was predominately an area of small farms, the region also contained plantations that were operated by lowcountry residents who decided to invest in the colony’s interior and men who immigrated to the region with the amount of capital needed to establish plantation settlements.<sup>31</sup> The backcountry’s planter class was considerably different from its wealthy and prosperous counterpart

---

26. Woodmason, 6.

27. Groover and Brooks, 93.

28. Woodmason, 6.

29. Weir, 210.

30. Woodmason, 13, 43.

31. Weir, 210-11.



on the coast. In contrast to plantation owners of the lowcountry who possessed large numbers of African slaves and held a majority of the region's wealth, the average backcountry planter owned approximately twelve slaves and backcountry planters as a whole represented less than ten percent of the landholding population within the region.<sup>32</sup>

The discrepancy in slave ownership found between the two regional planter classes of colonial South Carolina is further demonstrated in the population demographics of each region during the 1760s. During this decade, slaves constituted only about ten percent of the total population of the South Carolina backcountry, while there was a visible slave majority among inhabitants of the lowcountry.<sup>33</sup> The contrast of the prevalence of the institution of slavery within the two distinct regions of colonial South Carolina is described in a series of *South Carolina Gazette* articles printed during the 1760s that frequently report the escape of runaway lowcountry slaves to settlements within the colony's western interior. According to a notice published in the June 17, 1766 edition of *The South Carolina Gazette* in which the unnamed author offers a reward for the apprehension of two runaway slaves, it was also "customary for the back settlers of this province, to take up new negroes, and keep them employed privately."<sup>34</sup> In her own work on the region, Klein reinforces these primary source accounts by asserting that lowcountry slave owners regularly accused frontier settlers of being "less than zealous" in finding and returning runaways.<sup>35</sup>

During the initial settlement of the region, settlers of the backcountry adapted to the frontier's restricted access to the coast through subsistence farming and hunting. Instead of being guided by external market demand and the need to achieve maximum return on investment, Lewis argues, production in the early stages of frontier settlement was driven by self-sufficiency and the need to ensure a reliable food supply.<sup>36</sup> Coinciding with the rapid growth of western settlement during the 1750s, Lewis emphasizes that the scale of agricultural production within the South Carolina backcountry additionally increased as a result of the creation of adequate transportation links to coastal markets along with the introduction of sufficient capital and organizational methods.<sup>37</sup>

By the 1760s, the commercialization and integration of the backcountry economy resulted in the emergence of indigo and tobacco crops as leading backcountry commodities grown by regional planters and sent east to markets in Charleston. Indigo and tobacco were not the only burgeoning crops in the colonial backcountry. The introduction of mills and stores within backcountry settlements

---

32. Groover and Brooks, 95.

33. Weir, 211.

34. *The South Carolina Gazette; And Country Journal*, June 17, 1766.

35. Klein, 666.

36. Lewis, "Frontier Change in South Carolina," 187.

37. Kenneth E. Lewis, "Economic Development in the South Carolina Backcountry: A View from Camden," in *The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities*, ed. David Colin Crass, Steven D. Smith, Martha A. Zierden, and Richard D. Brooks (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 93.

such as Pine Tree Hill led to a rise in the production of wheat that was then ground into flour and transported to coastal merchants.<sup>38</sup> Groover and Brooks note that interior farms and plantations also “produced surpluses of food crops and livestock that were often used to feed enslaved laborers on the coast.”<sup>39</sup> By observing a series of listings found in numerous issues of the *South Carolina Gazette*, it can be seen that other items produced in the South Carolina backcountry that were then transported by wagon to Charleston for consumption and exportation included ship biscuits, hemp, beef, tallow, and wax.<sup>40</sup> Despite the transition of the backcountry economy into one based on commercial production of export goods and the industrious nature of its inhabitants, Charles Woodmason noted in his journal that most settlers of South Carolina’s frontier were underprivileged, impoverished, and neglected by the colonial officials in the lowcountry. According to Woodmason in a 1768 journal entry, the province’s legislature “are deaf to all Solicitations and look on the poor White People in a Meaner Light than their Black Slaves, and care less for them.”<sup>41</sup> Groover and Brooks, however, refute Woodmason’s observation by asserting that while few backcountry inhabitants attained the same level of wealth as the lowcountry planter class, many frontier settlers possessed “a fairly wide range of manufactured goods made available by local merchants and traders” that, in many cases, included goods imported from Europe, such as ceramics. The two authors also identify the existence of stereotypes formed by both historians and historical observers that highlight the meager possessions of colonial frontier settlers. Groover and Brooks argue that even though the backcountry primarily consisted of farmers who typically resided in smaller dwellings than their eastern counterparts, the manufactured goods recovered by archaeologists at frontier sites support the idea that the backcountry economy “progressed through several developmental stages during the eighteenth century beginning with the deerskin trade, followed by cattle herding, subsistence level agriculture, and eventually plantation-level commercial production by a few planter households.”<sup>42</sup>

During his own visit to the South Carolina backcountry in 1784, lowcountry planter and jurist William Drayton documented the western interior’s geography, economy, and inhabitants in his personal journal, thus providing modern scholars a first-hand perspective of the frontier region during the late stages of the eighteenth century and the aftermath of American Revolution. At one point of his tour of South Carolina’s frontier, Drayton visited the backcountry settlement of Ninety-Six where he recorded his impressions of its economic and geographical features. In his detailed description of the backcountry town, Drayton wrote that Ninety-Six “bids fair to be a place of Trade & Consequence” while also commenting on how the town’s surrounding area “is high & healthy; abounds

---

38. Klein, 664.

39. Groover and Brooks, 95.

40. *South Carolina Gazette* July 15, 1766; *South Carolina Gazette* November 14, 1768.

41. Woodmason, 60.

42. Groover and Brooks, 97.

with Numerous Springs of fine water; the Land round it is almost all of excellent Quality.” In a recording that is primarily focused on Ninety Six’s economic production, Drayton wrote that “the abundance here is already so great, & Labour so cheap, as to occasion a striking Difference in both between it & Charleston.” According to Drayton, as increasing numbers of people settled the town and its surrounding area, merchants from Charleston also decided to establish various stores in Ninety-Six for the purpose of selling goods and services to a growing population. In his journal, Drayton identified several commodities grown and produced in the South Carolina backcountry, which include corn, tobacco, indigo, butter, brick, and several different types of animal carcasses.<sup>43</sup>

While recording the positive aspects of the South Carolina backcountry, Drayton, in a manner similar to that of Charles Woodmason during his own tour of the frontier, also witnessed and documented the unfavorable economic conditions of the region’s poor inhabitants. Soon after leaving Ninety-Six, Drayton and his party, traveling further into the colony’s western interior, encountered one of the countless poverty-stricken communities located in the South Carolina backcountry during the eighteenth century. In his description of the frontier’s poor, Drayton wrote “The Hut along the Road in general are miserable Dwellings, built of logs, open to the Wind and Rain, & inhabited by a Parcel of half-naked Beings, almost every one without shoe or Stocking, & amongst them great numbers of children.”<sup>44</sup> Compared to Woodmason’s journey into the backcountry in 1766 during which the Anglican minister remarked that most people were “extremely poor,” residing in “Logg Cabins like Hogs and their living and Behaviour as rude or more so than the Savages...People continually drunk,” Drayton’s similar observations of the frontier’s poor that were recorded almost two decades later demonstrate how poverty persisted within the South Carolina backcountry into the late stages of the eighteenth century despite the region’s rapid economic development.<sup>45</sup>

Regularly mentioned by Woodmason in his various journal entries and writings, the prominent backcountry settlement of Camden, also known as Pine Tree Hill, served as the economic, political, and social center of the now economically thriving South Carolina backcountry in the period prior to the American Revolution.<sup>46</sup> Located in central South Carolina, the settlement of Camden was initially established as the Fredericksburg Township in 1734 as part of the provincial government’s township plan that was implemented in order to provide incentives for the white Protestant settlement of the colony’s interior. According to Lewis, although Fredericksburg Township was one of the most distant municipalities from the province’s capital of Charleston, its geographical

43. William Drayton, “William Drayton’s Journal of a 1784 Tour of the South Carolina Backcountry,” Edited by Keith Krawczynski. *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 97, no. 4 (July 1996): 195-6.

44. Drayton, 198-9.

45. Woodmason, 7.

46. Charles Woodmason to John Chesnut, June 30, 1769, in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 140; Lewis, “Frontier Change in South Carolina,” 188.

placement along the Wateree River and the Catawba Path “not only established a strategic political presence in the backcountry, but also encouraged settlement in a location ideally suited to control the region’s internal trade.”<sup>47</sup> Fredericksburg Township’s strategic proximity to the Catawba Path and Wateree River also ensured that the settlement was located near prominent inland rivers and trails where resources and goods from the colony’s western frontier could be seamlessly transported to Charleston’s major ports on the Atlantic.<sup>48</sup>

While the first immigrants to Fredericksburg Township arrived a couple of years after the completion of the township’s survey, Lewis wrote that the settlement did not receive a large influx of colonists until the late 1740s, during which time the sudden increase in settlement included the arrival of Irish Quakers who settled on a hill in the vicinity of Pine Tree Creek.<sup>49</sup> According to Thomas Kirkland and Robert M. Kennedy in their written history of the settlement, when the Irish Quakers first settled in the Fredericksburg Township, “there was no semblance of a town population, only scattered plantations and Indian camps.”<sup>50</sup> Early settlers of the township did not reside in a central area, but instead occupied scattered tracts of land on or near the river.<sup>51</sup> During the 1740s and 1750s, the Fredericksburg Township also attracted residents from South Carolina’s eastern coast and from the northern British colonies as the settlement gradually emerged as the focal point for dispersed agricultural production and trade within the South Carolina backcountry region.<sup>52</sup> Lewis argued that the Irish Quaker’s presence in Fredericksburg Township played a crucial role in the area’s economic development around a centrally located site that soon became known as Pine Tree Hill.<sup>53</sup>

In his analysis of colonial institution building within the Wateree Valley of South Carolina, Lewis wrote that in the two decades preceding the American Revolution, the Wateree River Valley underwent a significant transformation that resulted in the emergence of Pine Tree Hill as one of the key settlements in the South Carolina backcountry. Lewis explained that during the 1750s, population growth and a resulting increase in agricultural production within the Wateree Valley and its central settlement of Pine Tree Hill attracted the attention of the prominent Charleston merchant firm of William Ancrum, Lambert Lance, and Aaron Loockock, all of whom became “aware of its potential to produce wheat on a commercial scale for the export flour market.” Financially backed by influential and wealthy Quaker families in Philadelphia, the firm dispatched Joseph Kershaw as their agent to Pine Tree Hill for the purpose of establishing stores and mills within the backcountry settlement that could effectively produce and ship flour

---

47. Lewis, “Economic Development in the Backcountry,” 92.

48. Lewis, “Frontier Change in South Carolina,” 185.

49. Lewis, “Economic Development in the Backcountry,” 92.

50. Thomas J. Kirkland and Robert M. Kennedy, *Historic Camden, Part One: Colonial and Revolutionary* (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1905), 11.

51. Lewis, “Economic Development in the Backcountry,” 92.

52. Lewis, “Frontier Change in South Carolina,” 185.

53. Lewis, “Economic Development in the Backcountry,” 92.

to Charleston.<sup>54</sup> In June 1758, Kershaw arrived at Pine Tree Hill and settled on a 150-acre tract of land where he first established a store.<sup>55</sup> By 1760, Kershaw had succeeded in this endeavor, as flour produced within the Pine Tree Hill settlement was introduced and advertised to the residents in Charleston.<sup>56</sup> Several advertisements for backcountry flour appear in Charleston's *South Carolina Gazette* during 1760 when lowcountry residents were notified of the arrival of high-quality flour from Pine Tree Hill that was sold by Ancrum, Lance, and Loocock. According to a particular listing titled "Fine Carolina Flour" found in the August 16, 1760 edition of the Charleston newspaper, the backcountry commodity of "good quality" had "just arrived from Pine Tree Hill" at Charleston's port and were to be sold in 100 lb. kegs "for the conveniency of small families."<sup>57</sup> By the late 1760's, mills located in Pine Tree Hill were shipping over 3,500 barrels of flour and ship bread to Charleston annually as the settlement cemented itself as the backcountry's major export center.<sup>58</sup>

Kershaw's successes in advancing economic connections between the interior settlement of Pine Tree Hill and the colony's capital of Charleston soon led him to form new partnerships that extended his business widely throughout the South Carolina backcountry. In his description of Kershaw's expanded business interests, Lewis wrote that "In addition to his stores and mills, at Pine Tree Hill he operated a bakery, a brewery and distillery, and a brick yard. He also owned a tobacco warehouse and an indigo works there, which afforded distributive control of two additional emerging frontier exports."<sup>59</sup> Under Kershaw's economic guidance, Pine Tree Hill "became a multifunctional center for a wide region and served as a magnet for millers, and other craft specialists, as well as merchants, wagoners, and those involved in trade." Lewis also claims that Kershaw played a prominent role in changing the settlement's name to Camden in 1768.<sup>60</sup>

During Joseph Kershaw's residency within the South Carolina backcountry and its central settlement of Pine Tree Hill/Camden, Lewis explained that Anglican itinerant minister Charles Woodmason became a valuable contact for Kershaw because of Woodmason's "background and the geographical range of his connections in the interior."<sup>61</sup> In his journal, Woodmason first mentions Kershaw in a September 1766 entry in which the minister documents his arrival in Pine Tree Hill. In this entry, Woodmason noted there was "No genteel or polite Person" among the settlement's population "save Mr. Kershaw an English Merchant settled here." In other journal entries that followed, Woodmason additionally describes Kershaw as a "good Samaritan" for providing Woodmason with shelter when the minister was preaching in Pine Tree Hill while also admiring Kershaw for his

54. Lewis, "Frontier Change in South Carolina," 187.

55. Kirkland and Kennedy, 11.

56. Lewis "Economic Development in the Backcountry," 94.

57. *South Carolina Gazette*, August 16, 1760. See also August 30, 1760.

58. Lewis, "Economic Development in the Backcountry," 94.

59. Lewis, "Economic Development in the Backcountry," 94.

60. Lewis, "Frontier Change in South Carolina," 188.

61. Lewis, "Frontier Change in South Carolina," 191.

kindness and generosity in providing economic relief to distressed backcountry inhabitants during a seasonal drought.<sup>62</sup>

Joseph Kershaw is additionally frequently mentioned in Woodmason's 1769 letter to the business leader's protégé and partner, John Chesnut, which serves as Woodmason's response to Chesnut's anger towards one of the Anglican minister's earlier sermons.<sup>63</sup> While Woodmason acknowledges Kershaw for his previous acts of faith and charity, his opinion of Kershaw dramatically shifts as evident in this particular letter where the Anglican minister denounces Kershaw as "a Retailer of Spirituous Liquors" for the business owner's role in operating Camden's tavern, brewery, and store which all produced or sold alcohol to the settlement's population. Further along in the letter, Woodmason criticized Kershaw for using his wealth and social standing to protect himself from "Arrests, Insults, and Dangers," while also accusing Kershaw of sponsoring organized crime through the employment of "lawless Banditti, Blackguards, and Ragamuffins." Perhaps Woodmason's most significant written attack against Joseph Kershaw and his associates, however, occurs when the Woodmason invokes a passage from the Bible to compare Camden—a settlement Kershaw was influential in establishing developing economically—to the city of Sodom, a location destroyed by God in response to the immoral and sinful behavior of its inhabitants. While the people of Biblical times resided in Sodom millennia ago, Woodmason writes that Chesnut and Kershaw currently reside "in a little One" while also condemning the two prominent business leaders for upholding and promoting Camden's own societal vices.<sup>64</sup>

Despite Charles Woodmason's initial respect and fondness for Joseph Kershaw earlier in his journal, the minister's 1769 letter to Kershaw's associate, John Chesnut, represents a drastic change in Woodmason's impression of the Camden business leader. When analyzing the transformation of Woodmason's perception of Kershaw from a "good Samaritan" to "a Retailer of Spirituous Liquors," it is evident that Woodmason's animosity towards Kershaw primarily results from differences in each individual's respective self-interests in the region.<sup>65</sup> Unlike Kershaw, a business owner who would be mostly concerned with profiting from the sale of alcohol to the residents of Camden, Woodmason, an Anglican minister who sought to address the numerous immoralities of the backcountry through the introduction of organized religion to the region's settlers, was profoundly disgusted by the amount of drunkenness and alcoholism he witnessed among the inhabitants of Camden and South Carolina's frontier as a whole. In a journal entry from September 28, 1766, Woodmason recorded his first impressions of Camden's residents by describing them as "continually drunk," which contributed to Woodmason's comparison of the townspeople's living standards and behavior to that of the Native American "Savages." In a later

62. Woodmason, 6,7,13.

63. Hooker, xxiv.

64. Charles Woodmason to John Chesnut, 136-49.

65. Woodmason, 13; Charles Woodmason to John Chesnut, 136-49.

journal entry concerning the prevalence of drunkenness on the South Carolina frontier that was recorded just outside of Camden on August 16, 1768, Woodmason observed a large group of people who were “Revelling Drinking Singing Dancing and Whoring.” According to Woodmason “most of the Company were drunk” and “were as rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them. Their Dresses almost as loose and Naked as the Indians, and differing in Nothing save Complexion.” Woodmason additionally notes that most individuals within this group “had never before seen a Minister, or heard the Lords Prayer, Service or Sermon in their Days.” By studying these particular entries from Woodmason’s journal, it is unmistakable that the Anglican minister’s motive within South Carolina’s frontier was predominately from a religious and moral standpoint which soon conflicted with Joseph Kershaw’s businesses that sold alcohol to the very same Camden residents that Woodmason attempted to convert.<sup>66</sup>

### **Religious Observations and Recordings of Charles Woodmason and Other Eighteenth-Century Visitors to the South Carolina Backcountry**

When analyzing multiple forms of primary source accounts that were recorded by visitors to the South Carolina backcountry during the second half of the eighteenth century, it is clear that these individuals who toured the colony’s western interior did not share Turner’s idealism regarding frontier settlers and their perceived virtue and intellectualism. Instead, most of these individuals discovered that South Carolina’s frontier was a region rampant with what they perceived as vice, immorality, and irreligion. In his observations of the American frontier that were recorded during a tour of the South Carolina backcountry, eighteenth-century Anglican itinerant minister Charles Woodmason describes the western colonial frontier and its inhabitants in a considerably different manner than Turner does in his nineteenth-century essay.

Woodmason, a newly ordained Anglican minister, left the culture and wealth of Charleston in the autumn of 1766 to journey to South Carolina’s frontier region where he was to begin preaching to the region’s settlers. As the itinerant minister at St. Mark’s Parish, Woodmason “sincerely wished to serve his Church and his fellow men and for ten years had worried about the lack of Anglican ministers in the Backcountry.” Upon his arrival at the backcountry settlement of Pine Tree Hill, Woodmason observed a turbulent region that was inhabited by an ethnically and religiously diverse range of immigrants who had settled in the peripheral area in order to take advantage of newfound social and economic

---

66. Woodmason, 6, 56. Woodmason’s comparison of white backcountry inhabitants to the neighboring indigenous tribes provides insight into how Native Americans were still seen as irreligious “savages” to many European settlers of the British North American colonies. While this passage provides a detailed description of the living conditions of settlers of the South Carolina backcountry, it offensively derides the customary traditions of the Native American tribes who inhabited South Carolina’s western interior.

opportunities. The Anglican minister resided within South Carolina's interior for a period of six years, during which he traveled over three thousand miles a year and organized over thirty congregations across the area while also marrying, baptizing, and advising the region's inhabitants. According to Richard Hooker, the editor of Woodmason's backcountry journal, the minister's first experiences in South Carolina's western frontier came as a "shock," and his journal "heretofore consisting largely of routine record, became increasingly the description of a new strange world." To Hooker, Woodmason's journal represents a rare primary source concerning "the daily life, the thoughts, the hopes, and fears of colonial frontier peoples" while also providing scholars "a remarkably detailed and vivid picture of a region, a time, and a personality."<sup>67</sup>

In this introduction to Woodmason's journal Hooker claims that the writings of Charles Woodmason are "the fullest extant account of any American colonial frontier" in which the Anglican minister documents "the swift settlement of the forest region, the conversion of wilderness into small farms, the strife among national and religious groups, and the imprint of frontier conditions upon them all." According to Hooker, while Woodmason's journal serves as a descriptive first-hand perspective of life on the American frontier, it is not without faults and inconsistencies. Although Woodmason was seen as an honest and reliable man by his colleagues, the minister's strong religious convictions and biases are clear throughout the duration of his journal and sermon book. Even though he entered the Anglican ministry "with immense zeal", Woodmason's past life experiences in both England and the South Carolina lowcountry as a "planter, merchant, and parish and provincial official," greatly influenced his written descriptions of the South Carolina backcountry and its inhabitants. Hooker wrote that perhaps the most notable aspect of Woodmason's tour of the colony's western interior and something that can never be entirely explained was "the religious impulse that led him late in life from the luxuries of Charleston to the savage simplicities of the frontier."<sup>68</sup>

During his residency in the backcountry, Woodmason found himself in "a new world in which civilized standards of conduct sometimes seemed inverted, and where primitive conditions had loosened all social and family ties." Woodmason's writings, which include his private journal, three of his sermon books, and some of his letters, offer a unique and firsthand perspective of a specific region of the American colonial frontier that was vastly unlike the orderly, calm, and law-abiding English countryside to which the Anglican minister was accustomed. Instead, Woodmason observed a region which Hooker describes as "in near-wilderness condition" where "law and order, morality, family integrity and knowledge of the outer world were also weakened by exposure to the frontier." Woodmason, a man of strong convictions, spent most of his backcountry tour battling against immorality and irreligion by attempting to promote the seamliness and order of English Anglicanism. In his crusade to

67. Hooker, xi, xii, xviii, xxi.

68. Hooker, xii.



suppress vice and immorality, Woodmason hoped to introduce the perceived beneficial qualities of English stability to the wilderness of the South Carolinian frontier. Woodmason's journal additionally provides descriptive insight into the region's "state of morality, the plight of the poor, the lack of care and education for children, the conduct of magistrates, the clothing, food, housing, recreations, drunkenness, health, agriculture, transportation, and intellectual interests of the inhabitants."<sup>69</sup>

During his tour of the South Carolina backcountry in the second half of the 1760s, Woodmason attributed the diminished presence of religious influences within the colony's frontier region to a pervasiveness of numerous forms of perceived societal vice. Hooker wrote that visitors to the interior settlements had documented the region's lack of dominant religious institutions well before Woodmason's arrival in 1766.<sup>70</sup> In an April 1746 letter addressed to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Charles Boschi, an Anglican minister in St. Bartholomew's Parish, reported that a majority of the women he conducted marriage ceremonies for were already pregnant. When Boschi asked settlers if this occurrence was customary on the frontier, "those questioned gave joking answers or were angry." Boschi additionally noted that "It would be too tedious to enumerate here the disorders and vices that are in this Parish, and the people are so delicate that they do not like that a clergyman should say any thing against their faults."<sup>71</sup> While on a visit to the backcountry in 1753, Governor James Glen discovered that in a settlement wherein "Parents in the back Woods come together without any previous Ceremony" and where children were taken care of in the same manner as livestock, there was no clergyman within a hundred miles. During his excursion into South Carolina's frontier, Glen also encountered a man fifty years of age who had never seen a church or minister before.<sup>72</sup> According to William Bull, the colony's Lieutenant-Governor, knowledge of Christian scriptures and traditions grew fainter as individuals and families began to settle further away from the colony's center of Charleston.<sup>73</sup> Hooker argued that the lack of spirituality among the backcountry's inhabitants "offered a challenging mission to adventurous ministers or to inspired men among themselves."<sup>74</sup>

In the years preceding Woodmason's arrival to the South Carolina backcountry, not only did visitors to the region take note of the western interior's lack of places of worship and paid clergy, but the region's settlers also documented

69. Hooker, xi-xxx.

70. Hooker, xxv.

71. Charles Boschi to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, St. Bartholomew's Parish, April 7, 1746, in Florence Gambrill Geiger, ed., "St Bartholomew's Parish as Seen by its Rectors, 1713-61," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, no. 50 (Oct., 1949): 191.

72. James Glen to Lords of Trade, Ninety-Six, October 25, 1753, in *Records of the Province of South Carolina, Sainsbury Transcripts from the British Public Record Office*, XXV, Office of Historical Commission of South Carolina, 350-51.

73. William Bull to Hillsborough, Charleston, Nov. 30, 1770, in *Records of the Province of South Carolina, Sainsbury Transcripts from the British Public Record Office*, XXXII, Office of Historical Commission of South Carolina, 370.

74. Hooker, xxiv-xxv.

their observations of the frontier's weakened religious environment as evidenced by a letter published in Charleston's *South Carolina Gazette* in April 1762. In this letter written to the provincial government in Charleston, the undisclosed author wrote that the back settlements "have neither church nor parson" to accommodate the spiritual needs of the region's various Christian denominations and sects. According to the letter's author, most backcountry settlers "labour under some hardships," which include paying taxes to the colonial government who then used public funds to pay the salaries of the Anglican clergy while also building and repairing churches within the colony's coastal lowcountry. The author writes that frontier settlers also "expect to have money from the public fund assigned towards erecting places of worship for each sectary as well as the church of England, where their numbers are so many as to need it." To the author, backcountry settlers "think it hard" that their lands are taxed in in order to fund and maintain religious institutions in the lowcountry while the colony's interior has neither churches or places of worship that are publicly funded.<sup>75</sup>

In a letter written to the Bishop of London in October 1766, Woodmason noted the provincial government's reluctance to establish new places of worship within the South Carolina backcountry. During his tour of the region, Woodmason discovered that eight to ten parishes within the backcountry region had recently been abandoned after the deaths of their respective ministers. In this letter, Woodmason exhibited a degree of disappointment towards the Charleston government that decided to sacrifice the public interest in religion for the private interests of the colony's wealthy and influential residents. In the final sections of the letter, Woodmason warned the bishop of London that "if more ministers are not provided and do not come over soon, We shall have all the late German, French, and Irish Settlers become followers of the New Lights, or join other Sectaries and the Interests of the Church be entirely lost for they are already at a very low Ebb."<sup>76</sup> This warning at the end of the letter reveals Woodmason's despair at the failure of the Anglican Church to maintain its presence within the expanding westward frontier. Hooker wrote that it was Woodmason's "unhappy fate to move among myriad enemies of his beloved Church of England and to view the crumbling of a once powerful church-state establishment on the outer fringes of the British Empire."<sup>77</sup>

Hooker wrote that the Anglican minister explicitly describes the process of de-Christianization within the South Carolina backcountry through a series of journal entries, sermons, and letters.<sup>78</sup> In an entry recorded September 21, 1766, in which he described the settlers of Pine Tree Hill as "Rude, Ignorant,

75. "A letter from some of the inhabitant of the Broad-River and Suludy, to their friend in Charles-Town," April 3, 1762, in *South Carolina Gazette*.

76. Charles Woodmason to the Bishop of London, October 19, 1766, in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 84-7.

77. Hooker, xxvii.

78. Hooker, xxv.

Void of Manners, Education, or Good Breeding,” Woodmason also observed that the Quaker and Presbyterian congregations within Pine Tree Hill did not have a presiding minister. When Woodmason offered to give weekly sermons to these denominations, both congregations rejected his proposition. In another entry recorded in October of the same year, Woodmason wrote that he could “not find but one religious person among this Great Multitude.” Just a few days later, Woodmason further described backcountry inhabitants as a “very loose, dissolute, and Idle People Without either Religion or Goodness.” According to Woodmason, “The Same may be said of the whole Body of the People in these Back Parts.” These passages from this October entry represent one of the many instances where Woodmason attributes the formation of certain perceived undesired characteristics to the absence of religion and morality.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps the most detailed account of Woodmason’s observations of the religious conditions within the South Carolina backcountry is apparent in a July 2, 1767 letter in which Woodmason accepted an invitation to preach to a congregation near Granny Quarter Creek. When a crowd of over a hundred people assembled for one of Woodmason’s sermons, the Anglican minister found there was “Not a Bible or Prayer Book, Not the least Rudiments of Religion, Learning, Manner or Knowledge (Save of Vice) among them.” In this particular entry, Woodmason additionally wrote that the frontier settlers who attended his sermon that day had never seen a minister, read a chapter in the biblical scriptures, or heard a sermon before. On New Year’s Day in 1768, Woodmason returned to Granny Quarter Creek where he was just as dismayed at the settlement’s inhabitants as he had been during his earlier visit to the settlement. According to Woodmason, the people who attended his sermon were “the lowest Pack of Wretches my Eyes ever saw, or that I have met in these Woods, as wild as the very Deer.” In this entry, Woodmason is visibly horrified by the appearance and actions of the frontier settlers at his sermon who arrived barefooted and scantily clad and refused to sit still during the minister’s service. Woodmason argued that these problems cannot be “mended till Churches are built and the Country reduc’d to some Form.” Woodmason further speculated on how the polite and upstanding residents of London would react to such a sight.<sup>80</sup>

Woodmason’s reaction to how backcountry settlers conducted themselves during his sermon at Granny Quarter Creek is evident in a subsequent sermon delivered on July 15, 1770 that centered on correct behavior during church services. Designed for troublesome congregations, this particular sermon serves as one of many attempts made by Woodmason to introduce the perceived civilizing effects of organized religion, particularly English Anglicanism, to the inhabitants of a frontier region where places of worship were mostly nonexistent. One of the most noteworthy aspects of this sermon occurred when Woodmason threatened to report anyone who brought a dog with them to church services. Woodmason describes the presence of domesticated animals at services as “very

79. Woodmason, “The Journal of Rev. Charles Woodmason” 3-64.

80. Woodmason, “The Journal of Rev. Charles Woodmason,” 3-64.

troublesome” and “an Affront to the Divine Presence which we invoke, to be in the midst of Us, and to hear our Prayers, to mix unclean things with our Services.” In this sermon, Woodmason also urged church attendees to refrain from talking, whispering, coughing, or spitting due to the minister’s perception that these actions displayed “Irreverence towards God; is unbecoming of Religion, and may give Scandal and Offence to weak Christians.” Woodmason ended this sermon with a sense of optimism by hoping that his services may attract an increasing number of backcountry settlers.<sup>81</sup>

In another sermon delivered near the Saludy River in 1769, Woodmason stressed the need for the establishment of religious education within the South Carolina backcountry. As a result of insufficient relief to the region’s poor, Woodmason noted that the backcountry region “was cover’d with Swarms of Orphans and other Pauper vagrant vagabond Children to the Great increase of all Manner of Vice and Wickedness.” These unfortunate souls needed to “be taught the Principles of Religion, fitted to become useful Members of Society.” This sermon serves as additional evidence of Woodmason’s belief that the presence of strong religious institutions would be supremely beneficial to the inhabitants of the backcountry and, most notably, the region’s youth who were raised in an area that was mostly untouched by religious influences. In this sermon, Woodmason claimed that a majority of the region’s criminals originated from the large numbers of orphans and neglected children who both resorted to a life of crime in order to survive the harsh conditions of frontier life. Woodmason stated that for the purpose of preventing the emergence and spread of societal vice, the South Carolina provincial government had recently called for the establishment of six schools within the backcountry region that would each enroll up to fifty poor children who would be taught fundamental Christian principles so that they could eventually become contributing members to society. According to Woodmason, the religious education of the region’s youth was the first of many steps towards the elimination of the “deluge of Vice and Impiety which now overflows this Land.”<sup>82</sup>

By examining the sermon, it is apparent that Woodmason gained a great degree of personal satisfaction from the introduction of a religiously based education to the South Carolina backcountry. In the sermon, Woodmason described the day that he discovered that the provincial government would be establishing public schools within the colony’s interior as one the happiest and most blessed days during his entire tour of the colony’s interior. After witnessing the successes of organized religion within the South Carolina backcountry, Woodmason then hoped that “the name of God will in due Time spread from hence across this Great Continent.” In further descriptions of his personal gratification, Woodmason also

- 
81. Charles Woodmason, “On Correct Behavior in Church,” in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 88-9.
82. Charles Woodmason, “The Need for Education,” in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 118-120.

included additional insight into the religious environment of the South Carolina backcountry at the time of his arrival in 1766. In this section of the sermon, Woodmason claimed that he was one of the first Episcopal ministers to venture into the South Carolinian frontier, while also boasting that he “carried the Holy Bible, and read the Liturgy of our Church, in Places, and to Persons, who never before heard a Chapter, or had heard the Name of God or of Christ, save in Oaths and Curses.”<sup>83</sup>

The perception that the South Carolina backcountry region lacked the dominant religious institutions necessary to combat societal vice continued in the years following Charles Woodmason’s departure from the colony’s frontier in 1772.<sup>84</sup> A prominent first-hand account that briefly reestablishes the connection between the prevalence of immorality among South Carolina’s frontier inhabitants and the region’s lack of both church and clergy, is that of Archibald Simpson, a Presbyterian minister who resided in various regions of the colony for almost two decades. Following the conclusion of the American Revolution, Simpson returned to South Carolina in order to inspect his plantation. Peter Moore, the editor of Simpson’s diary, wrote that upon Simpson’s return, the Presbyterian minister found that his beloved parish had transformed into a hellish social wasteland where “profane cursing & swearing” had become “a deep rooted habit” as the result of the scattering of congregations and the disrepair of churches.<sup>85</sup>

### **Comparative Analysis of Turner’s Essay and Woodmason’s Journal**

Even though both Turner’s essay and Woodmason’s journal contain similar observations of the American frontier’s ethnically diverse population, their perspectives regarding the qualities and characteristics of frontier settlers are vastly different. While Turner did not specifically examine South Carolina’s frontier as a historical case study, his overall assertion that the harsh conditions of frontier life led to development of intellectual and virtuous traits among frontier settlers starkly contrasts with the recordings of Woodmason, a first-hand observer of the early American frontier, who described the South Carolina backcountry as “Sickly” and labeled its inhabitants as insolent, lazy, and “rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them.” Woodmason additionally noted that within South Carolina’s frontier region was an abundance of “Banditti, profligates, Reprobates, and the lowest vilest Scum of Mankind.” As he continued his journey further into the South Carolina’s frontier, Woodmason wrote that he had “not yet met with one literate, or traveled’ Person, No ingenious Mind, None of any Capacity.” According to Woodmason, the people within the South Carolina backcountry “Despise Knowledge and instead of honouring a

---

83. Woodmason, “The Need for Education,” 120.

84. Hooker, xxxi.

85. Peter N. Moore, ed., “Introduction,” In *The South Carolina Diary of Reverend Archibald Simpson: Part One, May 1754-April 1770* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), ix-xxv.

Learned Person, or any one of Wit or Knowledge be it in the Arts, Sciences, or Languages, they despise and Ill treat them.” As is evident from the writings in his journal, Woodmason did not witness the same traits of frontier settlers that Turner did in his own work over a century later.<sup>86</sup>

According to Woodmason, the impoverished settlers of the South Carolina backcountry “delight in their present low, lazy, sluttish, heathenish, hellish Life, and seem not desirous of changing it.” The Anglican minister profoundly illustrates the glaring differences between his recorded observations of the frontier settler and Turner’s more idealistic vision of American frontier life by further claiming that both male and female inhabitants of the backcountry “will do any thing to come at Liquor, Cloaths, furniture, rather than work for it, Hence their many Vices, their gross Licentiousness Wantonness, Lasciviousness, Rudeness, Lewdness, and Profligacy.” Woodmason additionally noted in another entry that after one of his services, the Anglican minister was stunned to find out that the backcountry settlers who had listened to his sermon immediately went back to “Revelling Drinking Singing Dancing and Whoring and most of the company were drunk before I quitted the Spot.” By comparing and contrasting Turner’s interpretation of the American frontier settler with the observations that Woodmason documented during his eighteenth-century tour of South Carolina’s western interior, it is unmistakable that Woodmason’s journal provides a rare first-hand perspective on the harsh realities of daily life on the American frontier that is not found Turner’s nineteenth-century essay.<sup>87</sup>

When identifying the successive stages of American settlement, Turner wrote that the European settlers of the early frontiers of American colonial history “had to meet its Indian question, its question of the disposition of the public domain, of the means of intercourse with older settlements, of the extension of political organization, of religious and education activity.” In the evaluation of the several challenges that European settlers faced during their initial settlement of the American frontier, it is evident that these specific difficulties that were identified by Turner in his essay remained persistent within South Carolina’s western frontier during Woodmason’s tour of the region in the second half of the eighteenth century. In a 1766 entry of the journal that he kept during his tour of the South Carolina backcountry, Woodmason wrote that the settlers of South Carolina’s western frontier were “extremely poor, Live in Logg Cabbins like Hogs and their Living and Behaviour as rude or more than the Savages.” In an additional description the difficult living conditions of the South Carolina backcountry that was recorded in the early months of 1767, Woodmason wrote that the “very poor” frontier inhabitants were “living in a State of Nature, more irregularly and unchastely than the Indians.” Perhaps Woodmason’s most detailed illustration of the “surmounting Difficulties” that frontier settlers faced during the eighteenth century however, was recorded later in 1767 when the Anglican minister visited a frontier settlement near Beaver Creek and wrote that “Their cabins quite open and expos’d. Little or

86. Turner, 37; Woodmason, “The Journal of Rev. Charles Woodmason,” 7, 25, 34, 38, 52, 56.

87. Woodmason, 52, 56.

no Bedding, or anything to cover them, Not a drop of anything, save Cold Water to drink.” Woodmason further commented that “The Indians are better Cloathed and Lodged.” As apparent in Woodmason’s journal, even after several decades of settlement in the South Carolinian backcountry, many inhabitants within this frontier region were still afflicted by the same harsh and difficult living conditions that the earliest settlers of the colony’s interior initially faced.<sup>88</sup>

Turner further claimed that throughout the history of the settlement of the American frontier, inhabitants of older coastal settlements in the east attempted to regulate the frontier and its inhabitation through “educational and religious activity, exerted by interstate migration and by organized societies.” Turner’s claim is validated by primary-source accounts such as Woodmason’s journal that provide valuable insight into the religious and educational conditions within America’s western frontier. In a 1767 entry of his journal, the Anglican minister wrote that the inhabitants of the South Carolina backcountry “were wearied out with being expos’d to the Depredations of Robbers, Set down here just as a Barrier between the Rich Planters and the Indians, to secure the former against the Latter, Without Laws or Government Churches Schools or Ministers, No Police established, and all Property quite insecure.” In another documented example of the almost nonexistent religious structures within the South Carolinian frontier, a central theme of the Anglican minister’s journal, Woodmason noted that a sizable proportion of backcountry settlers had never “seen a Minister, heard or read a Chapter in the Scriptures, or heard a Sermon in their days.” When subsequently describing the educational conditions or the lack thereof within the colony’s interior, Woodmason wrote that “Few or no Books are to be found in all this vast Country” and it was rare to come across a schoolteacher in this region. Throughout the examination of Woodmason’s recordings of the South Carolina backcountry, it became increasingly apparent that the Anglican minister assumed that irreligion and the shortage of educational structures within South Carolina’s frontier directly contributed to a society of “Vile unaccountable Wretches.”<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

Unlike Frederick Jackson Turner, who offered an idealistic and romanticized interpretation of the American West and its inhabitants, which directly appealed to a predominately urban audience during a time of unheralded economic ascendancy, the settlers and visitors of the various frontiers of early American history such the South Carolina backcountry arrived in a region rampant with irreligion and social decadence. From the region’s initial settlement in the early 1730s to the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in the early 1780s, inhabitants and visitors to the South Carolina backcountry identified the absence of places of worship and paid clergy that could properly accommodate the western interior’s religiously diverse population. With little to no support from the

88. Turner, 9-10; Woodmason, 7, 15, 33, 52.

89. Turner, 35; Woodmason, 23, 27, 43, 44, 52.

provincial government or the wealthy planter class in Charleston, the interior's religious institutions remained weakened and stagnant as observers of the region increasingly became aware of the emergence of numerous forms of perceived vices and immoralities that were rampant within backcountry society during the mid-eighteenth century. As several visitors to the region noted, the lack of religious influences was prevalent enough that in several frontier settlements, individuals had never seen a church or minister in their lifetime. To travelling ministers such as Woodmason, the absence of religious influences within the South Carolina backcountry made its inhabitants particularly susceptible to committing immoral and irreligious acts that resulted in their comparison to Western African slaves or indigenous Indians by their eastern counterparts. In many ways, however, the historical perception towards settlers of the eighteenth-century South Carolina backcountry and the American frontier overall has noticeably shifted in the years following the completion of Woodmaon's journal.



### Bibliography

- Billington, Ray A., *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Boschi, Charles, *St Bartholomew's Parish as Seen by Its Rectors, 1713-1761*. Edited by Florence Gambrell Geiger. *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 50, no 4 (October, 1949): 173-203.
- Bull, William. *Records of the Province of South Carolina, Sainsbury Transcripts from the British Public Record Office, XXXII*. Office of Historical Commission of South Carolina.
- Cook, James. *A Map of the Province of South Carolina*, edited by Cartography Associates, in the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.
- Drayton, William. "William Drayton's Journal of a 1784 Tour of the South Carolina Backcountry." Edited by Keith Krawczynski. *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 97, no. 3 (July 1996): 182-205.
- Glenn, James. *Records of the Province of South Carolina, Sainsbury Transcripts from the British Public Record Office, XXV*. Office of Historical Commission of South Carolina.
- Groover, Mark D., and Richard D. Brooks. "The Catherine Brown Cowpen and Thomas Howell Site: Material Characteristics of Cattle Raisers in the South Carolina Backcountry." *Southeastern Archaeology* 22, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 92-111.
- Hooker, Richard J. ed. "Introduction." In *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.
- Kirkland, Thomas J., and Robert M. Kennedy. *Historic Camden, Part One: Colonial and Revolutionary*. Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1905.
- Klein, Rachel N. "Ordering the Backcountry: The South Carolina Regulation." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (October 1981): 661-680.

- Lewis, Kenneth E. "Frontier Change, Institution Building, and the Archaeological Record in the South Carolina Backcountry." *Southeastern Archaeology* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 184-201. Accessed March 28, 2016.
- . "Economic Development in the South Carolina Backcountry: A View from Camden." In *The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities*, edited by David Colin Crass, Steven D. Smith, Martha A. Zierden, and Richard D. Brooks, 87-107. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998.
- . "The Metropolis and the Backcountry: The Making of a Colonial Landscape on the South Carolina Frontier," *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 3-13.
- Moore, Peter N, ed., "Introduction." In *The South Carolina Diary of Reverend Archibald Simpson: Part 1, May 1754-April 1770*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2012.
- Ridge, Martin. "The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 41, no. 1 (1991): 2-13. *South Carolina Gazette; And Country Journal*
- Turner, Frederick J. *The Frontier in American History*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.
- Weir, Robert M. *Colonial South Carolina: A History*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997.
- Woodmason, Charles, "A Letter to John Chesnut." In *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.
- . "A Letter to the Bishop of London." In *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.
- . "On Correct Behavior in Church." *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.

———“Part One: The Journal of Rev. Charles Woodmason.” In *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.

———“The Need for Education.” In *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*. Edited by Richard J. Hooker. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953.