

## Slavery and Rice on the Santee

Historians agree South Carolina's rice economy was the product of Anglo-American entrepreneurship coupled with African-American know-how and labor. Simply put, the coastal rice economy could not have survived without the knowledge of rice culture that African slaves brought with them from rice-growing regions of coastal West Africa.

In his book, *Black Majority*, historian Peter Wood marvels: "Literally hundreds of black immigrants were more familiar with the planting, hoeing, processing, and cooking of rice than were the European settlers who purchased them."

Almost as quickly as tidal rice became profitable, planters recognized the agricultural skill in West African slaves. They showed great preference in buying these slaves. As one Charleston slave merchant, Henry Laurens, remarked "Slaves from the River Gambia are prefer'd to all others."

Rice slavery on the South Carolina coast was truly a remarkable institution. Slaves brought their own skills for rice cultivations that, as Peter Woods notes, differed very little from their methods in Africa. "When New World slaves planted rice in the spring by pressing a hole with the heel and covering the seeds with the foot, the motion used was demonstrably similar to that employed in West Africa. In summer, when Carolina blacks moved through the rice fields in a row, hoeing in unison to work songs, the pattern of cultivation was not one imposed by European owners but rather one retained from West African forebears.

Peter Wood further notes that even the wide sweet grass baskets used in the fall to separate the grain from the chaff were "a purely African design." The design has changed little while generations of African Americans have passed down the craft.

Even more unique to rice slavery was the "task system." Rice slaves negotiated with their overseer through a "driver" slave. Once the driver and overseer agreed on a reasonable amount of work for a given week, the slaves set out on the task. After completing the work, any remaining time belonged to the slaves. During this period, they were free to work their own gardens, fish, and some even hunted wild game - though hunting was very rare. In contrast, cotton plantations employed the "gang system" with no concept of free time.

The pens adjacent to the slave cabins indicate slaves kept their own livestock. Fossil evidence from swine found around the slave cabins further suggests that Hopsewee's slave population supplemented their diet by raising their own animals.

Rice slavery was unique in two particular ways: the African influence and the task system. The task system and slave's own skills encouraged a degree of responsibility among slaves in managing rice cultivation. This air of autonomy is further reflected in expressions of West African culture. For example, the high roof with cypress shakes closely follows the high thatched African style. The pattern follows the African tradition and serves a practical function by reducing heat in the summer months.

Slave's responsibility for rice production is further expressed by those with important positions. Head driver slaves negotiated the slaves' weekly work and served as a foreman on work crews. Other slaves were given the important responsibility of "trunkmaster." Trunkmasters oversaw the in and out tidal flow of water in the marshy rice fields. Proper control of water flow during the growing season was essential to successful crops. Improper trunkminding could lead to salt water in the fields, which would ruin the crop.

Freedman's Bureau contracts between former slaves and masters in the post-Civil War period kept many of the same arrangements as they had during slavery. Furthermore, these arrangements provide an idea about slave life and labor expectations on a Santee Rice plantation. Contracts, for example, included arrangements for handing out farming implements. As during slavery, planters kept a close watch on their farming tools. Slaves sometimes purposefully lost or destroyed tools as a means of "passive" resistance.

For more on these topics see:

Coclanis, Peter A. "Rice," in *The South Carolina Encyclopedia*. Ed. Walter Edgar. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

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

Wood, Peter. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. New York: Knopf, 1974.

Thanks to David Dangerfield, Southern Studies Graduate Student, College of Charleston