

## [Conley on Williams III and Lofton, 'Rice to Ruin: Saga of the Lucas Family, 1783-1929'](#)

Review published on Thursday, October 15, 2020

**Roy Williams III, Alexander Lucas Lofton.** *Rice to Ruin: Saga of the Lucas Family, 1783-1929*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018. Illustrations. 452 pp. \$59.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-834-0.

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**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=53965>

In *Rice to Ruin*, Roy Williams III and Alexander Lucas Lofton provide a narrative of the lives of Jonathan Lucas and his descendants, focusing on the work and journeys of the family during the nineteenth century. While at its heart a genealogical study of the Lucas family, it also provides contributions to the existing literature in three broad categories: agricultural history, military history, and South Carolina history.

As the title suggests, heavy emphasis is placed on the cultivation of rice and associated developments. Jonathan Lucas “transformed the rice culture” of South Carolina and was the “Eli Whitney of the rice culture,” who advanced mechanical developments that bound “the South to two labor-intensive, lucrative crops [cotton and rice]” whose predominance would only end after the Civil War (p. 6). Lucas’s work on the rice mills, both in South Carolina and England (and the family’s involvement with the same development in other parts of Europe), led to the family being established as a major slaveholding family in South Carolina whose wealth was built on rice and rice milling.

The success and wealth of the family only diminished during the Civil War. Williams and Lofton give a detailed account of the effects of the Civil War on the Lucas family and *Rice to Ruin* opens further vistas on the conflict in South Carolina. As landowning gentlemen, the Lucas family was heavily involved on the Confederate side of the war and were in the South Carolina military. Economically, the Lucas family was also affected by the war, especially by the emancipation of slaves. Emancipation, and the economic dislocation of the war, led to a decline in the family’s fortunes, which continued into the twentieth century.

*Rice to Ruin* also gives excellent examples of the development of South Carolina history and its connections to the broader Atlantic World. Lucas not only revitalized rice cultivation and developed new means of processing but also actively engaged in the Atlantic World by spreading his process to England. By showing connections in the broader Atlantic World, the authors contribute further to our understanding of agricultural and technological developments during the nineteenth century.

The insightful treatment of the Lucas family and their lives and works during the nineteenth century could have been expanded in three ways that would have added breadth to this deep history. First, what were the lives of the slaves who worked the Lucas properties in South Carolina like and what were their relationships to the Lucas family? This is perhaps one of the biggest holes in the work as a

whole and could have provided much more texture to the narrative. Second, how did the Lucas family, particularly Jonathan Lucas, interact with the broader state and national politics and political issues of the period? And third, how did the lives of the women of the Lucas family, such as Charlotte Hume Lucas, conform to or alter our understandings of gender among the planters of South Carolina? Answers to all three of these questions are hinted at throughout *Rice to Ruin*. Indeed, while Williams and Lofton argue that “frequent slave purchases catapulted William Lucas [Jonathan Lucas’s son] into the upper echelons of slave ownership,” there is not much on how those slaves interacted with the Lucas family or whether the Lucas family was involved in the politics of South Carolina, as many elites were (p. 82). Furthermore, the role of the women of the Lucas family are mentioned throughout but there is little sustained attention to them, and an elaboration on the issue of gender would have been very informative.

However, these critiques do not diminish the contribution of *Rice to Ruin* as a whole to the extant literature on agricultural history, military history, and South Carolina history. For agricultural historians, the role the Lucas family played in developing rice cultivation and processing technology in the Lowcountry is especially informative. The account of the Civil War through the eyes of the Lucas men who were involved adds a new layer of details to the individual and social experience of South Carolinians and will be especially attractive to military historians. Furthermore, the rise and decline of the Lucas family before and after the Civil War, especially during the last decades of the nineteenth century, adds another layer to the history of South Carolina. It is also an excellent resource of local historians of South Carolina and students of genealogy.

**Citation:** Nathaniel Conley. Review of Williams III, Roy; Lofton, Alexander Lucas, *Rice to Ruin: Saga of the Lucas Family, 1783-1929*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2020. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53965>

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