

Charles Pinckney

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
National Historic Site
South Carolina



PHILIPSE MANOR HALL STATE HISTORIC SITE, NY

When William L. Pierce of Georgia sat down in Philadelphia to assess his fellow delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, he described Charles Pinckney as “possessing a spirit of application and industry beyond most Men.” The youngest of South Carolina’s delegation and a long-time advocate of a strong central government, Pinckney was among the first to call for a general convention to amend the ineffective 1781 Articles of Confederation.

He served on the rules committee, attended every session, and debated frequently. He forcefully advocated for the protection of property interests, including slavery, and

A Life of Public Service

Charles Pinckney was born into a prominent, slaveholding family in Charleston on October 26, 1757. His father, Colonel Charles Pinckney, was a wealthy planter and attorney, commanding officer of the local militia, member of the General Assembly, and president of the state’s Provincial Congress.

Young Charles received his basic schooling from David Oliphant, a noted South Carolina scholar who emphasized history, the classics, languages, and political science. Growing political unrest with Great Britain disrupted Charles’ plan to attend school in England. Instead he stayed home, studying law with his father.

In 1779 during the American Revolutionary War Pinckney represented Christ Church Parish in the state assembly. While a

lieutenant in his father’s militia regiment, he took part in the attempt to retake Savannah from the British. The next year, after the British captured Charleston, Pinckney and his father were imprisoned with other American officers. Colonel Pinckney was freed after swearing allegiance to the British Crown, an act that saved the family estate. Charles, who remained a US patriot, was released in June 1781.

In 1784 Pinckney became a delegate to Congress, then meeting in Trenton, New Jersey. In May 1787, along with his cousin Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Pierce Butler, and John Rutledge, he represented South Carolina at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Mainly due to his efforts South Carolina ratified the Constitution on May 23, 1788.

establishment of a central government with clear separation of powers. In skillfully navigated and heated debates, Pinckney helped shape one of the most important founding documents for the nation—the United States Constitution. He presented a full plan of government known as the “Pinckney Draft.”

Today’s Constitution includes some 30 provisions proposed by Pinckney, including the two-part legislature, single chief executive, annual state of the union address, and emoluments clause (restricting government officials from receiving gifts or titles of nobility from foreign states).

In April 1788 he married Mary Eleanor Laurens, and they had three children. Over the next 10 years he held a variety of political offices including president of the South Carolina State Constitutional Convention, governor of South Carolina, and US senator.

Pinckney began his political career as a Federalist, initially supporting a strong centralized government and constitution. Over time he changed his views, aligning with Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican (Anti-Federalist) Party. He managed Jefferson’s presidential campaign in South Carolina, rallying support for “states’ rights” and a less top-heavy government structure. Jefferson appointed Pinckney ambassador to Spain as a result of his allegiance and Jefferson’s presidential win.

As ambassador, Pinckney helped facilitate the US purchase of Louisiana from France and tried unsuccessfully to make Spain cede Florida to the United States. He returned to South Carolina in January 1806 and served briefly in the General Assembly before being elected to his fourth and final term as governor from 1806 to 1808. After a final term in the legislature and a brief retirement from active political life, he was elected in 1818 to the US Congress, from which he retired in 1821.

Charles Pinckney spent his final years in Charleston and died on October 29, 1824, at age 67. He devoted 42 years to politics, shaping the culture of South Carolina and the developing nation. He is buried at St. Philip’s Episcopal Church in Charleston.

Charles Pinckney



From *Signing of the Constitution* by Louis S. Glanzman © LOUIS S. GLANZMAN



Left: Detail from Charles Pinckney portrait by Gilbert Stuart, about 1786. Right: Silver inkstand Pinckney and other delegates used to sign the Constitution.

INKWELL, SIGNATURE—NPS, US CONSTITUTION—NATIONAL ARCHIVES

I must apologize for asking you to call at a place so indifferently furnished & where your fare will be entirely that of a farm.

—Charles Pinckney to President George Washington, May 1791

Pinckney's "Very Valuable Tract"

Snee Farm was originally part of a 1698 grant to Richard Butler. Charles Pinckney's father bought the property in 1754. Rice, cattle, indigo, and a variety of crops were grown on the plantation.

Though never Charles Pinckney's primary residence, Snee Farm was a significant landholding among his seven plantations. In May 1791 at Pinckney's invitation George Washington breakfasted here during his Southern Tour of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. On April 28, 1810, Pinckney placed an ad in Charleston's *City Gazette* offering properties for sale, including Snee Farm:

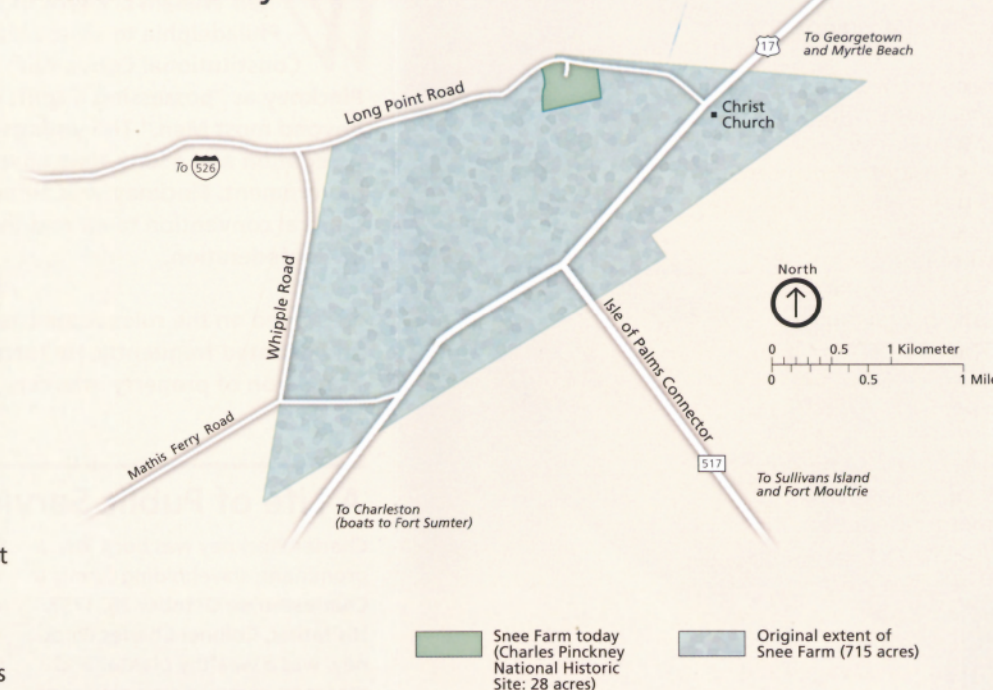
A very valuable tract of about eight hundred acres of Land, ten miles from the city ... consisting of about one hundred and twenty acres, more or less of rice lands, and the rest fit for the culture of grain of every kind and great part for black seed cotton. ... On this are a comfortable Dwelling House, new Kitchen, brick Barn, and some other Buildings and a very handsome Garden of eight or ten acres, at the back of which, there is a landing for a large schooner. ... The Negroes now on it will be sold with it.

During Pinckney's ownership approximately 60 enslaved Gullah Geechee people were

forced to labor on the indigo (left) and rice crops. In addition to farming, these men and women were skilled in a variety of trades. They worked as wheelwrights, coopers, carpenters, and sawyers on Snee Farm. After Pinckney sold the property in 1817, the enslaved workforce grew to 69 people as demand for labor increased with the introduction of cotton to the property.

With slavery abolished in the United States, many formerly enslaved people continued to work the plantations of Mount Pleasant and the Lowcountry. They often signed labor contracts, which provided tenant housing and low wages in exchange for their work.

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site



UNLOADING A RICE BARGE—COURTESY FCIT; TOP: UNCULTIVATED INDIGO—NPS

Lowcountry planters placed enslaved Africans with rice cultivation skills at a higher value. Carolina Gold rice, indigo, and cotton fueled the economy of Charleston and the young nation as a whole.

A Beautiful Culture, Born from Struggle

Often preferred for their skills in rice cultivation, enslaved people from West African and West Central African countries made up nearly 80 percent of Charleston's population in the Pinckney era. They brought their traditions, languages, religions, foodways, technical expertise, and values—along with the struggles and grief of enslavement—across the Atlantic Ocean.

The blending of these cultures with those of Indigenous peoples and Europeans created a distinctive cultural heritage in the Lowcountry:

Gullah Geechee. Unlike other enslaved experiences in the southern United States, Gullah Geechee traditions were passed down over hundreds of years because of the isolating geography of the Lowcountry river systems and barrier islands. Keeping the traditions alive honors Gullah Geechee ancestors and retains cultural aspects of West African roots.

The enslaved people of Mount Pleasant, including those at Snee Farm, are a vital part of Lowcountry history. Descendant communities including Snowden, Phillips,



NPS / KRISTA POLLETT

and Hamlin keep the Gullah Geechee traditions and culture alive. Aspects of the culture can be found throughout the

coasts and barrier islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and northeastern Florida.

Plan Your Visit

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site is six miles north of Charleston off US 17. Closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

The visitor center has exhibits on Charles Pinckney, the impact of slavery on the new nation, and archeology at the park.

Emergencies call 911

Accessibility

We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information ask a ranger, call, or check the website.

Visit National Park Service Sites in the Charleston Area
Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park
www.nps.gov/fosu

More Information
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Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

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National Park Foundation.
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