

Innovation and Technological Development:
An Historical Analysis of Rice Cultivation in West Africa and South
Carolina

by Aaron P. Goffney

Historians often ask the question, what makes an Empire? Empire embodied, land grabs, racism, exploitation of free labor and natural resources that led to hegemonic power and economic prosperity. Its paternalistic characteristics lie in the subjugation of black peoples and other peoples of color –a formative that deemed the white race a superior one. Maroons in the British colonies of Jamaica had to adapt to their environments after forced migration by European settlers. Edward Long, historian and planter stated that Africans were “bestial in their manners and debased their brothers of Africa.”¹ One could only assume this statement derived from the notion that Africans sold their prisoners of war to European settlers. Africans fought Africans akin to the way Europeans fought Europeans, and as a result, the most skilled prisoners captured were traded and later sold into slavery. Richard Price in his edits of essays on *Maroon Societies*, pores through sources from scholars such as Orlando Patterson and Robert C. Charles, whose general survey of maroon peoples farming techniques, war tactics, and religious practices gave further insight to African culture. It is important to recognize the uniqueness of Africans in rice cultivation, hunting techniques, and swidden agriculture performed in European settlements by Africans who had a knowledge system already perfected in West Africa.²

The scholarship of rice is not only an important staple crop that brought profit to South Carolina, its historicity is equally important in academia, as sugar was to the colonies in Jamaica and Barbados in the mid-eighteenth century.³ In 1974, Peter H. Wood, in his book *Black Majority: Negroes in colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, noted, in

¹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica* (Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 355.

² Judith A. Judith and J. A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

³ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority Negroes in Colonial South Carolina: From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 35.

his research on the earliest negroes in the deep south that “the role of the black majority was major rather than minor, active rather than passive.”⁴ This work encapsulates negroes in South Carolina who made up more than half of the colony during the eighteenth century and played a fundamental role in shaping their importance and significance within America’s thirteen colonies. Melvin Herskovits in his book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, reminded scholars that Africans, in all their complexities of “social, political, and religious systems— learned to survive in foreign territory that reinforced their identity.” Basil Davidson, a British historian, and journalist provided in his work, *A History of West Africa*, an insight to the major trends of West Africans, including but not limited to religion, art, education, and colonialism. Davidson argued that “many have denied the possibility of understanding the African past or denied its importance as a relative subject that has not contributed to or influenced the human development.”⁵

Religion and the arts played an essential role within African society and civilization. Embodied by witchcraft and magic, religion reflected a deeper sense of morality that developed “expectations of the individual and his obligation to society.”⁶ The notion that Europeans labeled Africans as uncivilized and savage beings was nothing short of a justification for enslavement and their aspirations for economic prosperity in a quest for profit from natural resources. Planters had to grapple with the idea to enslave humans that later resulted in disregarding moral values due to greed. Nonetheless, Africans were skilled when at work on plantations, unskilled when they did not possess cultural norms of the European society and its

⁴ Peter H. Wood, xi.

⁵ Basil Davidson, *A History of West Africa: 1000-1800* (London, UK: Longman, 1981), 1.

⁶ Basil Davidson, 170.

civilization, and savages when they resisted enslavement. West Africans possessed the necessary qualifications of not only cultivating lands, but also in complex trades such as, weaving, metal working, and boat-making. Davidson noted, tens of thousands of Africans were forced into subjugation by Europeans through the Atlantic slave trade, thus exporting its most valuable raw materials—human labor, who were highly skilled farmers and craftsmen. In addition, the author asserts, British colonies in America would create a vast amount of wealth and profit, for themselves and but never for Africa.⁷

In 2009, Judith Carney, author of *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, argued “that the development of rice culture marked not simply the movement of a crop across the Atlantic but also the transfer of an entire cultural system, from production to consumption.”⁸ Rice Cultivation in South Carolina has often been contributed to new technology innovations developed in European settlements. This notion discredits the skills, techniques, and knowledge system of West Africans who crossed the middle passage through forced migration.⁹ Englishmen and white immigrants in America and the Caribbean were ignorant to the crop and relied on the education of rice cultivation from African slaves.¹⁰ Drawing on the historical work written in 1954 by author and editor, Albert Virgil House, posits that South Carolina was not the only colony in the southeast that embodied a large-scale production of rice within the region. Due to the success of rice cultivation in South Carolina,

⁷ Basil Davidson, 264.

⁸ Judith A. Judith and J. A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

⁹ Judith A. Judith and J. A. Carney, 3.

¹⁰ Peter H. Wood, 35.

House noted, before cotton, rice was one of the most profitable cereals that was globally traded between 1768-1772—years leading up to the American Revolution.

Native Georgians participated in rice cultivation before the American Revolution.¹¹ House argued the literature from past historians who wrote on the rice-growing industry had been predicated on the techniques of coastal planters in South Carolina.¹² In his research, House analysis derived from two plantations under the auspices of Hugh Fraser Grant—a planter and citizen who became one of the leading pioneers in rice production on the Elizafield plantation.¹³ According to House, Elizafield was one of the oldest plantations in rice cultivation along the Georgia coast.¹⁴ The author draws on agricultural records that describe a capitalistic economy located at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina.¹⁵ In addition, sources such as Hopeton records, and the Journal and Account Book, 1834-61 of Hugh Frazer Grant of Elizafield Plantation in Glynn County Georgia, provided evidence of finances, slave lists, acreage, weather, and production problems owners faced in the antebellum years.¹⁶

Most scholarship on rice cultivation during slavery written in the mid-twentieth century focused on plantation routines and agriculture experiments and mostly celebrated the recognition of scientist, planters, and governors. House does not, however, implement in his

¹¹ Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, *The Journal of Hugh Fraser Grant, Rice Grower Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia* (New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1954), 5.

¹² Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, 5.

¹³ Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, 7.

¹⁴ Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, xi.

¹⁵ Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, xi.

¹⁶ Hugh Fraser Grant and Albert Virgil House, 85.

argument the slave's contribution to rice cultivation. His primary aim was to look outside the scope of South Carolina and focus on Georgian techniques of farming along the west and east of creek plantations. His extensive rice calendar provides further research for historians interested in slave run plantations that profited off rice and botanical treatments in its cultivation. In 2006, recent work on African contributions to rice cultivation in an essay by Judith Carney, posits that cultivation extended from the African continent in upper Guinea and later flourished in the United States along the coasts of South Carolina. In addition, the author notes that rice cultivation in West Africa still thrives as a staple crop, however, after the abolition of slavery, both Georgia and South Carolina swiftly saw a decline in its production.¹⁷

In 2004, Bruce Sinclair in his essay "Integrating the Histories of Race and Technology," urged scholars to rethink the histories of race and technology as a subject combined rather than separated.¹⁸ *Technology and the African American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, investigates the notion that African Americans were mentally inferior to White Americans, all of which, as stated earlier "formed the basic conditions of forced servitude."¹⁹ Rice cultivation and swidden agriculture techniques brought profit to the plains of both South Carolina and Georgia. Those in the Enlightenment period, such as Thomas Jefferson deemed others who were of non-Western civilizations technological incompetent. To debunk the myths about African Americans and other peoples of color, Sinclair collected a slew of essays written

¹⁷ Bruce Sinclair, *Technology and the African-American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006), 19.

¹⁸ Bruce Sinclair, 1.

¹⁹ Bruce Sinclair, 2

by historians who share the same plight of misinformation as it relates “unskilled” Africans on plantations.

Essays such as “Landscapes of Technology Transfer: Rice Cultivation and African Continuities” by Judith Carney allows the reader to understand how slaves, with just a hoe, an axe, and the spade, constructed a “vast hydraulic work in all its complexities from the jungles of Africa.”²⁰ Carney would later double down on this, when she highlights Peter Wood’s research from cultural change to cultural exchange that challenged, Wood’s notes as a “long held notion that slaves contributed only unskilled labor to the plantation economies of America.”²¹ Carney’s work seeks to make clear what has been misunderstood or misinterpreted on the diffusion of rice culture from Africa across the Atlantic limits the value of Africans historical agency. In 1996, Michel Rolph-Trouillot, author *Silencing the Past* stated summaries of intellectual trends such as these eliminated specific characters and narratives and thus, “created a one-sided historicity.”²² Critics of technology and development, agriculture strategy, and growth techniques, have long praised Europeans and Europeans of descent, but discredits not only a knowledge system of Africans in its cultivation, but, according to Carney, their ability to negotiate the terms of their bondage while providing a substance staple to the maroons throughout Latin America.”²³

²⁰ Bruce Sinclair, 41.

²¹ Judith A. Judith and J. A. Carney, 4.

²² Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), 3.

²³ Judith A. Judith and J. A. Carney, 1.

Peter Woods draws from the number of slaves which made up the black majority, outnumbering white inhabitants in South Carolina, and asserts that the mastery of rice cultivation within its colony is not by happenstance.²⁴ The need for slave labor in the colonies of Jamaica and Barbados due to sugar, is equivalent to the importation of slaves in South Carolina, predicated on the introduction of rice to the region and the skilled labor of African farmers who manifested profit from trade into fruition. Woods noted the increase of the rice culture, and the increase of slave labor in South Carolina and throughout the colony in the eighteenth century “have received little analysis.”²⁵ African labor was attractive to European settlers because they had unlimited terms of services unlike white indentured servants.²⁶ Moreover, according to Wood, who echoed Daniel C. Littlefield’s work in *Rice and Slaves*, stated that the independence of Africans to “fend for themselves more readily than the Europeans in the sub-tropical Atlantic climate, was deemed a valuable asset when provisions were low.”²⁷

Daniel C. Littlefield, Carolina Professor at the University of South Carolina gave further insight to early periods of Carolina’s settlement with rice and slaves. As a professor of African slavery in the United States, Littlefield’s study on South Carolina plantations delivers a deep analysis in the knowledge system of rice cultivation between both slaves and masters. In 1981, his work highlights that “South Carolinians placed a high value of slaves imported from rice-growing regions throughout the eighteenth century.” His studies draw from the work of Peter Wood’s *Black*

²⁴ Peter H. Wood, 35.

²⁵ Peter H. Wood, 37.

²⁶ Peter H. Wood, 43.

²⁷ Peter H. Wood, 43.

Majority and a slew of records from the Board of Trade with Governor Lewis in 1766.²⁸ Littlefield expertise lies in the special interest of American slavery, race relations, and a comparative study of plantation societies.

In his book *Rice and Slaves*, Littlefield also examines the dichotomy between plantation and house slaves in both Africa and North America. Conditions in North America and Africa were similar in some ways and differed in others. Littlefield's comparison contributed to his research goal to explore the "ways in which rice was produced in both Africa and South Carolina."²⁹ In this comparative study, he was able to gauge South Carolina's colonial economy with rice. His view of African rice being independent of the rice cultivation in Asia has not been universally accepted. However, theorists, such as R. Mauny argued that the cultivation of rice came through the Mediterranean as early as 1500 B.C.³⁰ Richard Price, editor of his book of essays, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, notes that "swidden horticulture was the mainstay of most maroon economies that consisted of yams, sweet potatoes, and other roots crops, bananas, plantains, dry rice, maize, groundnuts, squash, beans, chile, sugar cane, assorted other vegetables, and tobacco and cotton."³¹ Maroons societies were independent, advanced in agriculture techniques and warfare—a formative that encouraged one of the most historic alliances with the British government during the eighteenth century. According to Judith Carney, upland,

²⁸ Daniel C. Littlefield, 76.

²⁹ Daniel C. Littlefield, 80.

³⁰ Daniel C. Littlefield, 81.

³¹ Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore, MD: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), location 219.

swamp, and tidal were “three main principle West African production systems that made up South Carolina’s rice economy.”³²

Carney’s argument that negates the notion that Africans were unskilled workers, aligns with scholars such as, Peter Wood, Daniel C. Littlefield, Bruce Sinclair, and Basil Davidson, but adds to the historical analysis of Albert Virgil House whose sources deviate from the historical agency of African slaves and West African practices in rice cultivation. Theoretically, the missing historicity of actors within the narratives of South Carolina’s rice economy tells a one-sided history Michel Rolph-Trouillot posits as silences. Trouillot noted, “silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).³³ Scholars have begun to rectify these silences by implementing economic changes in West Africa before the slave trade to the New World, debunk the notion that African slaves were unskilled laborers, and provide evidence for this argument with research that challenges those assumptions through a history of rice cultivation in both West Africa and South Carolina.

Edward Long, planter and historian, stated Africans were people without taste, without genius, or discernment, who only had ideas of grandeur, knavish, crafty, soft, lazy, cowardly, and extravagantly besotted with an absurd and monstrous theology.”³⁴ As it pertains to rice,

³² Bruce Sinclair, 33.

³³ Michel Rolph Trouillot, 26.

³⁴ Edward Long, 355.

Carney questioned ideas such as these and recognized the expertise in slave-based plantation systems, in which slaves “engineering ability showed when they laid out thousands of fields and tens of thousands of banks and ditches in cultivation.³⁵ The larger picture of Carney and other scholars from various disciplines suggests that “Europeans and people of European descent can no longer be viewed as the sole masters of technology development and innovation.³⁶ Rice, the African crop, should be added to the historical narrative of South Carolina’s rice economy and African culture on slave plantations.

³⁵ Bruce Sinclair, 41.

³⁶ Bruce Sinclair, 42.

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