

Charles Burnham Cochran, 1766-1833

Charles B. Cochran was born in Charleston in 1766 to Mary Elliott and Robert Cochran, a shipyard owner who immigrated to America after serving in the British Royal Navy during the Seven Years' War. As superintendent of a powder magazine established adjacent to his shipyard on the Cooper River, Robert Cochran played a noteworthy role in the American Revolution. Sympathetic to the patriot cause, he facilitated the transfer of military stores under his oversight to the provincial government of South Carolina. He also participated in a raid on the British ship *Betsey* in 1775, which resulted in the confiscation of gunpowder and other military supplies. The following year, while recruiting seamen in New England, Cochran learned of British plans to attack Charleston and quickly returned to give advance warning and assist in defensive works. In 1777, as captain of the eighteen-gun brig *Notre Dame*, Cochran undertook another highly successful mission when he sailed to France disguised as a Dutch trader to gain military supplies. On the return trip, Cochran overtook a ship filled with supplies for the British army. His military activities eventually garnered the attention of Lord Cornwallis and in August 1780 Robert Cochran was among a group of men arrested and imprisoned in St. Augustine.¹

While war raged in America, the Cochrans sent young Charles to France to study at the boarding school of Mr. Le Coeur in Passy, a Paris suburb. There, he met the acquaintance of a number of expatriate children including John Quincy Adams, Jesse Deane, and Benjamin Franklin Bache. Through his friendship with Bache, Charles came to the attention of his grandfather, Benjamin Franklin, who at that time served as Commissioner to France. In 1778 Robert Cochran wrote Franklin to thank him for the "friendship and kindness with which you have favoured [*sic*] my dear little son."² Cochran asked Franklin to encourage Charles to write home when possible as "the length of time which elapses without hearing from him, makes me very anxious." Franklin's return letter praised Charles as "truly a fine Boy, ingenious, active, industrious, and capable of any Improvement you may think fit to bestow upon him in his Education. From his good Dispositions of Mind, there is great Reason to hope, that his Parents will have much Satisfaction in him."³ Although Franklin sent Bache to further his education in Geneva in the fall of 1779, he continued to

¹Johnson, Joseph, *Traditions and Reminiscences of the American Revolution in the South*, (Charleston: Walker & James, 1851), 52-54, 98-99, 123-124; McCrady, James Waring and C.L. Bragg, *Patriots in Exile: Charleston Rebels in St. Augustine During the American Revolution*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2020), 99; Butler, Nic, "The Rebellion of South Carolina: April 21st, 1775," Charleston Time Machine, Charleston County Public Library, May 4, 2018, <https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/rebellion-south-carolina-april-21st-1775>.

²"From Robert Cochran to Benjamin Franklin, 16 August 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-27-02-0237>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 27, *July 1 through October 31, 1778*, Lopez, Claude A., ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 262–263.]

³"From Benjamin Franklin to Robert Cochran, 12 June 1779," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-29-02-0542>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 29, *March 1 through June 30, 1779*, Oberg, Barbara B., ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 675.];

act as mentor to Charles for several more years, as evidenced by a 1782 letter from Charles to Franklin, which apologized for not delivering his homework owing to a severe illness that prevented travel.⁴

Franklin's mentorship of Charles likely arose both from a keen interest in the education of youth and a spirit of compassion for a child so far from home in difficult times. During Robert Cochran's imprisonment, Mary Cochran wrote to thank Franklin for his kindness to Charles:

as the unhappy situation we have been in prevented our having the satisfaction of sending him a letter; and intirely [sic] put it out of Mr. Cochran's power of remitting the payment for his schooling, [sic] which added much to my uneasyness, [sic] fearing he might be ill treated on acct. of it. [...] I make no doubt you were acquainted of those prisoners sent from Charles Town to St. Augustine—Mr. Cochran was One of the number in the first Ship, almost eleven months has elapsed since he has been cruelly separated from me, which consequently occasion'd [sic] my family to experience many difficulties; but now I am in a place of liberty, I shall endeavor to be as contended as possible, till one of the best Husbands is again restored to me.⁵

Not long after penning the letter to Franklin, Mary and Robert reunited in Philadelphia where they remained until 1782 when they could safely return to Charleston. In the meantime, Robert managed to ship indigo to France that Charles used to pay his overdue school bill and secure return passage home.⁶

Despite privations suffered during the war, the Cochran family fared well in the ensuing years. In 1783, City Council chose Robert Cochran to serve in the respected position of harbormaster. When Congress authorized the creation of the United States Revenue Cutter Service in 1790, a precursor to the Coast Guard, George Washington chose Cochran to command the USRC *South Carolina*. Meanwhile, the family shipyard, located on what is now Shipyard Creek, continued to thrive.⁷

⁴ "To Benjamin Franklin from Charles B. Cochran, 3 January 1782," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-36-02-0253>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 36, *November 1, 1781, through March 15, 1782*, Cohn, Ellen R., ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 368.]; Rossignol, Marie-Jeanne, "Benjamin Franklin Bache's Childhood Diary: The "Shaping" of a "Self"", *XVII-XVIII*, v. 72 (2015), 197-212.

⁵ "To Benjamin Franklin from Mary Cochran, 6 July 1781," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-35-02-0172>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 35, *May 1 through October 31, 1781*, Oberg, Barbara B., ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 229–231.]

⁶ McCrady and Bragg, *Patriots in Exile*, 130, 141-142.

⁷ "[Capt. Robert Cochran; City Council; Harbour Master; Port; Tuesday; Paper; Gadsden]," *South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser* (Charleston, South Carolina, 27 September 1783); "From George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 8 May 1791," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-08-02-0127>, [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 8, *22 March 1791-22 September 1791*, Mastromarino, Mark A., ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 161-162; Coker, P.C. III, *Charleston's Maritime Heritage, 1670-1865*, (Charleston: CokerCraft Press, 1987), 130-138; For more information on Cochran's Shipyard see: Smith Henry A. M., "Charleston and Charleston Neck: The Original Grantees and the Settlements along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jan., 1918), 28-29.

Charles Cochran used his elite education and connections made while studying in France to carve out a prominent place for himself in Charleston society. He entered the political arena in 1792 as a representative of St. Matthew's Parish and Orangeburg District in the South Carolina General Assembly. In 1795, at the behest of Sen. Ralph Izard, George Washington appointed Cochran to the sought-after position of federal marshal for South Carolina.⁸

Not all Charlestonians approved of the way Cochran fulfilled his duties as marshal. Charles Godwin wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1801 to request appointment to the office of federal marshal as:

The conversations of Mr. Allston who has lately returned from the northward, & of Mr. Charles Pinckney who has since him returned, seem to render it certain that Mr. Cochran the present Marshall [*sic*] is to be removed. The circumstance of his being an eastern man & the dupe of eastern policy, made us hope, as soon as we should be blessed by your exaltation [*sic*] to the dignified office which is now dignified by you Sir, that a factious wrong headed youngster would no longer be continued in the important office of Marshall, [*sic*] where he has unremittingly checked the free course of justice by his partial selection of jurymen [...]⁹

Jefferson appears not have acted on Godwin's request. Nevertheless, Cochran submitted his resignation the following year because of "the injury which my agricultural concerns have received from my close and constant attendance on the duties of my office." Then secretary of state, James Madison, heeded Cochran's recommendation and appointed his younger brother, Robert Elliott Cochran, as his replacement, a position he held until 1813.¹⁰

After a few years of focus on agricultural and business pursuits, Cochran again entered the field of public service when he accepted the appointment of Gov. Hamilton to serve as aide-de-camp of the South Carolina Militia in 1805. That same year, Cochran gained election to City Council for Ward 8, after which the other City aldermen chose him to serve as Charleston's fifteenth intendant. During his intendency, the City passed legislation regulating the sale of alcohol along with the licensing of carts, drays, wagons, and

⁸ "Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings," *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina, 17 October 1792: [2]); "To George Washington from Charles Burnham Cochran, 25 May 1795," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-18-02-0129>, [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 18, 1 April-30 September 1795, Ebel, Carol S., ed. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 172-173.]

⁹ "To Thomas Jefferson from Charles Goodwin, 30 April 1801," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0569>, [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 33, 17 February-30 April 1801, Oberg, Barbara B., ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 657-658.)

¹⁰ "To James Madison from Charles B. Cochran, 4 October 1802 (Abstract)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/02-03-02-0773>, [Original source: *The Papers of James Madison*, Secretary of State Series, vol. 3, 1 March-6 October 1802, Mattern, David B., Stagg, J.C.A., Cross, Jeanne Kerr and Susan Holbrook Perdue eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 609.]

carriages. City Council also focused on the quarantine of ships in Charleston Harbor and ensuring cleanliness in the City to ward off the ever-present threat of yellow fever.¹¹

After his intendency, Cochran continued to play an active role in Charleston society up until his death in 1833. He served as treasurer for the lower district of South Carolina under the administrations of Charles Pinckney and John Drayton, 1806-1810. He later served on the Board of Directors of the Union Bank from circa 1810-1826, part of which time he acted as bank president. Other institutions he played a part in include the Board of Commissioners of the Market, the St. Cecilia Society, the South Carolina Homespun Company, and the Charleston Bridge Company.¹²

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¹¹ "Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings," *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), 7 January 1806: [4]; "Advertisement," *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina, 12 April 1806 [1]; "City Gazette. Charleston, Friday, August 8, 1806," *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina), 8 August 1806: [3].

¹² "[Saturday; Charles B. Cochran; Esq; Treasurer; State]," *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina), 8 December 1806: [3]; "Union Bank." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina), 9 March 1820: [2].

Charles Burnham Cochran Time Line, 1766-1833

- 1766 Born in Charleston to Robert Cochran and Mary Elliott
- 1778 Arrived in France to study at the school of Le Coeur along with schoolmates including Jesse Deane, John Quincy Adams, and Benjamin Franklin Bache
- c. 1784 Charles returns to Charleston
- 1790 Married Harriett R. Thompson (d. 1824) with whom he had three children
- 1792-1794 Representative of St. Matthew's Parish in the South Carolina General Assembly
- 1795-1802 Federal marshal of the district of South Carolina
- 1805 Aide de camp in the South Carolina Militia
- 1805-1806 Intendant of the City of Charleston
- 1806-1810 Treasurer for the lower division of South Carolina
- c. 1807-1809 Manager of the St. Cecilia Society
- c. 1807-1809 Board of Commissioners of the Market
- 1808 Director of the South Carolina Homespun Company
- c. 1810-1826 Board of the Union Bank of Charleston
- 1833 Death and burial at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and St. Paul