

From Colonies to Nation: The Emergence of American Nationalism, 1750-1800

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Most people in the modern United States do not wrestle with the decision to view themselves as either American or British. In 18th-century North America, however, the determination of one's nationality was subject to change and may have been for many people a complicated, protracted process. Most of the first Americans were at one time citizens of Great Britain. The inhabitants of the British colonies in North America maintained their loyalty to the king of England long after they arrived on the continent. Yet at some point a sense of American identity took hold. The assumption is that American nationalist sentiments welled up throughout the colonies in the 18th century. There was a time for most of the colonists of North America when they stopped thinking of themselves as British and began thinking of themselves as American. This process can be referred to as the emergence of American national identity.

This collective imagining of a new identity could not have happened by coincidence, though, and it was certainly not a natural or inevitable development. There must have been forces acting on the colonial masses to encourage them to think of themselves as Americans. The hypothesis of this study is that colonial newspapers, the primary media for mass communication, must show some evidence of the emergence of American national identity. This study focuses on a content analysis of newspapers published in Charleston, South Carolina from 1750 to 1800. The goal of the study is to detect trends in the emergence of an American national identity as evidenced by the language used in 18th-century

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Charleston newspapers. The content of Charleston newspapers offers crucial clues for understanding when and how colonial elites began imagining themselves and their fellow colonists as members of an American nation.

Literature Review

A number of scholars place the birth of the American nation within the quarter century from 1750-1775 (Weeks; Merritt; Breen; Blassingame; Savelle; Waldstreicher; Varg; Murrin). While the purpose of my study is not to pinpoint the birth of the American nation — I aim to trace its gradual emergence — these scholars underscore the fact that there existed a process through which North American colonists came to think of themselves as members of an American nation. Scholars subscribe to a diverse range of definitions of the nation and national identity, but most agree that the nation is a mental construct (Hroch; Zelinsky; Savelle; Anderson; Gellner).

Miroslav Hroch defines a nation as “a large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical) and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness” (79). Similar themes of the nation as a form of consciousness show up in Max Savelle’s explanation of nations and nationalism. “The nation has no existence in the physical world,” says Savelle (902). He continues: “Its existence, therefore, while nonetheless real, is entirely metaphysical, or mental; the nation exists only as a concept held in common by many men” (902). Paul Varg similarly defines national identity as “a self-conscious awareness of unity and separateness growing out of a common historical background and ideology” (170). Benedict Anderson provides one of the most relevant discussions on the nation and community. He extensively develops the idea that the nation is a form of consciousness, or a mental construct. Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). So, the nation is imagined, which means the members of a nation will not know all the other members of the nation. Rather, the unity of a nation is imagined in the minds of all of its members. According to Anderson, print media such as novels and newspapers play an important role in the emergence of a national mode

of thinking. He uses the example of the daily ritual of reading the newspaper: a reader comes to share a sense of national identity with thousands or millions of other people whom he does not know personally. The fact that they read all read the same stories about the same events bonds them together in an “imagined political community.”

My own case study of Charleston newspapers shows that between 1750 and 1800 colonists went through a gradual process of beginning to think of themselves as Americans, and no longer as Britons. Since this was not a natural occurrence, one might wonder why and how colonists started to see themselves as Americans. The term “American” necessarily had to be applied to the colonists, if only meant initially to assign them some kind of identifying name. Scholars differ somewhat over when the colonists became “Americans,” but most place this development within the period from 1750-1775 (Weeks; Merritt; Breen; Blassingame; Savelle; Waldstreicher; Varg; Murrin). As Merritt (1963) concludes, “the trends toward increased American community awareness and an enhanced sense of American community developed slowly, to be sure, but were well under way long before the outbreak of revolution” (71). In a following essay (1966), Merritt uses quantitative content analysis of colonial newspapers from five cities (Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Williamsburg, and Charleston), looking for the use of “place-name symbols,” which are “self-referent symbols referring collectively to either the colonists or the colonies as a single unit” (331). In both of his pieces, Merritt finds the rise of American nationalism to be a slow, gradual process with certain periods of rapid development.

Hroch claims that a national movement begins with a small group of intellectuals (Phase A) and activists (Phase B) who draw on preexisting conditions to incite a “national consciousness” among a larger ethnic group (81). These activists and intellectuals, though, do not simply invent the nation. Instead, claims Hroch, there must be among the larger ethnic group a memory of a common past, linguistic or cultural bonds, and a sense of equality in order for the smaller group of activists to instigate a national movement. Nonetheless, this group of activists and intellectuals plays a driving role in encouraging the emergence of the nation (Hroch). Colonial elites who possessed the tools of print communication, those who would be described by Hroch as “patriotic agitators,” founded the United States and drove the rise of American

national identity (81). In the colonial period, publishers and politicians were often one and the same. Benjamin Franklin is the most prominent example. Colonial newspapers were often written and published by those colonists who first imagined themselves as Americans and felt compelled to convince their fellow colonists that they also were Americans.

Methodology

My method of data collection for this study is a content analysis of the colonial press. In content analysis, according to Bruce L. Berg, “researchers examine artifacts of social communication” (267). Content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti qtd. in Berg 267). Focusing on the *South Carolina Gazette*, published in Charleston, South Carolina 1750-1775, I initially planned to read four randomly selected issues of the newspaper from each year during the 25-year period. This turned out to be too large of an undertaking for the time I was able to allot to my research. Upon realizing this, I decided to read four randomly selected issues of the *South Carolina Gazette* for every five years from 1750-1775 (1750, 1775, 1760, etc.). Five-year intervals provided a more realistic workload and still sufficed to show long-term trends in media content and public opinion. I then chose to continue reading Charleston newspapers published every five years through 1800, which would, ideally, show sustained and increasing imagining of the American nation after formal independence. The newspapers I read along with their dates are listed in Appendix B.

One of the merits of reading different newspapers is that a number of people influenced the newspaper content that I read. This essentially rules out the idea that any apparent trends may be the result of one person’s bias or influence. The most important control variable in my research was that all the newspapers I sampled were published in Charleston. Despite having different publishers, the layout and appearance of each newspaper is quite similar. A discussion of the structure and publishers of the Charleston newspapers follows.

South Carolina Gazette (1732-1775)

Thomas Whitmarsh began publishing *The South-Carolina Gazette* in January 1732, but he died in 1733. Benjamin Franklin sent Lewis Timothy to Charleston to revive the newspaper in 1734 (South Carolina Business Hall of Fame). Timothy published the newspaper until his death in 1738, at which time his wife, Elizabeth Timothy, took over. While Elizabeth did most of the work, she published the newspaper under the name of her son, Peter Timothy, who was too young to take over when his father died. Peter assumed publishing duties of the paper in 1746, was joined briefly by Thomas Powell and Edward Hughes in 1772, and in 1773 again took over as sole publisher. The *South-Carolina Gazette* was suspended in December of 1775. One of the most well-know publishers in colonial North America, Timothy had a working relationship throughout his career with Benjamin Franklin. Botein comments on Timothy's loyalties leading up to the revolution, observing that "his loyalties were suspect from the very beginning of the crisis" (26). In the 1760s, Timothy had fallen out of favor with those who were most enthusiastic about American independence. Timothy regretted this, however, and in 1770 he began to try to distinguish himself as a supporter of American independence. At some time in 1773 and thereafter, "Timothy's patriotic ardor revived, carrying him to the prestigious peak of his lengthy career," and when he died in 1782, he was "assured of his reputation as a patriot" (Botein 27).

South-Carolina and American General Gazette (1764-1781)

Robert Wells and David Bruce began publishing this newspaper in 1764. The two published the newspaper jointly until October 31, 1765, when Wells is listed as the sole publisher. Wells was joined in 1775 by his son John. Soon after, Robert Wells, who was a supporter of the British cause, went to England and never returned. The paper appeared intermittently in 1776 and 1779 due to the British invasion, but was published by John until 1781. Wells had close ties to imperial officials, and his newspaper favored the British cause in its views (Weir). Robert Wells' *Gazette* was "even more timorous" than Timothy's when it came to issues of the revolution, according to Botein (26). Even under Robert Wells' son, John, the *Gazette* is listed in a bibliography of "loyalist newspapers of the American Revolution" (Barnes 234). John Wells

was a supporter of the American cause. According to Brigham, John Wells was forced to support the British cause in 1780 in order to preserve his property (1037). This may explain the newspaper's tag as a loyalist publication. The newspaper was published with this title until February 1781, when it was succeeded by *The Royal Gazette*.

South-Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser

This newspaper was a continuation of the *South-Carolina Weekly Gazette*, which was established by Nathan Childs in February, 1783. Robert Bruce joined Childs and the two began to publish the newspaper as "Nathan Childs and Company" in March 1784. The pair was joined in March, 1785 by John M'Iver. Starting 1 July 1785, the newspaper began to be published under the title, *South-Carolina Gazette and the Public Advertiser*, before it became the *South-Carolina Gazette, and the General Advertiser* on 7 January 7 1786 (Library of Congress).

Columbian Herald (1784-1796)

This newspaper was started in November 1784 by Thomas B. Bowen and John Markland. It had a number of different names, starting with *The Columbian Herald, or the Patriotic Courier of North-America*. This initial name signals this newspaper's political leanings from the very outset of its publication. On 24 November 1785, the name of the newspaper changed to *The Columbian Herald, or the Independent Courier of North-America*. Markland retired in 1786 and, after working with several other publishers, Bowen became the sole publisher in late 1788 or early 1789. In July 1793 the newspaper became the *Columbian Herald, or the Southern Star*, at which time Bowen was joined in publishing by William P. Harrison (Brigham).

The masthead of the *Columbian Herald* in 1790 and 1795 contains a centered portrait of George Washington, a distinctly American figure, in the same place occupied by Great Britain's coat of arms in the *South-Carolina Gazette*. Immediately beneath the masthead appears an excerpt from the United States Constitution. It reads: "CONGRESS shall make no LAW — abridging the FREEDOM of SPEECH, or of the PRESS."

Carolina Gazette (1790-1820+)

Peter Freneau and Seth Paine established *The Carolina Gazette* on 1 January 1798. It was a weekly paper that the pair published along with *City Gazette*, a daily Charleston newspaper. The weekly was published by Freneau and Paine until 1801, after which it had many different publishers.

To analyze the content of the newspapers described above, I formulated a list of terms for which I would look in the newspapers during my research. This list (see Appendix A) consists of two main groups. The first group, “British Identity,” contains words or phrases that are supportive of British culture and British control over the North American colonies. The second group, “American Identity,” contains words or phrases that are supportive of a new American culture and a group of people free from British rule.

Results and Discussion

The trend of an increasing usage of terms and phrases relating to a sense of American identity is apparent in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 graphs the raw number of occurrences of references to American identity and references to British identity. Figure 2 shows the percentages of the total terms that are constituted by the two different categories of the code. Both figures document a great increase in references supportive of American identity from 1750-1800. Over these fifty years, there were three distinct periods of development. In the first period, from 1750 to 1770, references to British identity consistently outnumber references to American identity. Figure 2 shows that the ratio of references to British identity to references to American identity lingers around 80 percent to 20 percent for the years 1750 to 1770. Thus, the bias in favor of British identity is quite clear. Terms and phrases referring to American identity mostly remain below ten occurrences per issue from 1750 to 1770. Over this time, references to British identity usually do not dip far below twenty occurrences. A breaking point occurs in 1775, however, as the second issue from that year contains more references to American identity than references to British identity for the first time. Thus, the year 1775 begins the second distinct period for newspapers published in Charleston. In 1775 and 1780, there is no clear identity bias in the newspapers I read. This is evidenced in Figure

2 by the ratio of references to British identity to references to American identity, which has decreased to about 65 percent to 35 percent. Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that there are specific newspaper issues that seem to be biased towards American identity (1775: 2, 1775: 3, 1775: 4, 1780: 1, 1780: 2) as well as issues that seem to be biased towards British identity (1775: 1, 1780: 3, 1780: 4). While the bias in the newspapers switches back and forth in 1775 and 1780 from American identity to British identity (as shown by Figure 1), the bias is also weaker during these years than it is during the first and third periods. The years 1775 and 1780, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, mark the growth of American national identity in relation to an entrenched British identity. Beginning in 1785, newspapers demonstrate a steady and continuous increase in references to American identity. From 1785 to 1800, references to American identity reach their highest levels and references to British identity slip to no more than ten occurrences, as evidenced by Figure 1. Figure 2 shows that the identity bias (in favor of American identity) in this third period is stronger than in the two previous periods. From 1785 to 1800, on average, the ratio of references to American identity to references to British identity ranges from 80 percent/20 percent to 100 percent/0 percent. For the two issues over that period in which that ratio is at or near 50 percent/50 percent, the total number of identity references is unusually small, which undermines the significance of these two issues to the overall trend. It is important to look past the spikes on the graph in Figure 1 to focus on the overall trend line from 1750 to 1800 (Figure 1A). The spikes on the graph generally represent a newspaper issue that contained an article in which the writer used one term especially frequently and repetitively, such as “his majesty,” “the president,” or the “United States.” This occurs in the first issue from 1755, the third issue from 1770, and the first issue from 1790, for example. In 1795 and 1800, by contrast, the rise in references to American identity above previous levels is consistent over those years and appears to be a significant development in the overall trend. Figure 1 displays the great increase in references to American identity over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century. Figure 1A includes the same graph with trend lines shown. A qualitative discussion of the newspaper issues and their representations in Figure 1 and Figure 2 follows.

Figure 1: Occurrences of References to National Identity (Quantity)

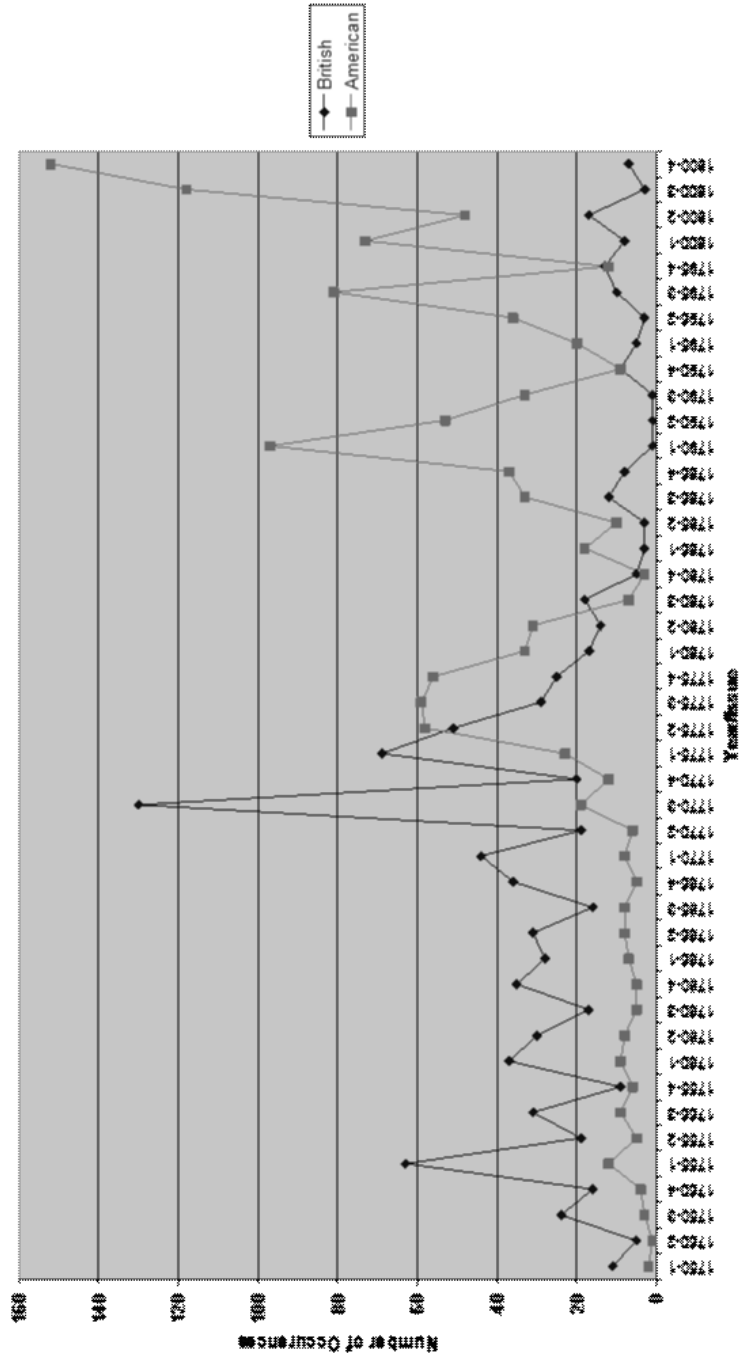


Figure 2: Occurrences of References to National Identity (Percentage)

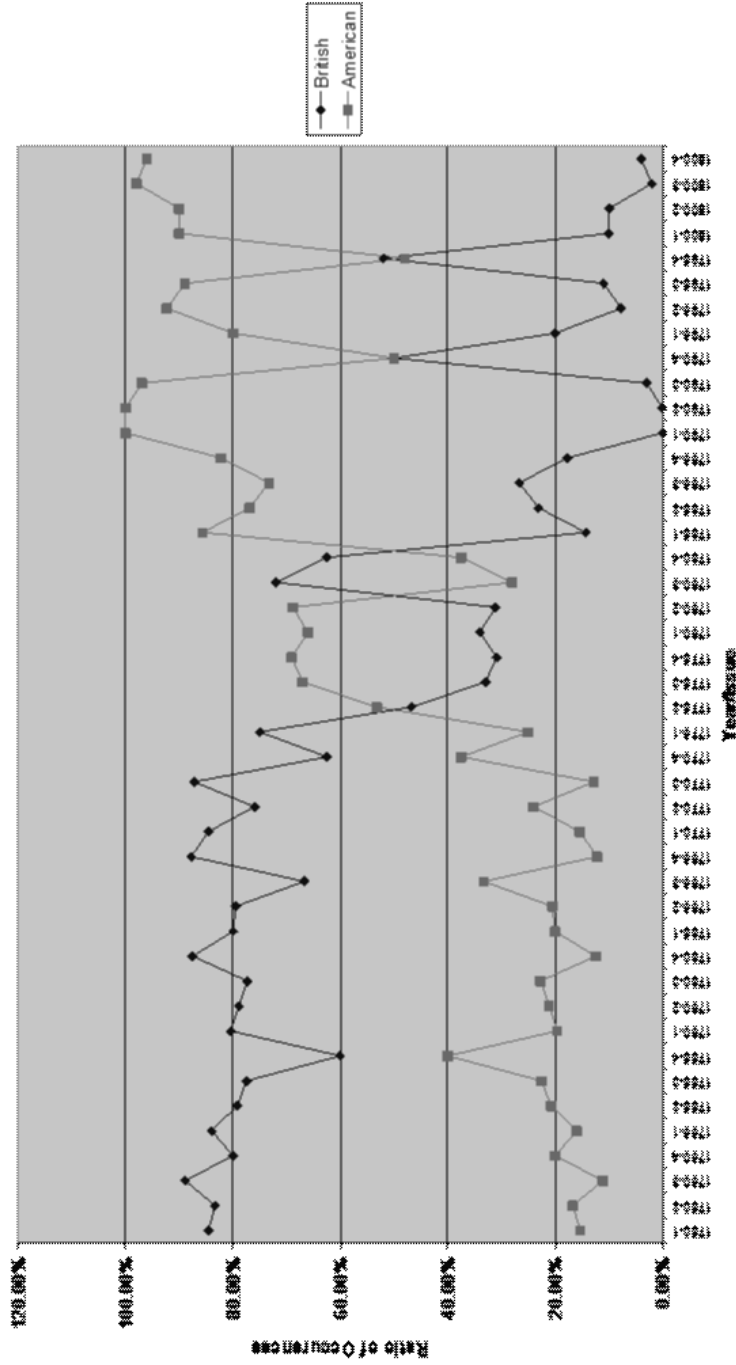
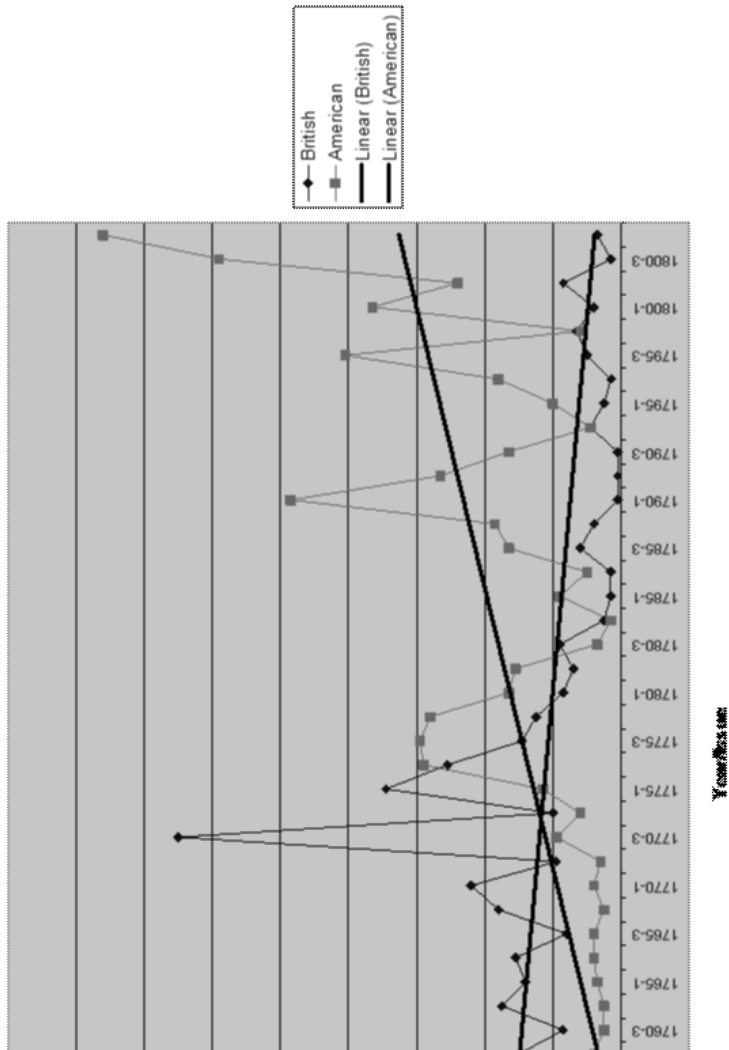


Figure 1A: Occurrences of References to National Identity (Quantity, with trend lines)



From his office at the corner of Tradd and King streets in Charleston, Peter Timothy published *The South-Carolina Gazette* from 1746 until 1775. Timothy's one-man publication contains a number of elements that remain relatively consistent during his time as editor. *The South-Carolina Gazette* was published weekly, and contained a news section, local advertisements, a Marine report on ships entering and leaving the port of "Charles-town," a section reporting current prices on commodities, and a weather report. The news section and advertisements section comprised the majority of the newspaper's pages. Timothy reported news from "Charles-town," from South Carolina, from the rest of the colonies in North America, and often published excerpts from news publications from around the world. The advertisements section often took up two to three pages of the newspaper. *The South-Carolina Gazette* grew significantly in length over the period of 1750-1775, during which period several trends in its content emerge.

The issues from 1750 are relatively short and are mostly devoid of any references to a sense of American identity. News reports come from European locations such as London, Dublin, Edinburgh, Brussels, Hanover, Stockholm, Petersburg and Madrid. While these place names are not included in my quantitative results, place names will be discussed throughout this section, as they may be indicative of the overall content of each newspaper issue. In one issue, Timothy includes an excerpt from the *Westminster Journal*; another (17 Sept.) includes a letter from an authority in Algiers to the "Commander in Chief of his Majesty's Ships" (1). The December 3rd issue of the *Gazette* contains some of the only local news in the 1750 sample, including a proclamation by a South Carolina official of "an Act to encourage the importation of Bar Iron" in any of "his Majesty's Colonies in America" (1). The only phrases suggesting the formation of an American identity are a minute number of place names from North America, most of which are "Charles-town." The masthead of the newspaper in 1750 contains a large image of Great Britain coat of arms. The presence of this image in the masthead continues in 1755, 1760, 1765, 1770, and part of 1775.

Issues of the *Gazette* in 1755 are significantly longer than those from 1750. In addition, while the 1755 issues contain a similar amount of news from European locations, there is a marked increase from 1750 in the number of news stories with bylines from New York, Boston,

Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Charleston. A January issue from 1755 presents speeches by the governor of Virginia to the general assembly of Virginia, and the subsequent replies of the assembly. Like other government correspondence published in Timothy's *Gazette*, this example from 1755 contains large quantities of the phrases "his majesty," "his majesty's," "subjects," and "colonies." Unlike issues from 1750, however, there is some usage of the word "America." For instance, in the March 27th issue refers to a regiment of British soldiers being "sent to America" (1). The August 28th issue reports that many families will "proceed to America" and that more soldiers "have continued their ports for America" (1). These troop movements were undoubtedly due to the French and Indian War, which began in 1754 and continued until 1763. The most significant development in *The South-Carolina Gazette* between 1750 and 1755 is the increased usage of the word "America." This usage represents a growing tendency to identify the land occupied by the colonies as "America."

Issues sampled from 1760 are quite similar in both length and content to the sample of issues from 1755. The *Gazette's* focus is divided evenly between European news and colonial news. The presence of local news becomes more consistent in the 1760 issues, though it constitutes a relatively small section of the newspaper. There is no increase in the usage of references to America or references to a sense of American identity in the 1760 issues of the *Gazette*. Nonetheless, there is a section in the January 12th issue entitled "American Advices" (1) which contains news from Boston and Newport, Rhode Island. In the September 13th *Gazette*, one British writer talks about "the present prosperous situation of affairs in America" (2). Still, there are many phrases referring to the king as "his majesty" and his "subjects" in his "colonies." Issues of the *Gazette* from 1760 continue to emphasize a sense of British identity as opposed to an American identity.

In 1765, *The South-Carolina Gazette* tends to emphasize European news. In three of the four issues sampled, European news items far outnumber those from around the North American colonies. Bylines from London dominate the front page in the three issues just mentioned, while Prussia, Poland, Ireland, Scotland and Spain appear frequently. News from colonial cities is minute, and updates on the happenings in "Charles-town" are sparser in 1765 than they are in the 1760 sample of

the *Gazette*. As in previous years, there are only several phrases in each issue referring to American identity. The March 16th issue discusses “the scheme for imposing a stamp duty in the American colonies” (2). Another issue, from August 24th, talks about a regiment of British troops “bound for America” (1).

The Stamp Act was passed by the British parliament on 22 Mar. 1765. The October 5th issue of *The South-Carolina Gazette* provides a firsthand glimpse of the colonists’ reaction to the Stamp Act of 1765 in an excerpt from the *Connecticut Gazette*. This article also contains an image of people of North America separate from their counterparts in Britain: “As the late Stamp Act occasions great and universal uneasiness in the minds of the people throughout North-America, and is really a matter which very nearly affects their interest and liberties, it behoves every lover of his country to contribute what he can towards their relief” (1). The writer then goes through a series of complaints about the Stamp Act. Within this passage is the first usage of the phrase “the people” in the issues of the *Gazette* that I sampled. It is significant that Timothy published this challenge to British Authority in the *Gazette*. Whether readers of the *Gazette* in “Charles-town” agreed with this writer from Connecticut is unknown. Nonetheless, they are presented with an image of distaste for British policies in the colonies, and a call to challenge the authority of British rule.

Issues sampled from 1770 contain few more references to American identity than do the issues from 1765. North America and Europe are evenly represented in the *Gazette*’s news sections in 1770, with news from London often occupying a prominent spot on the early pages. News from around the colonies is also given importance, however, and the happenings of “Charles-town” are given a significant amount of weekly attention. The September 13th issue of the *Gazette* is comprised mostly of published correspondence between “his Majesty’s Council” (1) and the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly. This correspondence is responsible for the spike in phrases referring to British identity in 1770, which can be seen on Figure 1. “His majesty” and “his majesty’s” is used profusely throughout these communications. References to American identity are few in the 1770 issues, but there is one interesting advertisement with a byline from Philadelphia printed in the March 15th issue of the *Gazette*. The advertiser claims, “Whereas

a China Manufacture is now erecting in this city, where it is already proved to a certainty, that the Clays of America are productive of as good Porcelain as any hitherto manufactured in, and imported from England” (1). Still, perhaps Peter Timothy did not believe residents of “Charles-town” in 1770 were interested in reading challenges to British authority. The results do not show any bias towards American identity, and the above advertisement is the only claim of American superiority in Timothy’s newspaper.

1775, of course, saw the start of the Revolutionary War in the North American colonies. The sample of *The South-Carolina Gazette* from 1775 depicts a sharp trend over the course of that year. References to American identity increase at the beginning of 1775 in the January issue, but they are still outnumbered by phrases referring to British identity. By the March 6th issue, references to an independent American identity are more frequent than references to British identity. In the latter part of 1775, in the September 26th and November 14th issues, references to American identity significantly outnumber references to British identity. The masthead of the March 6th issue features the coat of arms of Great Britain, which is absent in the next sampled issues. This is an interesting development, considering that the battle of Lexington and Concord occurred on 19 Apr. 1775. This would seemingly be the date on which Great Britain officially became the enemy of many colonists in North America, as the Revolutionary War had officially begun. All the issues sampled from 1775 emphasize local and colonial news. The March 6th issue frequently uses the phrase “the people” to refer to the residents of all the colonies in North America. Among these phrases are “Representatives of the People,” (2) “Rights of the People,” (2) “Good of the People,” (4) and “Voice of the People” (3). The first use of “the people” occurs on 5 Oct. 1765, as noted above, yet it was the issue from 6 Mar. 1775 that is the first to use the phrase with frequency. There are also a number of references to the Continental Congress or the “Colonial association.” The word “America” is used far more frequently in 1775 than in any of the issues from previous years. In the September 26th issue of the *Gazette*, Timothy prints a letter from an anonymous colonist, calling himself “A Free British American” (1) and writing from “Charles-town,” to a British general. The writer of the letter repeatedly points to a division between

American and British identity. In one segment of his letter, the writer questions the general:

If it is necessary to the Liberty of seven Millions, residing in England, that they have a representative share in their own Government, why is it not equally necessary for three Millions of Americans? Is Liberty one Thing there, and another here? Is that essential to the Liberty of a Briton which may be taken from an American still remaining equally free? Lay your Hand on your Heart and answer me, when you draw your Sword against America. (1)

The tone and content of the 1775 sample of the *Gazette* are markedly different from previous issues. 1775 appears to be the jumping off point for an emerging independent sense of American identity.

Issues of the *South Carolina and American Gazette* from 1780 were published in the midst of the Revolutionary War. The colonists were fighting for their independence, but they were not yet part of an internationally recognized union. The most glaring result of the sample from 1780 is the continued use of 'his majesty' to describe the king of England and his possessions. On the part of the newspaper's publisher, it is unclear whether this shows a reluctance to commit to a separatist stance against England or a preference for British rule in North America. What is clear is that the idea of the American nation was not yet firmly established. The terms "America" and "American" are used frequently in the 1780 issues. There are also a number of references to a union of the colonies, identifying them as a "confederation," "this country," or "our country." The word "Congress" is used to identify the single governing body for the colonies as a collective unit. In 1780, there is something of a tug-of-war over what to call the colonies in the newspaper, as they are identified both as "provinces" and as "states." The former would be a traditionally European word for subdivisions of a country, while the latter would tend to be used by colonists fighting for their independence. The word "state" does not appear in any of the newspaper issues sampled before 1780, while "province" is used far more frequently in samples before 1780. The *South Carolina and American General Gazette* from 19 Jan. 1780, contains a report from London in its "European

Intelligence” section in which the British writer claims that “America is no longer ours” (1). This would be a promising concession for a reader who supported independence and the emerging American nation. In the same January issue, an excerpt from the *London Gazette* contains phrases such as “his majesty” and “this province.” The excerpt is a letter from a British Major General to Lord Germain in England in which the general talks about his division of the army and their attempts to set up posts on the islands around Charleston. Each issue from 1780 contains a relatively even balance of American news and European news. A notable feature of the 1780 issues is that the European news is almost solely from England. The issues all contain some pieces by British writers of which the subject is most often the war in North America. The August 23, 1780 issue contains two letters from residents in Charleston to British Colonel Nisbet Balfour. The signers of the letter call themselves “His Majesty’s Loyal Subjects, now inhabitants of Charlestown” (2). Both letters express loyalty to Great Britain and regret the rift that has opened between it and the colonies. This issue contains almost three times as many references to British identity for the colonies as it does references to American identity. One notable piece of the issue is a proclamation by the Colonel Nisbet Balfour prohibiting the driving of cattle without a license, in which he refers to the colonists as the king’s “subjects” (3). In the same issue, references to British identity outnumber references to American identity five to three. However, there were a small number of items to be tallied in this issue. Overall, the *South Carolina and American General Gazette* in 1780 is focused on the Revolutionary War, and it provides viewpoints from both sides of the fight.

A strengthening of American identity appears in the 1785 newspaper issues sampled from the *South Carolina Gazette* and *Public Advertiser*. Each of the four issues from 1785 has a high ratio of references to American identity versus references to British identity. American references range from 73.3 percent to 85.7 percent of total terms tallied. The use of “his majesty” nearly vanishes in the 1785 issues. The former colonies are consistently called “states” and are never referred to as “provinces.” There are references to America as “this country,” “our country,” and the “United States.” These are the first issues in which “United States” or “United States of America” appears consistently. There are no

references to Americans as subjects of the king of England or anyone else, and Congress is a regular topic in the news. The issue of 1 Jan. 1785 contains excerpts from the *Boston Gazette* and the *European Magazine*, in the latter of which a British writer condemns and discredits American independence. The writer from the *Boston Gazette* complains about the appearance of American women, basing his argument on women he encounters in the streets. He writes that he is “disgusted” (1) by the large size of many women and by their current fashion choices. Nonetheless, and most importantly, he refers to American women collectively as “our country women” (1). The issue of 8 Sept. 1785 contains a prominent promotion of the American nation, a detailed description of the “Great Seal of the United States” (2). According to the description, the seal depicts an “American bald eagle,” and “the date on the base is that of the declaration of independence: and the words underneath signify the commencement of the American era, where of this is the date” (2). This is a significant statement for the concept of emerging American nationalism. The thought of a new American era conjures up images of a superior people and a dominant country, and is itself an expression of nationalism. The issue of 1 Nov. 1785 contains a significant amount of news from Europe and America. European datelines in the issue consist of Rotterdam, Belfast, Dublin, and London, while American datelines include New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. It is important to note that the newspaper issues from 1785 are the first to use the modern spelling of “Charleston,” a small but significant step away from “Charlestown,” which sounds more like a place that is directly connected to and controlled by a British monarch. This may be a sign of an attempt to shed remnants of British identity. The sample of newspapers from 1785 is characterized by a dearth of references to British identity, and a published signal of the beginning of an era that is decidedly American.

The *Columbian Herald*, at the beginning of each of its issues in 1790, contains an excerpt from the United States Constitution: “CONGRESS shall make no LAW — abridging the FREEDOM of SPEECH, or of the PRESS.” The publisher clearly places significant importance on this particular American law, and presumably respects the authority of American law in general. The president of the United States and the American government are supported in the 1790 issues, while the king

of England is mentioned briefly in only one of the issues I sampled. The issues from 20 Aug. and 23 Sept. 1790 contain no references to British identity, but 97 and 53 references to American identity, respectively. The 16 Sept. 1790 issue contains one reference to British identity and 33 references to American identity. It is interesting that the 2 Oct. 1790 issue contains an even balance of 9 references to British identity and 9 references to American identity. However, the references to British identity such as “his majesty” occur in a letter to Lord Stanhope, a British politician, which was reprinted from a London paper. The writer emphasizes the importance of an alliance between France and England as a “counterbalance of Europe against America, which solely occupied with her commerce, her marine, and her increase of population, will centuple in a hundred years her numbers, her wealth, and her power” (2). This letter recognizes the growing power of America, fearfully imagining the onset of the same “American era” that was proclaimed in the *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser* in 1785. The 20 Aug. 1790 issue of the *Columbian Herald* contains a letter from a man named Junius Americanus to the president of the United States, which was originally published in New York’s *Daily Advertiser*. Junius Americanus, as a side note, is a name that seems like it would be a pseudonym, and a nationalistic one for that matter. In his letter, Americanus reviews some of the procedures of “Congress” and the relationships among “the president,” the “Senate,” and the “House of Representatives.” These are all terms that Americanus uses a great number of times in his letter. Two of the issues sampled from 1790 contain reports from sessions of Congress, and another issue (23 Sept.) contains part of the “Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania” (2). Issues from 1790 are primarily concerned with the evolving government and civil society of the United States.

Issues of the *Columbian Herald* or the *Southern Star* from 1795 continue the trend towards an established American identity. References to American identity outnumber references to British identity more than they did in previous years. In the first three issues sampled from 1795, 80, 90.3, and 89 percent of designated terms, respectively, refer to an American identity as opposed to British identity. Issues of the *Columbian Herald* or the *Southern Star* devote an increased amount of space to American news, with more datelines from a wider range of American

cities. It is interesting that every issue from 1795 has a significant amount of space devoted to news from France. There seems to be an American interest at this time in republicanism in France. The 2 Nov. 1795 issue focuses primarily on European news, featuring datelines from Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris, Hague, Hamburg, Nort, Bayeux, London, and Falmouth. In other issues from 1795, “United States” and “our country” continue to be popular phrases, while there are many references to Congress as well as “patriot” Americans. The 14 Aug. 1795 issue of the *Columbian Herald or the Southern Star* contains a lengthy letter from a citizen to George Washington, then president of the United States. The writer of the letter frequently uses the term “United States,” which explains the spike in 1795 on the graph in Figure 1. He states his opinion, which he claims is also the opinion of many of his “fellow citizens,” on a proposed treaty between the United States and Great Britain. A political collaboration between the two countries, claims the writer of the letter, “must fill the American mind with horror” (2). He expresses a sense of identification with Americans as a distinctive and dignified group of people and he emphasizes the need for the president to be wary and protective of American citizens in relations with the British. This writer’s opinion may have been held by many other Americans. Regardless, the *Columbian Herald or the Southern Star* is mostly devoid of references to British identity and contains many affirmations of American identity.

In sample issues from 1800, this trend continues. A majority of news stories and letters in the issues from 1800 are directly related to the United States. There is still, of course, some European news, but it is quite broad. If the writings about Europe are centered on any country, it would be France. Not surprisingly, France was a new republic and aspiring nation just like the United States. Stories relating to Great Britain are far rarer than in samples from previous years. Each issue from 1800 contains a “Late European News” section that essentially summarizes issues from around Europe. American government and civil society are the most commonly discussed issues in *The Carolina Gazette*. “United States” is by far the most commonly used of the tracked phrases in the 1800 issues, followed by “citizens,” “Congress,” and “American.” One writer refers to “we Americans” (23 Jan. 1800) and writers in three of the four issues prognosticate on certain

characteristics of the “true American” (13 Mar., 4 Sept., 27 Nov.). These writers claim that the true American is averse to British influence, a dedicated proponent of liberty, and a supporter of republicanism (in the United States and in France). Another writer boasts about “the high reputation of the American flag” while showing appreciation for United States Navy men fighting hard for “their country” (13 Mar.). The issues of 23 Jan. and 13 Mar. both devote roughly two columns to the memory of George Washington. The 4 Sept. 1800 issue contains a letter from “A South Carolina Federalist” in which the writer numbers himself among

those who, from an inveterate hatred to the British (which tho’ carried to an improper excess, yet, as deriving its origin from the genuine feelings of patriotism in the revolutionary war, flows also from an honorable source), cannot bear with patience the conduct of that nation towards us. (Freneau and Paine, 4 Sept. 1800)

The writer talks about an American disdain for the British and presumably British culture that finds its origins in the revolutionary war. He also implies that this hatred is a result of “patriotic feelings” and refers to Great Britain as “that nation,” which suggests that Americans make up a separate “this” nation. Only 13 Mar. 1800 issue contains the phrase “his majesty.” In general, pieces by British writers are rare in *The Carolina Gazette* in 1800. The issues sampled from 1800 are characterized by a lack of attention to issues concerning the relationship between the United States and Great Britain, and a concentration on the young American republic.

So, what does all this mean? When did colonial elites begin to imagine themselves and their fellow colonists as an American nation between 1750 and 1800? The American nation did not suddenly come into existence at a specific moment such as the start of the Revolutionary War in 1775 or the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. American national identity grew slowly within the colonies and then the states over the course of the latter half of the eighteenth century. The American nation, judging from my results, did not exist in 1775 or even in 1780. An American national identity began to spread rapidly by

1785 and through 1800, at which time the American nation was clearly becoming established. The emergence of American national identity was neither sudden nor natural. The American nation had to be created, or imagined, by colonial elites. Newspapers were evidently an important tool for convincing colonists, who would all become fellow U.S. citizens, that they were part of the American nation.

Conclusion

Newspapers published in Charleston in the 18th century have a story to tell. The story is told by the Charleston printmen and the newspaper content they published. It is re-told by Figure 1 and Figure 2, which reflect the phrases and terms used in those newspapers. The story is that of the emergence of American nationalism over the course of the latter half of 1700s. It is not the goal of this study to determine a precise point at which the American national identity is firmly established, and that point is certainly not evident in the results of the study. The results do, however, point to its gradual emergence in the content of 18th century Charleston newspapers.

A breaking point does occur in 1775, when the Revolutionary War begins and there are two sides between which colonists, and undoubtedly newspaper publishers, were free to choose. The Charleston publishers Peter Timothy, Robert Wells, and John Wells were conflicted over whether they and their newspapers would show support for the British cause or the American cause. Perhaps they were conflicted because it was unclear in 1775 and 1780 which cause would benefit or hurt them more in their careers and reputations. Publishers of the *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser* (1785), the *Columbian Herald* (1790, 1795), and the *Carolina Gazette* (1800) were essentially spared this decision because an era of American independence had begun with a victory in the Revolutionary war by the time they were publishing. It was explicitly clear after 1783 that supporting the American cause would be more beneficial to those publishers. It was clear because the Revolutionary War ended in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris, in which Great Britain formally recognized the independence of the United States. Thus, it is likely that there was no longer a British cause to support in regards to national identity in the United States. With the departure of British troops and the vanquishing of British influence in the United States,

there would be no negative consequences for publicly supporting the American cause. The trend after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War is an increasing expression of American national sentiment in newspaper content. Terms and phrases referring to American identity in Charleston newspapers steadily increase from 1785-1800, while those referring to British identity decrease to infinitesimal levels.

The first thing readers of the *Columbian Herald* saw when they glanced at the newspaper was a portrait of George Washington. Charlestonians reading the *Carolina Gazette* in 1800 were bombarded with the activities of Congress, the idea of “the United States” and the image of the “true American.” Charleston publishers in the latter half of the eighteenth century were an important part of a group of elites who had espoused the cause of American national identity and decided to spread that national awareness throughout the thirteen colonies/ United States. These elites envisioned themselves as members of the American nation for self-interested and practical reasons. A thriving American nation existing within a powerful American state would be economically and politically advantageous for those who occupied its top political and social positions. The beginning of the “American era,” which many in the United States were eager to jumpstart from 1775 to 1800, promised a bright future for those who considered themselves to be American. Life in an American era was especially promising for the white propertied males who drove the emergence of an American national identity. They certainly knew, however, that there could be no American era without an American nation. For Charleston’s publishers, newspapers provided a way to reach their fellow citizens on a large scale and played a central role in the emergence of American nationalism in the latter half of the 18th century.

Appendix A

Terms Suggesting British Identity

References to the King of England

His majesty / majesty's

The king

His excellency

Royal

References to colonists as colonial subjects

Subjects

His majesty's subjects

Subjects of Great Britain

British subjects

Englishmen

References to the British empire

Empire

Imperial

References to British possession

Province

His majesty's colonies in America

English settlements in America

Colonists / Colonies

Terms Suggesting American Identity

References to America

America / Americans

North America / North Americans

United States of America / United States

References to colonists as citizens of an independent republic

The people

Fellow citizens

Inhabitants of North America

Patriot

References to colonial union

Continental association

Continental Congress

Country (this/our)

Congress

Senate

House of Representatives

References to colonial possession

American colonies / colonists

North American colonies / colonists

American colonists

State (of)

States

Note: phrases containing more than one of the above terms are counted once.

Note: terms in italics were added for newspaper issues dated after 1775.

Appendix B

Newspaper Issues Sampled

South-Carolina Gazette

January 15, 1750
March 19, 1750
September 17, 1750
December 3, 1750
January 16, 1755
March 27, 1755
August 28, 1755
January 12, 1760
March 15, 1760
September 13, 1760
November 15, 1760
January 19, 1765
March 16, 1765
August 24, 1765
October 5, 1765
January 11, 1770
March 15, 1770
September 13, 1770
November 22, 1770
January 30, 1775
March 6, 1775
September 26, 1775
November 14, 1775

*South-Carolina and
American General Gazette*

January 19, 1780
July 26, 1780
August 23, 1780
November 8, 1780
January 1, 1785
March 23, 1785
September 8, 1785
November 1, 1785

*Columbian Herald or the
Independent Courier of
North America*

August 20, 1790
September 16, 1790
September 23, 1790
October 2, 1790

*Columbian Herald or the
Southern Star*

January 12, 1795
March 18, 1795
August 14, 1795
November 2, 1795

Carolina Gazette

January 23, 1800
March 13, 1800
September 4, 1800
November 27, 1800

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