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Charleston and the Emergence of Middle-Class Culture in the Revolutionary Era. By Jennifer L. Goloboy

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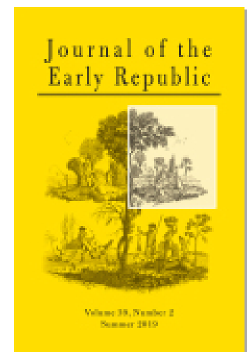
Charleston and the Emergence of Middle-Class Culture in the Revolutionary Era by Jennifer L. Goloboy (review)



Elizabeth White Nelson

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obstacles to observant Jews. Rabin's emphasis on the myriad ways in which nineteenth-century Jews created "more portable and expansive conceptions of what counted as authentic Judaism" is a persuasive and helpful contribution to the growing, but still thin historiography of Jews in the early republic (143).[2] Her argument not only helps illuminate an understudied aspect of the nineteenth century, but speaks to the state of religion in a twenty-first-century America that is every bit as "lonely, isolating, suspicious, and . . . mobile" as Rabin's pre-1877 Jewish America (145).

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Charleston and the Emergence of Middle-Class Culture in the Revolutionary Era. By Jennifer L. Goloboy. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016. Pp. 197. Cloth, $54.95.)

Reviewed by Elizabeth White Nelson

Jennifer Goloboy recounts an interesting and detailed history of merchants in Charleston, South Carolina, from the 1760s to the 1820s. By framing this period as the "Revolutionary Era," she argues for important continuities in the commercial culture of Charleston before and after the Revolutionary War. The lives and habits of Charleston merchants, she argues, offer a new perspective on the important organizing factors in the history of middle-class culture in America. "Above all," Goloboy writes, "I hope to dispel the idea that 'middle-class' inherently implied 'nice': economically and socially progressive, engaged in nurturing a close family life" (4). Charleston merchants were sharp dealers, whose main object was to survive the fickle nature of the market economy. Goloboy's study of the habits and practices of trade favored by Charleston merchants underpins her most important point: "the cultural work of making the

2. Michael Hoberman, *New Israel/New England: Jews and Puritans in Early America* (Amherst, MA, 2011); William Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654–1800* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005); Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT, 2004).

middle class happened in the countinghouse as well as the parlor, and among men as well as women" (92).

Goloboy defines the middle class as "a distinctive culture that belonged to independent trading households" (3). Yet for a book that purports to reshape our understanding of the middle class as both a category and a group, the discussion of the theoretical models of class identity and the broader historiography of middle-class culture is brief. Goloboy struggles with a key question in the history of the middle class: Were merchants, by definition, middle class? She conflates the economic role of merchant with the idea of middle-class status without exploring how merchants, shopkeepers, retail traders, auctioneers, attorneys, bankers, insurance agents, and, in some cases, artisans came to see each other as more than other actors who participated in the commercial life of Charleston. By her own description, the middle class was recognizable by the middle of the eighteenth century. As early as 1763, Goloboy argues, colonial North American merchants "expected to lead restricted middle-class lives and pass their status on to their children" (10). In addition, she defines artisans as middle class, but in jeopardy of losing their middle-class status by the end of the eighteenth century, noting, "most artisans found it increasingly difficult to earn enough to remain in the middle class" (3). She departs from the practice of using the term "middling sorts" to describe these men to argue for coherent middle-class identity in the late eighteenth century. Yet without a more detailed discussion of the transformation of Charleston social hierarchy in the transition from colonial port to independent city, it is not clear how the "middle class" was more than a group of men who fell within a general range of economic status.

Goloboy does not make it clear how these men navigated the transformation from the traditional hierarchies of birth that underpinned class status in colonial Charleston to an understanding of class identity where prosperous men and their wives organized social status around ideas of refinement, gentility, and sentiment, mandating restraint to rein in the dangerous tendencies toward luxury that they feared unchecked prosperity might encourage. Market behavior might include sharp dealings that fell outside of "nice" behavior, but class identity was a way for merchants and prosperous artisans to create divisions within commercial culture that would distinguish those with "good motives" from those who skated the edges of both legality and propriety in commercial relationships. The links between behavior in the market and behavior in

the home were important to prosperous Americans, both northern and southern. The success and failure of commercial enterprises depended on the shrewd assessment of a man's assets and his character, in public and in private. It seems unlikely, therefore, that merchants and shopkeepers in the turbulent economic world of the early republic would have been willing to see all men of business as members of the same class of people.

Goloboy's work joins a growing body of scholarship on the southern middle class. She refers to the complex role slavery played in southern society, especially for men who were not planters, but her discussion of this important area of commercial life is brief and leaves the reader wishing for more detail. The period Goloboy explores marks not only a significant growth in the use of slave labor for cotton production but also an important shift in the commerce of the slave trade. It would be fascinating to know more about how non-planters in Charleston negotiated these changes economically and socially. As she notes in passing, most northern middle-class people thought abolitionists were wild-eyed radicals. Lydia Maria Child, who frames Goloboy's introduction, lost her membership to the Boston Athenaeum, her editorship of the *Juvenile Miscellany*, and her place as the literary darling of Boston society by advocating antislavery views. Child's social ostracism, and subsequent struggle to make a living, reveals an uncomfortable intellectual commonality between the northern and southern commercial classes about the issue of slavery in the 1820s. Goloboy's study offers the tantalizing possibility of how we might see more of the ways that prosperous southerners and northerners shared many more common views than we have acknowledged.

Overall, while Goloboy argues for a re-periodization of the emergence of the middle class, the Charleston merchants she studies suggest that periodization might be a red herring. The question, it seems, is not when did the middle class emerge, but rather how did men whose prosperity rested in commerce—and the women who married them and raised their children—shape public and private roles for themselves that made commercial dealings foundational to social status after the Revolution. Goloboy makes some notable contributions to that inquiry. Her detailed attention to the economic activities, decisions, and relationships of male merchants is a welcome addition to a history that often has focused on prescriptive literature rather than on the behavior of those engaged in commerce. Her focus on Charleston contributes to the ongoing project

of re-evaluating the economic culture of the South in the Revolutionary era. The scrutiny she places on the concept of "niceness" reminds historians who study the middle class to question the assertions of class identity and awareness rather than adopt them as categories of historical inquiry. Through her study of these Charleston merchants, we are reminded of the ebb and flow of success and failure common among prosperous Americans in the early part of the nineteenth century and the continued difficulties historians face in understanding the complex category of class in American history.

Elizabeth White Nelson is an associate professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is the author of *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington, DC, 2004).

The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History. Edited by Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. Pp. 812. Cloth, $150.00.)

Reviewed by John Garrison Marks

Compiling and editing historical documents is difficult work. When your subject left behind no documents written in his own hand, when the extent of his travels through the Atlantic world is exceeded only by the broad scope of his impact and legacy, and when the historiography surrounding him is fraught with controversy, the task is nearly impossible. All of this marks the work of Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette in producing *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History* as a monumental achievement. In more than eight hundred pages, Egerton and Paquette have put together an annotated document collection that details the context, events, and influence of Denmark Vesey's planned 1822 revolution in Charleston. The resulting volume comprises essential reading for understanding not just race and slavery but also the entirety of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

Taking a long view of the Vesey affair, Egerton and Paquette divide their collection into six parts. Part I, "Preconditions," contains documents related to Vesey's early life in the circum-Caribbean, African-descended people's resistance to slavery and racial control in early