

Hopsewee: A Rice Plantation on the Santee River

Most associate southern plantations with cotton, but in the mid-1700s the South Carolina Lowcountry first experienced the economic promise of tidal rice as a cash crop. The Lowcountry's tidal rivers, such as the lower Santee, were the ideal environment for tidal rice. By 1840, Georgetown District plantations were producing 36,360,000 pounds of rice annually - nearly half of all the rice produced in the United States. Hopsewee's founding in the mid-1730s coincided with the expansion of tidal rice. Timing, coupled with its location on the North Santee places it among the quintessential Lowcountry Rice Plantations.

Hopsewee's main house and slave quarters were built on the North Bank of the North Santee, but the plantation's most valuable soil was its marshland rice fields. The rice fields were located across river on Lynches Island, a large piece of land located between the North and South Branches of the Santee River. The plantation used barges to boat slaves and rice to and from the island during the growing season. Area plantations farmed nearly 3,500 acres of the marshy island, with Hopsewee cultivating about 475 acres.

In 1850, Hopsewee produced 560,000 pounds of rice and little else. Essentially, the plantation concentrated all of its efforts in the marshes to produce its most profitable crop and used the profits to purchase any other foodstuffs that were needed during the year.

The expansion of tidal rice in the Lowcountry most certainly bolstered wealth among the plantation owners, but it also solidified the region's dependence on slave labor. A 1738 inventory at Hopsewee counted eleven slaves in the estate belonging to Thomas Lynch II. As rice cultivation grew, so did the number of slaves needed to work the marshes. By the 1850s, Hopsewee inventories and the Federal slave census counted nearly 180 slaves at Hopsewee. Though the tide and the marshes were key factors in rice culture, no factor was more important than the labor and skills that came directly from African slaves.

For more on these topics see:

1850 US Agricultural Census

Plat of Lynches Island, c. 1820, South Carolina Historical Society.

Records of the Charleston County RMC, Book L3 Pages 472-478.

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Easterby, J.H. *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F.W. Allston*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945; reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004.

Littlefield, Daniel C. *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981

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