

South Carolina and the Presidency

By Brent Breedin

In a society that too often remembers only who is “number one,” the contributions made by runner-ups, “coulda-beens,” and “shoulda-beens” are ignored and forgotten. Consider South Carolina’s leadership role over the past 235 years (1773-2008).

As one of the thirteen original colonies opposing England’s rule, South Carolina produced two of the nation’s best and brightest: Henry Middleton and Henry Laurens, who served as the second and fourth presidents of the Continental Congresses, respectively, during the critical five years leading up to and including the American Revolution. Since then, however, not one of the nation’s fifty-two presidents (ten under the Articles of Confederation and the rest under the Constitution) was elected as a South Carolinian. Three American presidents—Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, and Woodrow Wilson—were born or spent part of their youth in the state; five South Carolinians—John Rutledge, Thomas Pinckney, Charles Coatsworth “C.C.” Pinckney, Charles Fremont, and Strom Thurmond—ran unsuccessfully for the presidency; and seven others—Ralph Izard, Jacob Read, John Gaillard, Langdon Cheves, John C. Calhoun, James L. Orr, and James F. Byrnes—were at one time a mere heartbeat from the White House, according to various laws of presidential succession.

New Nation, New Leaders

As president of the First Continental Congress, Charleston’s Henry Middleton signed the Declaration of Rights and Grievances on October 28, 1774, and argued for restraint until England’s King George could respond. Henry Laurens, who succeeded John Hancock as president of the Second Continental Congress on November 1, 1777, led the early government during General George Washington’s winter at Valley Forge.

His wise counsel during the “Conway conspiracy,” which threatened Washington’s command, and his role in gaining French financial and military support against England, were crucial to the fledgling nation.

In three of the first four presidential elections under the Constitution, South Carolinians finished near the top in the electoral college. In the presidential election of 1788, John Rutledge finished fifth behind Washington, John Adams, John Jay, and George Clinton. He went on to serve as senior associate justice on the first Supreme Court, becoming its second chief justice upon Jay’s resignation. Brothers Thomas and C. C. Pinckney were presidential candidates in the elections of 1796 and 1800, respectively.



Henry Laurens served as president of the Second Continental Congress from 1777–78. He spent fifteen months in the Tower of London after being captured by the British en route to Holland, where he sought an alliance with the Dutch.

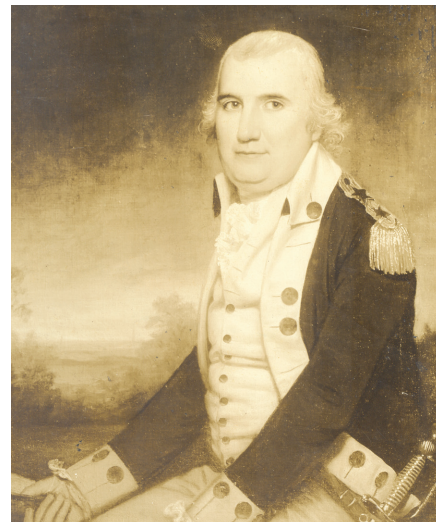
From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Under the Constitution, prior to ratification of the Twelfth Amendment on June 15, 1804, presidential electors voted for the two candidates they thought best qualified to be president. When the votes were tallied, the candidate with the most votes, assuming he received a majority, became president; the runner-up became vice president. In the elections of 1788 and 1792, George Washington received half the votes, equivalent to a unanimous win, and John Adams beat out several others, including Rutledge, for the vice presidency. When Washington retired, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr unofficially formed the Republican party, while Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and the Pinckney brothers maintained the status quo as Federalists. As party boss, Hamilton could not openly oppose Vice President Adams's place atop the 1796 Federalist ticket. Instead, he planned to persuade a handful of Federalist electors to omit Adams's name from their ballots, thereby enabling Thomas Pinckney to win the presidency. When Hamilton's scheme became known, Adams's supporters retaliated by omitting Pinckney's name in favor of Jefferson, depriving Pinckney of the vice presidency and nearly clinching the presidency for Jefferson.

Thomas Pinckney achieved national recognition as a diplomat and negotiator in England and Spain before his 1796 vice-presidential bid. Similarly, his older brother C. C. earned a reputation for honesty during his special mission to France, when he responded to suggestions for bribery with the retort, "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute!" A Revolutionary

War hero and close friend of Washington, he was the nation's second-ranking military officer during this perilous time. As his brother had in 1796, he found himself on the Federalist presidential ticket with Adams, who in 1800 was seeking re-election. Once again, Hamilton plotted to make a Pinckney president, yet the scrupulously honest C. C. would have no part of it. He refused to accept eight South Carolina electoral votes unless Adams, not Jefferson, received the other eight. Had C.C. carried his home state and three of South Carolina's eight electoral votes for Jefferson instead gone to Adams, the final electoral college vote in 1800 would have resulted in a Pinckney-Jefferson ticket. Instead Republican candidates Jefferson and Burr each received seventy-three electoral votes, edging out Adams and Pinckney. The tie vote precipitated the Twelfth Amendment, the political demise of Vice President Burr, the death of Hamilton in his duel with Burr, and the resulting "Virginia Dynasty."

Charles Pinckney, Thomas and C.C.'s cousin, played a major role in South Carolina's support of Jefferson in 1800. His reward was the U.S. ambassadorship to Spain for six years. C.C., on the other hand, became titular head of the fading Federalist party. As such he was named Federalist presidential nominee two more times, losing to Jefferson in 1804 and to James Madison in 1808. In a sense, Charles Coatsworth Pinckney became the nation's first "three-time loser" in presidential politics. The courtly South Carolinian did not covet the presidency as did more famous "three-time losers" Henry Clay and William Jennings Bryan,



Thomas Pinckney (left) and his brother Charles Coatsworth "C.C." Pinckney (right) both campaigned unsuccessfully for the presidency of the United States. They were widely recognized as skilled diplomats.

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making one wonder if perhaps Clay's alleged quip, "I'd rather be right than president," might have been more believable had it come from the mouth of Pinckney.

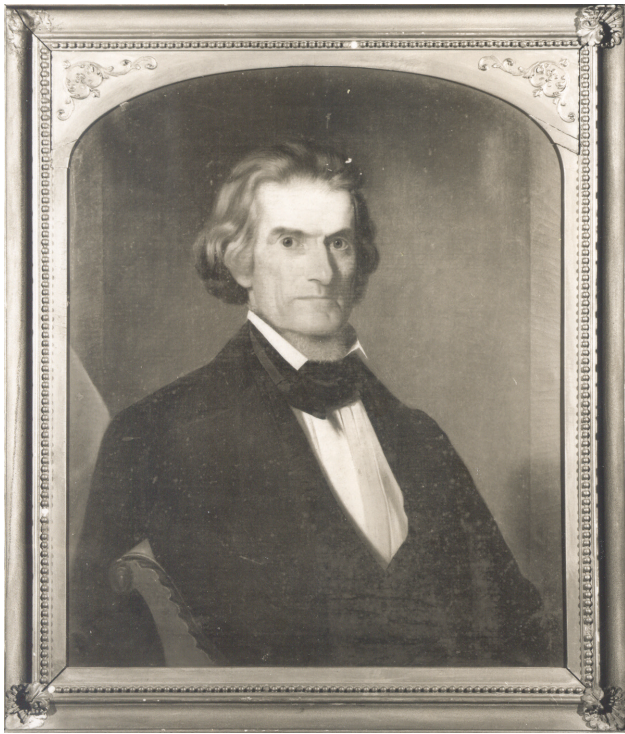
When Congress passed the first presidential succession law in 1792, it declared that the president pro-tem of the Senate would be second in line for the presidency in the event of the death or disablement of the president and vice president. Third in line would be speaker of the House of Representatives. South Carolina's first full-term senator, the wealthy and well-educated Ralph Izard of Goose Creek, was president pro-tem from May 1794 to February 1795. Charlestonian Jacob Read, who succeeded Izard in the Senate in 1795, also served as president pro-tem in 1797-98. As such, both Izard and Read were briefly in line for the American presidency. A decade later, John Gaillard, a successful lawyer and planter from St. Stephens, was elected president pro-tem, a position he held for fourteen of his twenty-one years in the Senate. When President Madison's second-term vice president, Elbridge Gerry (father of the fine art of gerrymandering), died on November 23, 1814, after twenty-one months in office, Gaillard was next in line for the presidency until March 4, 1817. Behind him during most of 1815 was U.S. Representative

Langdon Cheves of Abbeville, who served as Speaker of the House in 1814-15.

In 1828, forty years after Washington was elected president, South Carolina-born-and-reared Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun became the first ever "same state" presidential ticket to win election, though Jackson was a resident of Tennessee at the time and had been since 1788. The same Jackson-Calhoun ticket likely should have won four years earlier when Jackson beat John Quincy Adams in the popular vote. However, since Jackson's electoral vote fell short of a majority, the U.S. House of Representatives, with Henry Clay as speaker, gave the presidency to Adams. Earlier, Calhoun had dropped out of the presidential race to become the sole vice-presidential candidate on all four tickets.

Jackson's victory for the presidency over Adams in 1828 was by a 178-83 electoral vote. In 1832 he was reelected by an even more decisive 219-49 margin over Clay. Jackson was the first of only three presidential candidates to win the popular vote in three elections. Grover Cleveland did so in 1884, 1888, and 1892, though he lost to Benjamin Harrison in the electoral college in 1888. Franklin D. Roosevelt won both the popular and electoral votes in 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944. As a president, Jackson ranks among the strongest to serve and was ranked sixth in "presidential leadership" in a 2000 *Wall Street Journal* survey.

Calhoun, like his fellow House and Senate colleagues Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, was always on the so-called "short list" for the presidency. His eight years as secretary of war under President James Monroe gave him an apparent advantage, which he then added to as vice president. Testament to his qualifications for the top job can be found in the 1821 diary of John Quincy Adams, with whom Calhoun served for eight years in President Monroe's cabinet. Adams noted that "Calhoun is a man of fair and candid mind, of honorable principles, of clear and quick understanding, of cool self-possession, of enlarged philosophical views, and of ardent patriotism. He is above all sectional and factious prejudices more than any other statesman of this Union with whom I have ever acted." Unfortunately, a falling-out with Andrew Jackson on both personal and political grounds effectively ended Calhoun's aspirations to the presidency in 1828.



John C. Calhoun served as vice president to two presidents, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. He resigned his office in 1832 to become a U. S. Senator from South Carolina.

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John Charles Fremont was born in Savannah but moved with his widowed mother to Charleston when he was six or seven. He called South Carolina home until he was twenty-five, at which time his mentor, Joel Poinsett, arranged to have him commissioned second lieutenant in the U.S. Army's topographical corps and made special assistant to Joseph Nicholas Nicollet, a distinguished French scientist-explorer. Fremont shared a common interest in the West with powerful Senator Thomas Hart Benton, whose daughter Jessie he married. Subsequently, he achieved legendary status as the nation's "Pathfinder of the West," where he was a California senator, a military hero, and a gold-rush millionaire. His fame brought him the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1856. He was defeated by Democrat James Buchanan in a three-way race with ex-President Millard Fillmore, but his run for the White House set the stage for Lincoln four years later. In his 1945 book *They Also Ran*, Irving Stone compared presidential winners and losers and rated Fremont far more favorably than Buchanan.

Though Fremont failed in his 1856 presidential bid, Anderson County native James Orr served several terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and was elected Speaker of the House. As such he was third in line for the presidency during Buchanan's first two



Born in Augusta, Georgia, Woodrow Wilson spent his high-school years in Columbia.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Senator Strom Thurmond ran for president in 1948, as the States' Rights Democratic Party candidate.

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years in office. When the South seceded from the Union in 1861, Senator Andrew Johnson of Tennessee sided with the Union, became military governor of Tennessee, and was elected as Lincoln's vice president in 1864. Johnson assumed the office of president when Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865. Admittedly, Johnson's ties to South Carolina are tenuous: as a tailor's apprentice in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the early 1820s, he ran away to Laurens, where he worked before moving to Tennessee.

The Modern Presidency

Since the conclusion of Johnson's term in office on March 4, 1869, South Carolina's closest link to the presidency is with Woodrow Wilson, who attended high school in Columbia. Born in Staunton, Virginia, he spent most of his boyhood in Augusta, Georgia, before moving with his parents to Columbia. Four years in South Carolina were followed by matriculation to Davidson College, Princeton University, the University of Virginia, and Johns Hopkins University, making him the nation's best formally educated president. He was tapped as the Democratic nominee for governor of New Jersey in 1910 and received the presidential nomination in 1912. Running against both incumbent President William Howard Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson received forty-two percent of the popular vote. In the electoral college he whipped the divided Republicans, 435-96. Four years later

he soundly defeated former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes. Wilson was a forceful, idealistic president during the difficult World War I years and their aftermath. His failure to gain Senate approval of the League of Nations tarnished his reputation, though a recent leadership evaluation of U.S. presidents ranked him in eleventh place among the “almost greats.”

Charleston-born James F. Byrnes is both a “coulda been” and a “shoulda-been” in presidential politics. His leadership in both houses of the Congress, as “assistant president” in charge of the economy during World War II, and as FDR’s major Congressional ally during the New Deal years earned him the role of President Roosevelt’s running mate in 1944, until FDR learned that organized labor would not support a fourth-term bid with Byrnes. Even so, Roosevelt took Byrnes along on his 1945 trip to Yalta, where he met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. Some thought Byrnes may have been next in line for the vice presidency following FDR’s death on April 12 and Harry Truman’s inauguration, yet Truman named him secretary of state instead. Although Byrnes had little experience with foreign relations, he was one of Truman’s long-time trusted advisors. Among his weaknesses as secretary of state was his tendency to keep the president out of the loop. While FDR had appreciated not being bothered with small details, Truman thought Byrnes was being insubordinate. He was named *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1946, but was replaced as secretary of state by General George Marshall in January 1947.

Edgefield’s Strom Thurmond is the only other South Carolinian to come within striking distance of the presidency—first as the Dixiecrat candidate in 1948 and twice as president pro-tem of the U.S. Senate, in 1981-87 and 1995-2001. In running against Democratic President Truman and Republican challenger Thomas Dewey in 1948, Thurmond’s primary goal was to gain enough electoral votes to keep the two favorites from gaining a majority—with final determination

of the victor going to the House of Representatives. Thurmond’s 2.4 percent of the popular vote and thirty-nine electors fell far short of what was needed to thwart Truman’s 49.5 percent of the popular vote and 303 electors. Under the Presidential Succession Law of 1947, Senate President Pro-Tem Thurmond was third in line for the presidency for twelve years.

Ratification of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment to the Constitution in 1964 made it possible for a vacant vice presidency to be filled by presidential appointment with Congressional approval. Today, the Speaker of the House stands between the president pro-tem and the presidency, and he, too, may be replaced in short order by House members.

Although no South Carolinian is running for president in the 2008 election, the past 235 years serve as an excellent indicator of the important role South Carolinians will continue to play in the American presidency in the years to come.



Brent Breedin was Senator Strom Thurmond’s press secretary in 1958-59 and the White House Weekly newsletter’s historian from 1998-2002. Born in Beaufort, he lives today in Columbia.

INFORMATION WANTED: Enos Reeves and Abraham Paycom Reeves



Enos Reeves 1753 - 1807

Enos Reeves, married to Amy Legare, was a gold and silversmith in Charleston, SC from the late 1780’s until his death in the summer of 1807. He was an original member of the South Carolina Society of the Cincinnati. One of his children, Abraham Paycom Reeves (1791-1832), married Hannah Keith Palmer, and was an architect in Charleston. He designed the ornate gates and fence enclosure, at St. James Lutheran Church on Archdale Street.

The Reeves family seeks information about these relatives, as well as original documents and examples of the silverwork of Enos. Please contact I.S.K. Reeves V, P.O. Box 1210, Winter Park, Florida 32790, (office) 407.647.1706, (fax) 407.645.5525, or email: ISKR5@aol.com. Any assistance will be very much appreciated.