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# Reluctant Revolutionary: The Papers of Henry Laurens

Dorothy Twohig

*The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume 16: September 1, 1782–December 17, 1792.* David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor, eds.; Peggy J. Clark, associate editor; Thomas M. Downey, assistant editor, Samuel C. Smith and Mary Inkrot, editorial assistants. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, published for the South Carolina Historical Society, 2003, xlvi + 927 pp. \$49.95; (cloth), ISBN 1-57003-465-6.

In the early 1950s, when President Harry S. Truman called upon the scholarly community to undertake the publication of the papers of individuals important to an understanding of American history, Henry Laurens of South Carolina was among the 112 figures recommended. Laurens was not well known to twentieth-century historians outside of South Carolina even though he had held several prestigious appointments on a national level. Indeed, one of the goals of the Laurens Papers was to rescue him from an undeserved obscurity, and it is certain that the superb sixteen-volume edition of Laurens's papers, published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, will perform that function admirably.

Born in 1724 in Charleston, the son of a well-to-do saddler of French Huguenot ancestry, Laurens had received an adequate education for his day, served an apprenticeship in a London countinghouse, and returned to Charleston in 1747 to begin a career that was to make him one of the wealthiest and most influential merchants and landowners not only in South Carolina but in the mainland colonies at large. The early volumes of the *Papers* chronicle Laurens's ascent to the status of colonial gentleman through his marriage, his acquisition of land, his mercantile ventures, and his election to the Commons House of Assembly in 1757—a typical path to colonial gentility. His pre-Revolutionary War career often parallels that of George Washington.

Like Washington he hungered for land. By the outbreak of the

Revolution Laurens owned eight plantations in South Carolina and Georgia; by the time of his death he had amassed over 24,000 acres of land in both states. Like Washington, he married into money. His union with Eleanor Ball, the daughter of a leading South Carolina landowner, was a factor in his growing financial and social position. Again like Washington, Laurens's service in his colony's military service—as a lieutenant colonel in South Carolina's campaign against the Cherokee during the French and Indian War—contributed to his growing stature as a leader. He began his political career in the colony with his election to the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly in 1757.

Laurens spent several years in England in the early 1770s, and after his return to Charleston, his position at first in the approaching conflict with Britain was, to use the term used by the editors of the *Papers*, that of a “conservative revolutionary.” Only reluctantly did he move into the forefront of the opposition to the crown. From his sojourns in England Laurens had many ties—social, intellectual, and economic—with the mother country, and he was not favorably impressed by the mob violence that too often accompanied opposition to crown policies in the colonies. In South Carolina he quickly took his place as one of the cooler heads. During his years in London he had become an astute observer of the growing intransigence of Britain toward the colonies but he still hoped that the American differences with the government in London could be settled peaceably. By early 1774, however, he was growing discouraged, noting pessimistically in a letter to his son John that British policy would “make a good Platform for the Invincible Reasoning from the Mouths of four and twenty Pounders.”

But he left the old ties reluctantly. As he wrote his son in August 1776, “even at this Moment I feel a Tear of affection for the good Old Country & for the People in it whom in general I dearly Love.” Laurens gradually succumbed, however, at least on some level, to the growing feeling that there was a conspiracy between the crown and its appointees in South Carolina to circumvent the colony's liberties. And Laurens was, as his letters reveal, quick tempered and outspoken and often drawn into personal disputes with crown appointees. (On one occasion he tweaked the nose of newly appointed collector of the customs Daniel Moore in a confrontation on the Battery.) He may have been a reluctant convert to the American cause but by 1775 he was striding into the forefront of colonial resistance to the crown, serving in South Carolina's Provincial Congress—acting as its president after June 1775—and in March 1776 he was elected vice-president of the state under

its new constitution. In 1777 Laurens moved onto the national scene when he was elected to represent South Carolina in the Continental Congress. He was to return to his native state only once in the next eight years.

During these years Laurens performed yeoman service on numerous congressional committees and served as president of Congress from November 1777 to December 1778. In 1779 Congress appointed him minister to Holland with instructions to open negotiations with the Dutch government for a loan to support the war. He was successful in securing limited aid, but on his return voyage to America his ship was taken by the British, and, charged with treason, he was an unhappy and complaining prisoner in the Tower of London for the next fifteen months until he was exchanged in December 1781 for Lord Cornwallis. Laurens remained in Europe until 1784, serving as one of the commissioners to negotiate peace with Great Britain.

Like all the major editions, the *Laurens Papers* offers a rich field of research for historians in countless disciplines. But as regional studies grow steadily more sophisticated, the area for which these volumes will make the greatest contribution is as a major—and largely untapped—source for the study of the eighteenth-century South. The pre-Revolutionary War volumes, covering the period when Laurens was heavily engaged in mercantile and agricultural ventures in South Carolina, provide a unique source for the growth of the rice and indigo economy of the late-eighteenth-century Deep South and for the growing hunger for slaves that was to mark South Carolina's political and economic scene for future decades. Laurens's correspondence with his factors and his fellow merchants is one of the best historical sources of information on the export of rice, naval stores, and indigo, and the importation of slaves, tropical products, and rum from the West Indies.

The earlier volumes delve into other little-known episodes as well. There is extensive correspondence on Laurens's role in the South Carolina Committee of Safety's attempts to circumvent the activities of British Indian agents engaged in fomenting an uprising of the Creek and Cherokee on the South Carolina frontier. The exchange of letters between Laurens and George Galphin and others illuminate the problems of South Carolina and other southern colonies with substantial Indian populations on their borders.

With the success of the colonies in the French and Indian War, the South Carolina aristocracy of which Laurens was now a prominent member had become, as George Rogers has observed, "immensely rich and immensely secure." But Laurens's Charleston, in spite of its already legendary charm, was also, as these volumes reveal, a place plagued by hurricanes, malaria,

and yellow fever. Smallpox visited with devastating results. Fear of slave revolts permeated every level of society. Antagonistic policies acerbated relations between the tidewater and the frontier. The city offered a fertile field for the personal and political feuds that frequently erupted.

But Laurens's correspondence in the project's early volumes indicates that various pleasures compensated for the stifling heat of a Charleston summer. A vivid tapestry emerges of the social and family life of a slightly exotic southern pre-Revolutionary War society. Laurens, like many of his South Carolina peers, was obsessed with the landscaping and architectural improvement of his Charleston mansion and of his other plantations. Assisted by gardener John Watson, he pursued the rarest of exotic plants both from America and abroad. Writing in 1809, David Ramsay noted that Laurens had introduced "olives, capers, limes, ginger, guinea grass, the alpine strawberry, bearing nine months in the year . . . blue grapes, and also directly from the south of France, apples, pears, and plums of fine kinds."

Laurens was in the forefront of Charleston's intellectual development as well. Over the years his correspondence had developed a literary style that reflected his wide reading. Certainly this was reflected in his extensive purchases from London bookseller Samuel Birt and his leadership in the formation of the Charleston Library Society, of which he long served as vice-president. His substantial library held not only the volumes on literature and politics owned by most eighteenth-century gentlemen but with more practical works as well. Books on gardening by Peter Collinson of London influenced the layout of Laurens's famous Charleston garden. He was not, however, completely seduced by the superior advantages of a literary education. "Hundreds of Men," he noted in a letter to John Rose, 28 December 1771, "have their Mouths fill'd with jabbering Latin, while their Bellies are empty."

Laurens's devotion to his family permeates the *Papers*. The Laurens family presents a prototype for the extent of family mortality in the eighteenth century. It was perhaps more usual for a child to die than to survive to maturity. Of the twelve (possibly thirteen) children born to Henry Laurens and Eleanor Ball, seven of them died before the death of his wife in childbirth in 1770. Henry and Eleanor had been married for twenty years, and Laurens mourned her death. "I have lost a faithful bosom Friend," he wrote Matthew Robinson, 1 June 1770, "a Wife whose constant Study was to make me happy." He never remarried, and, aside from an occasional mention in her husband's letters, Eleanor remains a shadowy figure. Laurens outlived all

except three of the children. Some of them died in childhood, others shortly after birth. Death was so common that it could become a subject for black humor. After the death of his three-week-old son, Laurens wrote his friend George Appleby, 9 November 1764, that his wife “was safely deliver’d of a fine Boy on the 10th of September, but the little fellow finding what a World of vanity & vexation he had come into, went back again the 24th.” In 1771 in what was an unusual step for a colonial entrepreneur, he gave up his mercantile business to oversee personally the education of his younger children in London, remaining abroad with them until the end of 1774.

Aside from his wife, Laurens’s closest tie was to his eldest son John, one of the American Revolution’s most attractive if ill-fated players. Much more radical than his father in his support of American independence, John had rushed home, against his father’s advice, from his last year of studying law at the Inns of Court in London to join the American forces, leaving behind a young and pregnant wife in England. Inspired by a demanding father, John embarked on an exciting, if sometimes controversial, military career, becoming an aide-de-camp to Washington and participating in a number of military actions. He was greatly admired by his contemporaries. During their service together on Washington’s staff, he became young Alexander Hamilton’s best friend—a friend Hamilton was never able to replace during his long career. But many of his military superiors and comrades, including Washington, deplored his reckless disregard for his own safety. In August 1782, at the age of twenty-seven, and to almost universal regret, John was killed in a senseless skirmish with a British foraging expedition.

Henry and his son were separated more than they were together during the years while John was at school abroad and later, during the war years, by their public service, but they kept in touch constantly by letter. The rich correspondence between father and son, on national and local politics, on military affairs, and on family matters, gives the *Laurens Papers* a uniquely personal perspective on the events of the war and its effect on its participants. (The volumes for the war years are almost as much John’s as Henry’s.)

It is in his correspondence with John that Henry Laurens’s essentially conservative approach to the Revolution is most apparent. The correspondence between Henry and John also presents one of the most interesting—and significant—late-eighteenth-century dialogues on slavery. Given their backgrounds, the two were unlikely proponents of any radical approach to emancipation. Beginning in 1776 John advanced a series of proposals that would allow slaves to enlist and serve in the Continental Army in return for

their freedom. Henry displayed his usual caution, while John pressed ahead with his equally usual reckless enthusiasm. By 1778 the desperate need of Congress for troops persuaded Henry, now president of Congress to back his son's plan. The scheme eventually foundered on pro-slavery sentiment both in the South and in Congress, but the correspondence between John and Henry in the *Laurens Papers* presents ample evidence of the impending arguments between pro- and anti-slavery advocates. In his letters to his father, John argued eloquently that the South's peculiar institution was incompatible with the ideals of the Revolution and that the goal was emancipation—sooner rather than later. Henry was by no means an advocate of slavery. “I abhor slavery,” he wrote his son. But he spoke, as usual, for a more conservative faction of southern—and northern—constituencies. In his view, slavery, propelled by its social and economic problems, would eventually disappear on its own. For the present, emancipation would face insurmountable obstacles in its interruption of what he called the “tranquility” of southern society in its dependence on slavery to preserve a social and economic way of life. And he held a common, if naive, belief that his own slaves were happy in their servitude and devoted personally to him.

Looming over the final volume is Henry Laurens's grief at the death of his son, an event from which he never really recovered. More than simply a familial relationship, more than father and son, the two had an intellectual connection that Henry would find impossible to replace. Upon his return to America at the end of 1784, the period covered by volume 16, he declined any further public service, except for his brief role in supporting the new Constitution at the South Carolina Ratifying Convention. Until his death in 1792 he largely devoted himself to the restoration of his plantations which had been devastated by the war.

The *Papers of Henry Laurens* illustrates, probably better than any other papers project, the evolution of historical editing over the last half-century. When volume 1 appeared in 1968 under the editorship of Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers, Jr., the transcription policy generally followed the middle ground between the literal and modernized proscribed in the *Harvard Guide to American History*. The editors agreed upon producing “an accurate but a readable text” but “in as much as printing is unable to reproduce a longhand manuscript exactly and eighteenth-century manuscripts have certain peculiarities, the editors have made some modification and modernization of the text.” An examination of the caveats in the description of editorial policies, however, indicates that the editors took more liberties

with a literal text than their statement would imply. For the most part, abbreviations were spelled out, punctuation was often regularized (the dash was deleted except in its modern usage), commas were inserted according to project rules, slips of the pen were silently corrected. The result, for the first nine volumes, was pretty much a clear text transcription policy.

Since the publication of the first volume in 1968, the relatively small editorial staff has produced volumes at an admirably steady rate. The longest hiatus between volumes occurred between 1981 and 1985 and coincided with the extensive changes in editorial policies initiated in chapter 10. No doubt partly influenced by the comments of Thomas Tanselle and by the example of other editorial projects, transcription policies underwent a metamorphosis from clear text to an almost literal transcription policy. Indeed, the later volumes of the *Laurens Papers* are probably more conscientious than most projects in describing vagaries in text. Annotation of documents in all of the volumes has been concise, accurate, appropriate, and consistently distinguished.

With Laurens's assumption of his seat in the Continental Congress in 1777, the editors encountered a problem that has plagued all of the Founding Fathers projects—the question of duplication of documents that are published in the volumes of other editorial projects. For the first nine volumes the project's editors included almost all extant Laurens documents. But with Laurens's arrival as a delegate to the Continental Congress, the situation changed drastically. For the *Laurens Papers*, the main source of duplication would be Paul Smith's edition of *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1781*, which would include Laurens's papers not only as delegate but as president of Congress, although there would clearly be duplication of documents in other editions as well. The Smith edition includes almost every letter written by Laurens during his period of service in Congress, a period covered mainly in volumes 12, 13, and 14 of the *Laurens Papers* but in other later volumes as well. Laurens's official correspondence during these years provides a rare view of the day-to-day activities of Congress, the elation over the Franco-American treaty of alliance, and on Laurens's reservations concerning the accompanying commercial treaty. Given Laurens's familiarity with British affairs, his comments provide one of the best sources from the American side for the negotiations over Lord North's conciliatory resolutions in Parliament. To omit such documents would obviously vitiate these volumes. As the editors—and users—of other projects dealing with public papers have discovered, there is no completely satisfactory solution for the



problem of documentary duplication.

The editors of most of the Founding Fathers papers have chosen not to confront this issue squarely, usually taking the path of publishing letters between major figures with the token concession of cutting down on the annotation of such documents. The editors of the *Laurens Papers* took a more courageous, if controversial, path. Urged on also by the exigencies of time and funding, they included in volume 13 approximately only one-fourth of Laurens's correspondence, with even more stringent cuts to follow. However since the Smith edition included none of the letters written to delegates unless both parties were members of Congress, the editors were still left with an extraordinary treasure trove. As is the case with other projects, incoming and private letters (particularly Henry's correspondence with his son and with political and business friends) are often more revealing and significant than official documents. Thus, in spite of omitted documents, the volumes are still able to contribute a rare view of the everyday workings of the delegates and their interaction with each other.

With the publication of the final volumes of the project, the selection policy has grown steadily more stringent; volume 16—the project's final volume—contains only approximately twenty-four percent of extant Laurens documents that were created in the years covered by the volume. The editors have, with varying degrees of success, tried to ameliorate the problems created by their selection policies with various devices. As often as feasible they have used omitted documents in the annotation. They chose not to include a calendar entry for documents at their appropriate place in the volumes but at the end of each volume there is a list of all known documents, giving the date and the sender/recipient, with the documents that appear in the volumes listed in italics. There is no description of the contents of omitted documents.

There have been tentative plans during the course of the project to issue after the publication of the final volume supplementary material dealing with omitted documents. Wisely, given the speed with which electronic forms are developing and the current difficulties in funding, these plans have been currently placed on hold. The editors of the *Laurens Papers*, however, have long been in the forefront of electronic publication, and there is good reason to hope for progress on this front. A cumulative index is currently in progress.