Charles Towne and the Institution of Race-based Slavery

Introductory Quotation

“[L]east wee should presume to farr[,] wee shall only say that thes[e] Set[t]lements have been made and upheld by Negroes and without constant supplies of them cannot subsist…”

—in this quote, excerpted from a letter written to the king by several influential Barbadians in September 1666, the authors stressed the important role that slavery had played in the development of the English West Indies so as to make the institution seem all the more necessary in Carolina.

Opening Observations

The history of provincial South Carolina is inextricably tied to the institution of race-based slavery. Peculiar among England’s mainland colonies, South Carolina was the only such province that embraced the institution from its physical inception. It was also the only English colony in North America that eventually grew to possess a clear-cut black majority. 2 “In sharp contrast to the Chesapeake, where slavery took root late and grew slowly,” as one historian has pointed out, “slaves were present in South Carolina from its founding and their numbers expanded rapidly in the decades following its initial settlement.” 3 Slaves of African descent would not achieve majority status in the colony until the first decade of the eighteenth century, long after Charles Towne had been relocated from Albemarle to Oyster Point. 4 While the black population had been steadily growing since the year of the Ashley River settlement’s establishment, the numbers of slaves rose exponentially after colonists achieved success with rice cultivation in the 1690s. South Carolinians had finally found a viable staple in the white grain and with it came an inordinate demand for labor, thus prompting planters to increase their slave imports. 5 Rice would be to South Carolina what sugar had been to Barbados, and, once its cultivation began in earnest, the former’s socio-economic development would begin to substantially mirror the latter’s. But during the colony’s pre-rice years at Albemarle Point, slaves represented a minority in Carolina and served as an adjunct to the indentured labor force.

Carolina Slavery and the Barbadian Connection

The cultural influence of the West Indies on provincial South Carolina was most significantly manifested in the emergence of the colony’s slave-based plantation

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4 Wood, Black Majority, 143, 144 (Table I).
5 See, Ibid., Chapters 1 & 2.
economy, which itself was largely patterned after the Barbadian model. The fact that slavery went hand and hand with the founding of the Ashley River settlement should come as no surprise, given that a number of prominent Barbadian planters became intimately involved in the planning process soon after Carolina’s chartering in 1663. Even one of the proprietors, Sir John Colleton, was a slave-owning resident of the sugar island. Through a series of negotiations with the proprietors, these Barbadians helped to formulate the type of society that would emerge in the colony by insisting on certain provisions concerning slavery. They scored a victory early in the planning stages, when they convinced the proprietors, in 1664, to extend the headright system of land granting to include slaves. Freeholders would now receive the same amount of acreage for adult slaves as they would for “weaker” white servants (i.e., women and children). Not completely satisfied with this arrangement, the Barbadians went on to successfully lobby for equal headright status among adult male slaves and adult male servants.

Another important guarantee associated with slavery dealt with the religion of those held in bondage. In their famous “Fundamental Constitutions,” the proprietors decreed: “Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power & authority over his negro slaves of what opinion or religion soever.” This particular assurance arose from the longstanding reluctance of West Indian planters to Christianize their slaves, lest they should be deemed “civilized” and thus deserving of human rights—a consequence that could potentially undermine the institution of slavery, the very lifeblood of the sugar economy. This provision not only eased the anxiety that masters may have felt regarding the extent of their legal control over their slaves, but it also further reinforced racist notions of black inferiority that whites had begun to use to justify slavery.

Slave Demographics

The vast majority of slaves that arrived in Carolina before Charles Towne moved to Oyster Point did not come directly from Africa. (Slaves would not begin arriving directly from the continent until the 1690s.) Instead, they entered the colony by way of the English sugar isles, particularly Barbados. These West Indian slaves generally came over with their migrating masters; however, some were also purchased from island planters in exchange for provisions. Additionally, the historical record reveals that a Carolina merchant acquired “one lusty negro man” while doing business in Virginia, so it is possible that other colonists secured a few slaves from the Old Dominion as well. The proportion of creole to African-born slaves in the colony cannot be determined, but evidence suggests that Creoles predominated. Both a Spanish spy, who visited the

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6 See Greene, “Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection,” passim.
8 Ibid., 42-45, 121, 164.
9 Ibid., 115.
Ashley River settlement under diplomatic pretenses in 1672, and a Carolina defector, who found sanctuary in the Spanish colony of St. Augustine in 1674, reported that Ashley River slaves were armed for the defense of the colony. The precedent for arming slaves had been established in Barbados, where planters, in times of crisis, would press their most-loyal creole slaves into the militia. As a general rule, West Indian masters trusted Creoles, at least early on, more than unacculturated Africans. They often gave island-born slaves greater responsibilities on their plantations, allowing them to practice trades or serve in managerial capacities. Consequently, logic dictates that West Indian immigrants would have initially brought their most reliable creole slaves to Carolina, since the colony lay in the midst of a potentially hostile frontier, where violent encounters with Indians and Spaniards were a distinct possibility. It also seems plausible that masters would have selected Creoles, who were more proficient in the English tongue than their African counterparts, for the simple purpose of facilitating communication. It is, however, probable that a handful of “seasoned” African-born slaves, i.e., those who had been in the islands long enough to be sufficiently acculturated, were among the early blacks imported into to the colony.

Regardless of their place of origin, slaves constituted an appreciable portion of the colony’s population from the very outset. The thirty or so slaves that arrived in Charles Towne during the first year accounted for fifteen percent of the settlement’s 200 total inhabitants. With respect to gender, men initially outnumbered women, probably because planters needed physically stronger laborers at first to meet frontier demands, but the sex ratio appears to have balanced out relatively early. Experienced West Indian planters may have consciously attempted to redress the imbalance, for in the islands unmarried “male slaves insisted on having wives…[and] would wander off to neighboring plantations in search of women or refuse to work” if they did not get them. By 1680, the colony contained about 1200 people, of which more than 200 were probably black, making at least one in every six Carolinians a slave at that time. Of equal importance, the number of slaves in the colony had possibly achieved parity with that of white servants even before Charles Towne moved across the Ashley River (circa 1678). Thus, the processes by which slaves would eclipse indentured servants as the dominant

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16 Menard, “Slave Demography in the Lowcountry,” 283 (Table 1).


19 Between 1670 and 1679, approximately 240 white servants landed at Albemarle Point, most of whom arrived before 1672; whereas, an estimated 200 slaves of African descent lived in the colony by 1680. Assuming that scores of servants had already completed their terms by the end of the 1670s, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the number of slaves could have equaled that of servants at that time. See, Aaron M. Shatzman, “Servants into Planters, the Origin of an American Image: Land Acquisition and Status Mobility in Seventeenth-Century South Carolina” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1981), 91; Menard, “Slave Demography in the Lowcountry,” 283 (Table 1).
labor force—an operation that would be fully accomplished by the early-1690s—were at work as early as the late-1670s.\textsuperscript{20}

The popularity of slave labor was on the rise in Carolina even before the rice boom of the 1690s. The increasing interest in slaves derived largely from the shortcomings of the indentured servitude system. The major drawbacks to white servitude included the ever-diminishing pool of would-be servants in the English-speaking world, their rapid rate of turnover, and the general malaise that contemporaries thought prevailed among them—a condition that reportedly made servants indolent and intractable, and thus collectively undependable as a labor force. Many Englishmen also favored slaves because they believed that Europeans lacked the constitution needed for working long days under the torrid blaze of Carolina’s summer sun. Since Africans originated in a sultry, tropical climate, planters assumed that they were physically better suited for rigorous exertion in hot and humid conditions.\textsuperscript{21} Slaves, however, were exceedingly expensive and required a considerable outlay of capital on the part of their buyers.\textsuperscript{22} Yet this disadvantage was offset by the fact that slaves would serve for life, thereby allowing masters to potentially recoup their investment many times over. Slavery, therefore, seemed to be the best solution for the colony’s labor shortage, especially after planters found a profitable staple in rice at the end of the century.

\textbf{Living and Working Conditions}
Records are sparse for the colony’s first decade, but the twenty-eight estate inventories of slaveholders that survive from the late-seventeenth century indicate that most masters owned fewer than five slaves.\textsuperscript{23} There were, of course, notable exceptions to this rule, for Governor John Yeamans had assembled a labor force that included twenty-six slaves by the time of his death in 1674.\textsuperscript{24} Most of the Ashley River settlement’s slaves would have served masters who also commanded the labor of white indentured servants. Frontier conditions dictated a degree of fluidity with respect to race relations in the early years and it would not have been anomalous to see white servants and black slaves working together on the same project.\textsuperscript{25} A slave’s labors probably differed little from those of white servants. Like indentured laborers, slaves cleared land, planted fields, cultivated crops, raised livestock, and helped erect buildings. Some of them may have been skilled craftsmen, for Barbadian masters allowed select Creoles to master the arts of carpentry, woodworking, masonry, smithing, and coopering.\textsuperscript{26} As previously mentioned, slaves also contributed to the defense of the colony. The Carolina government obviously permitted

\textsuperscript{20} Menard, “Slave Demography in the Lowcountry,” 284.
\textsuperscript{22} The probate inventory of one Richard Fowell’s estate, recorded in 1678, provides perspective on the relative value of slaves. The average worth of one of his adult male slaves was £21, whereas adult females averaged £19 in value. In contrast, an old cedar table was appraised at a mere six shillings and approximately seventeen pounds of raw pewter would fetch only fourteen shillings. (See, Inventory and appraisement of the estate of Richard Fowell, Miscellaneous Records, Secretary of State, Records of the Secretary, 1675-1695, p. 58, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia SC.)
\textsuperscript{23} Menard, “Slave Demography in the Lowcountry,” 285.
\textsuperscript{25} Morgan, \textit{Slave Counterpoint}, 2, 5-6.
slaves to possess military weapons, as two contemporaries reported that blacks bore arms in the colony. Further confirmation for this practice may be found in an order issued by the grand council in June 1672. This directive required all armed inhabitants of the colony to assemble in Charles Towne, presumably for training, with the exception of “the Negroes in the Governor’s plantation who are left to defend the same being an outward place.” Naturally, the slaves guarding Governor Yeamans’ Wappoo estate would have been armed with more than their fists.

The limitations of the colony’s early primary sources impede attempts to accurately reconstruct patterns of daily life for slaves. Since it does not seem likely that West Indian masters would have made any drastic changes in the previous work schedules or living arrangements of their slaves, one can infer that blacks typically worked ten-hour days, six days a week, and rested only on Sunday. They probably lived in their own discrete dwellings, separate from their master’s and those of any indentured servants who resided on the property. But like white laborers, slaves would have eaten a monotonous, starch-laden diet and would have suffered from hunger during food shortages—though slaves may have received a bit more food than indentured servants at times of scarcity simply because it was in the economic interest of masters to take care of their costly human investments. It is also highly probable that many slaves, including Creoles, retained much of their African cultural heritage. Planters in the English Caribbean had generally taken a hands-off approach when it came to policing slave culture, allowing their dependents to perpetuate as much of their African belief system, folkways, and religious traditions as they desired, insofar as they did not interfere with their work. The slaves that toiled on West Indian sugar plantations came from a myriad of West African ethnic groups, most of whom spoke their own distinctive languages. To communicate with each other, this polyglot group developed a patois, or pidgin language, which integrated both English and African words. Most whites could not decipher this hybrid speech, which gave slaves the ability to carry on private conversations right in front of their masters without fear of being understood. This unique patois was probably spoken in South Carolina as well.

**Resistance**

Again, the reticence of the colony’s pre-1680 records on the subject of slavery hinders one from drawing conclusions on the degree and frequency of black resistance. One might assume that the lack of documented instances of resistance in the records, which otherwise contain numerous references to white servant disobedience, suggests that harmony prevailed in the early relations between masters and slaves. But this could just as easily mean that discipline was handled privately on plantations away from the public eye, for slaves did not possess the same rights as white servants—hence the proprietor’s guarantee that the Carolina planter would “have absolute power & authority over his negro slaves.” Although no primary sources that document slave runaways have surfaced for the 1670s, the council journals contain an intriguing entry that remains open

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to interpretation. In 1673, two free white men, Richard Batten and William Loe, allegedly stole a slave from Nathaniel Sayle and then absconded from the colony. The men were later captured and sentenced to death, though both were reprieved after showing the proper remorse, but nothing is known about the fate of the slave. While the authorities interpreted the slave’s disappearance as a kidnapping, one could also speculate that he went willingly, or was even an active co-conspirator in the defection plot. Actual documented cases of runaways, however, exist for the 1680s. Towards the end of that decade, at least eleven Carolina slaves escaped to St. Augustine and received asylum there.

Conclusion
Through their negotiations with the proprietors in the years that preceded the establishment of Charles Towne, Barbadian planters with Carolina aspirations laid the groundwork for extending the institution of slavery to the shores of England’s newest mainland province. Slaves landed at Albemarle Point with the first fleet and others soon followed in their wake, as West Indian immigrants brought in “seasoned” bondspeople from their island plantations. Although slaves initially supplemented the white servant labor force, they had largely supplanted it by the 1690s. “The widespread enslavement of Negroes,” as one renowned historian has noted, “was by no means a forgone conclusion from the start.” But it seemed inevitable after the onset of the rice boom, which encouraged Carolina planters to pattern their operations on the slave-based plantation model that had been so successful in Barbados. The adoption of the West Indian socio-economic paradigm would not only profoundly affect the course of South Carolina’s history, but it would also have important implications on the development of the American Deep South.

Report prepared by John Hiatt for the South Carolina State Park Service, 12 July 2002