CHAPTER 1

A Brief History of Rice Culture to the 1870s

. . . a factory truly a rice plantation is . . . for Nature—passionless step-mother that she is—exerts so slight and attentive art so complete and watchful a control over every process attending its production, that rice is substantially “manufactured” not cultivated.


From colonization until the arrival of large-scale industrialization during the Second World War, the distinctive identity of the American South stemmed primarily from plantation agriculture. In the nineteenth century, cotton claimed the title of king of the plantation staples, but several other crops held sway in particular regions of the South. Virginians and Marylanders grew tobacco, Louisianans raised sugarcane, and Carolinians and Georgians cultivated rice. Indeed these crops, not cotton, shaped the people, society, landscape, and historical development of the tidewater and other specific geographies.

The lowcountry of the Carolinas clung to the crop that produced the first generation of wealth, while creating at the same time a social order that differed from the remainder of the Southeast. While rice plantations shared much with plantation society elsewhere, they were distinctive because of the conditions peculiar to rice cultivation itself: the presence of malaria, slave communities of high density, the task system, and a wealthy planter class with pretensions to aristocracy.

We do not know exactly who brought the first rice to Carolina or under what particulars it arrived. The British backers of colonization, both financial and political, intended for Carolina, like other colonies, to fit into the mercantilist system. To that end they suggested that settlers try a range of crops, rice among them. Historians of South Carolina continue to argue
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over the introduction of Madagascar gold seed rice, which apocryphally came via Captain John Thurber’s ship in 1685. Scholars have all but definitively shown that Carolinians grew white rice in the seventeenth century with gold rice being introduced after the American Revolution. Regardless of the circumstances of rice’s introduction, colonists successfully grew small amounts of the grain in the Charlestown colony by 1690.¹ By 1712 Carolinians not only produced rice for local consumption; they had begun exporting the excess to England. These early rice growers began to enjoy larger yields, and their labor and land demands kept pace with the spread of the crop.² They satisfied their labor needs by importing increasing numbers of black slaves, some from the Caribbean and others directly from West Africa. By 1708 more black people lived in Carolina than did people of European descent, and, as Peter Wood and Daniel Littlefield have pointed out, the simultaneous rise of rice and slavery are not historical accidents. Indeed the emerging profitability of rice as a labor-intensive plantation crop created a ballooning of demand for slaves.³

Historians have only recently delved into the interrelation of rice cultivation and the demand for land in the lowcountry. Rice planters wanted more land, but not just any land. They sought the borders of swamps and tidal estuaries. Indians occupied much of the land deemed prime for rice and threatened the use of the large rivers for commerce. Planters undoubtedly felt great relief after the Yemassee War in 1715, which resulted in the relocation of Indians from the Ashepoo-Combahee-Edisto basin. Colonists in turn occupied those lands as the result of royal grants. In the 1720s and 1730s planters founded numerous rice plantations on these rivers, signaling the switch from reservoir rice culture to tidal irrigation.⁴

Even though rice planters recognized the potential of tidally irrigated land by 1740, they worked through a long period of experimentation and construction to develop tidal rice culture. Three factors—cost, labor, and knowledge—inhibited this transition. Planters incurred significant costs financing the improvement of agricultural acreage. Carolinians cleared and reclaimed some of the most formidable agricultural land in eastern North America. The effort required time and money from the planters and labor from slaves. Planters found that the investment in labor involved in swamp reclamation forced them to take a long-term approach to their drainage projects. To that end they looked to natural increase among their slaves to augment their labor force, but the lowcountry was a particularly deadly place because of malaria, yellow fever, cholera, and other diseases, so the trade in newly arrived slaves remained brisk in Charleston.⁵
Slaves grew other crops during rice season and during “lay-by times” and in the winter reclaimed more swamp land for cultivation. The work went slowly, in part because they engaged in a form of agriculture and on a landscape unfamiliar to Europeans and Africans. They did not know exactly what they needed to construct or what form the plantation would take. Thus they embarked on decades of experiments and research into hydrology and methods of rice cultivation. West African slaves, especially those from the Gambia River estuary, brought with them knowledge of tidal rice culture, and they were instrumental in technology transfer and adaptation in the lowcountry. It now appears that lowcountry rice culture involved some direct importation of West African skills, some European knowledge, and a good deal of local innovation.⁶

The white planters turned to African laborers in part because they believed that Europeans could not survive hard labor in the miasmic climate of the lowcountry. Peter Wood suggested that the partial immunity to malaria of some Africans resulting from the sickle cell trait provided the basis for this notion. More directly, planters bringing Africans out of a tropical environment assumed that one steamy wilderness was much like another. This assumption of Africans’ suitability for swamp work lasted as long as slavery and beyond. “To clear these rank, intricate wildernesses is a toilsome and costly labor,” opined an author in Harper’s Weekly. “The sturdy woodman of our Northern forests might well shrink from the task. . . . The negroes, however, . . . fear not the dangers of the fens, and their axes quickly open the labyrinths to the unwonted sunshine.”⁷ The argument over origins hinges in part on how and where Carolinians learned the wet cultivation of rice. Planters did investigate reports of Asiatic practices. They also employed some engineers from the Netherlands for their knowledge of dikes and drainage.⁸

The first era of wet rice cultivation in the lowcountry utilized fingers of salt marsh on lands near Charlestown. A wider practice of planters involved damming low-lying bays and swamps. These approaches dominated cultivation from the 1730s until tidal cultivation supplanted it in the Revolutionary period. Early rice planters typically utilized rain water runoff by planting the crop in the lowest areas on the property. Plantation owners built an earthen dam on high land above the field and created reserves of freshwater that they let onto the field by using a simple sluice gate. The field in turn possessed an earthen dam at its lowest end to hold the water on the crop. When desired, the planter could drain the field by opening another sluice gate in the lower dam. However, some plantations took advantage of natural limestone springs to assure their water supply.
The move to inland swamps from upland cultivation resulted as much from a need to control weeds and the swamps’ rich alluvial soil as from the water needs of the rice plant. Common practice required rice planters to flood inland swamp fields twice during the growing season.9

In the decades leading up to the Revolutionary War, a few planters began to experiment with using the diurnal freshwater floods of the tide along lowcountry rivers. They pursued this method because it promised to flood and drain a much larger acreage. In addition the new pattern of multiple floods of the rice enabled individual slaves to cultivate as much as five or six acres due to reduced hoeing requirements. As tidal rice cultivation spread through the lowcountry, the acreage of rice planting grew, as did the number of bushels produced per acre and per cultivator.10 Within tidal rice culture, growers practiced many small variations from river to river and plantation to plantation, but the wet method of cultivation came to dominate, and a consistent schedule for cultivation emerged during the early 1800s.

Planters, and particularly slaves, found that reclaiming the cypress swamps from the river for tidal cultivation involved frightful labor and perilous working conditions. Slaves worked much of the time with axe, shovel, and hoe, digging ditches, making banks, or cutting down trees and removing roots. Slaves often worked in winter and summer in water to their waists. The softness of the soil meant standing in mire as high as the knees while trying to dig or chop, then clawing one’s way out of the sucking pluff mud (the vernacular name for the always-wet, dense soil present in lowcountry marshes and tidal swamps). In the warm months the nearly tropical heat and humidity took a toll on even the youngest and fittest bodies. For much of the year, malaria-bearing mosquitoes, gnats, and other biting insects plagued those that ventured into the swamps. While the alligators, snakes, and poisonous plants posed a smaller threat than disease, their presence had a chilling effect on the human imagination, as seen in folk wisdom. Despite these obstacles, year after year slaves and masters slowly changed the landscape and carved plantations out of lowcountry estuaries.11

As they constructed the banks, slaves buried wooden “trunks” at strategic locations. The trunk as a technology cannot be overemphasized, for it was the device that allowed for the regimentation of tidal rice culture. Trunks ran twenty or more feet in length so that the gated ends protruded from the bank. Carpenters designed them as rectangular water pipes from two to four feet in width and height. Their heavy lumber gave them a good deal of weight, and it was common to float them into place and hold them
there until the ebb of the tide before securing them under bank. On each end the trunks held up two attached posts of six or more feet in height. A pivoting rod ran through the post near their top. Upon the rod and inside of the posts hung the gate. The gate itself contained two pieces, a door suspended from crosspieces and the fixed hanging frame consisting of the crosspieces and the long planks connecting the structure to the posts. Thus the gate as a unit could swivel from a position against the trunk, effectively closing it, to an open position leaving a gap of several feet. In addition trunk minders could raise or lower the door itself by using pegs and the crosspieces. The carpenters’ handiwork allowed for the manipulation of tide within the plantation. When either gate was down, the force of water on it sealed the water out of the trunk and could keep water in the rice field or prevent the river's tide from rushing inside the bank. Planters could control to within inches the depth of water on a field at any given stage of the rice plant’s growth.¹²

Decades and even generations of reclamation and cultivation by the slaves left every floodable acre of the plantation behind a bank, with the land irrigated by the use of trunks, canals, and cross ditches. Planters designed the plantation to have squares of between fifteen and twenty acres. From their view these smallest units served dual purposes. They created small sections for flooding and lent themselves to a practical organization of labor. The squares took on identities as slaves, planters, or overseers
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gave them names. Some squares took their names from a particular slave or driver such as “Ned’s Field” and some from their location, such as “Catfish Creek”; others took their names from an animal seen there such as a turtle or alligator. Through its rationalized features, buildings, and names, the plantation symbolically exhibited the planter’s power.¹³

A description of the dominant methods of antebellum rice cultivation is in order. Two approaches to planting seeds existed, but most planters used the covered trench method, in which women sowed seed in rows and men came behind the sowers with “battens,” or planks, that they used to cover the seed with no more than an inch of soil.¹⁴

In both methods of planting, skilled slaves responsible for the flow of water, designated as trunk minders, allowed water onto the fields after
covering. They inaugurated the series of flows and dry growth that aided in the germination of the seed and killed or curbed the growth of weeds and grasses. The first flood of the new growing year also floated unburned rice stubble and other detritus that would gather against the banks. Slaves working on the banks raked the flotsam onto dry ground where they later burned it.¹⁵

The rice sprouted, or “pipped,” after sitting underwater for a week or less. When the overseer noted the rice sprouts coming up, he drained the fields. The rice then grew for a short period in dry soil to allow the newly germinated seed to establish some roots and attain a few inches of height. Then the trunk minders reflooded the field with water for the “stretch,”

1.3 Trunk minder at flooded rice fields.
Courtesy of South Carolina Historical Society
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or “point flow.” This second flooding marked the convergence in cultivating practice of the open and closed trench methods.¹⁶

The point flow lasted from a week to twenty days depending on the planter or overseer’s preference and weather conditions. The field hands returned to their labors as soon as the field dried enough and the rice stalks strengthened. Over the next twenty days they hoed the entire crop twice with their six-inch cultivating hoes. These tillings kept grass and weeds at a minimum. Planters also believed it important for the slaves to stir the soil, aerating the earth after it became compacted under the weight of the two floods.¹⁷

Following these hoeings, the minders allowed in the third flood, called the “long flow.” They kept the water level over the top of the rice plants for several days. The recently hoed grasses floated to the top, and the field hands again raked the debris to the banks for burning. Moreover, by completely submerging the plants, planters reduced the threat of insect pests. The minders lowered the water level incrementally until it was only a few inches to a half-foot deep and the rice was exposed to the air. They kept the water at that level about two weeks before draining it off. During that period Robert F. W. Allston, an antebellum authority on rice cultivation, sent his slaves back into the field to pull up tall grass and weeds. A few days later the minder drained the field, ushering in the final period of dry growth, which lasted just under a month. During that time the field hands conducted two hoeings, one as soon as the ground dried and the second at the end of the dry growth period. The slaves used smaller and lighter four-inch hoes for this cultivation, seeking once again to eliminate weeds and aerate the soil.¹⁸

Conditions then called for the fourth and final flooding of the crop. Rice growers called this the “lay-by” or “harvest flow,” and it remained at a constant depth from six to ten inches deep, with the trunk minders being careful not to get the water over the first joint, or rachis, of the plant. On many plantations minders allowed the tide to come in and drain out on a regular pattern every week during the harvest flow to remove stagnant water and keep the fields fresh. The minders maintained this flow until the grain appeared ready for harvest.¹⁹

In early September the grain hardens enough to drain the fields a final time. All hands turned out for the harvest. Following the drying of the fields, hands entered with sickles, known locally as rice hooks, to cut the crop. A single hand walked along cutting three rows of rice at a time. He or she cut the rice off about a foot above the ground and laid the stalks back on the stubble. This effectively kept the grain off the moist ground
and allowed air to circulate around the heads. Planters wanted the rice to lie in the sun for a day to begin curing. On the second day, slaves returned to the curing rice and bound it up in sheaves with string or more often with a stalk of rice itself. They either stacked the sheaves in the field in ricks or transported them straight to the work yard on the highland. Getting the rice to the highland involved loading the sheaves on flats to float it up, or carrying the “crop to the barn upon the heads of the Negroes . . . a picturesque sight enough to the indolent spectator, but toilsome and dangerous to the workers under the hot suns of mid-summer.”

Stacking in ricks encouraged the rice to cure. Slaves constructed the ricks in a rectangular pattern six to eight feet high. The advantage of the rick in curing rice resulted from the heat produced by the combined rice. This caused the rice to harden and better prepared it for threshing and milling.

**The Evolution of Rice Processing, 1730–1850**

Rice milling, like threshing, changed because of progress in technology, with advances to milling coming prior to those in threshing mills. Slaves brought with them the dominant method of hand milling used for the
first century of rice culture. They hollowed out the top portion of a log to create a mortar and then fashioned a pestle of wood. They then lifted the pestle and allowed gravity to drive it back into the mortar where it hit the rice.22

The physiognomy of the grain made milling necessary. Rough rice, or unmilled rice, has both an outer cuticle, or hull, which is easily shelled and an inner bran layer that is closely connected to the grain and difficult to remove. The pounding process first breaks off the hull, and then the polishing process rubs off the bran layer, leaving the rice with a shiny white luster. Planters recognized that this process required a great deal of labor and, as one Carolina planter reported in DeBow's Review, was “tedious, destructive to the laborer, and very exhausting to animal power.” The great difficulty presented in milling stemmed from the need for the pounding and rubbing to be of sufficient vigor to effect the removal of the unwanted parts without causing the grain to break or be crushed. The pricing of rice reflected the quality of the product, and cracked or broken grains did not fetch nearly so good a price.23

By the middle of the eighteenth century, planters experienced a bottleneck in production as their yields increased and the ability to mill their rice improved little if at all. Numerous craftsmen, planters, and inventors attempted to design rice-milling machinery. Most of their inventions derived power from livestock and were not able to meet demand and quality needs. The first significant advance in milling utilized waterwheels, mill ponds, and large pestles, and planters invested in these to some extent in the 1780s. However, before these waterwheel mills could spread, a more important design superseded then. The watermills depended on an unpredictable supply of water, while the new machines turned to the tides for energy. Jonathan Lucas took much of the credit for constructing the first automated rice mill, on Henry Laurens's plantation in 1794. The Lucas mills turned tide power into energy for rotating a crank that in turn lifted large pestles and drove them down onto the rice. Lucas also automated the process of moving the grain with elevators and packing machinery, saving immense amounts of labor.24

In 1801 Lucas established the first toll mill for rice in the lowcountry, and it proved to be the beginning of an important new industry. Eventually Lucas's son joined him in building and operating rice mills, and their reputation among planters as innovators in their field equaled Eli Whitney's. The Lucases maintained their reputation by being the first to bring steam power to rice milling in 1817. Steam power and other design advances in rice milling brought advances in efficiency and in quality of
milled rice, and a great appreciation in the capital investment for the mills themselves. Toll rice millers quickly prospered, and milling on individual plantations declined.\textsuperscript{25}

Three steam mills in particular—Chisolm’s Mill, Canonsborough Mill, and West Point Mill—not only claimed the prime industrial properties in Charleston but also some of the best wharfage. These mills consisted of entire industrial compounds with cooperage sheds, wharves, rice storage barns, and housing for slaves who belonged to the companies. All three of these mills went into operation prior to 1840. Jonathan Lucas III operated Canonsborough and founded the West Point Mill, thus maintaining his family’s prominence in the industry. Georgetown’s position at the heart of rice planting made it home to a number of mills throughout the antebellum period, and a dozen were in operation there at the time of secession.\textsuperscript{26}

Factorage firms occupied the pivotal location of rice industry middle men. Nearly all factors located their businesses in the cities of Wilmington, Georgetown, Charleston, or Savannah. Planters contracted with a firm to act as their principle agent in selling rice. In addition factors served the planter in other ways: they procured slaves for them, advanced financing for crops and household needs, forwarded supplies and merchandise required on the plantation, and dealt with details of shipping, storage, and toll mills for the crop. In short, factors integrated themselves into the industry as the negotiators between the planters on the periphery, the milling, financing, shipping, and marketing infrastructure in the city, and the international market.\textsuperscript{27}

As the market for rice developed, the factor and planter became commodity brokers. The planter sent his rice to the toll mill in the fall of the year. Some toll mills offered storage of the grain as part of their service, and in other cases the planter stored it in a warehouse. The factor then talked with buyers and monitored the price of rice in New York and the European markets in order to advise his client when to sell and at what price. In this regard, by 1800 the planter himself existed well within the sphere of the Atlantic world’s capitalist market.\textsuperscript{28}

By 1860 Carolinians’ experience with rice planting extended back a century and a half. Early on, the population shifted from a majority of white people to mostly black slaves. The nexus of rice planting itself migrated from fresh-water impoundments to tidal cultivation along rivers. Low-country society changed from a frontier area with an Indian culture and a rough colony of white and black people to several interlocked cultures
of white elites, white yeomen, and black slaves. The region boasted five cities, and rice culture extended from the Cape Fear River in North Carolina to the St. John’s River in Florida. Although in the nineteenth century the South seemingly raced westward with the cotton boom, lowcountry elites remained satisfied with their place and conservative in their outlook. They also became increasingly strident in their political views. In 1860 Charleston witnessed the failure of the Democratic Convention that it was hosting to make a nomination for president, and in 1861 the inauguration of the Civil War took place there. In pursuing war with the Union, rice planters brought about wrenching changes in their lives, in the lives of the slaves, and in the shape of the lowcountry’s society and economy.

The Civil War’s Impact on Rice Culture

What for planters began as an act of hubris cloaked in an aggressive defense of their society ended as a lesson in humility at the hands of northern arms and the South’s former bondsmen. In the early winter of 1860, rice planters such as Williams Middleton signed the Ordinance of Secession. Traversing the Ashley River to attend the secession convention that assembled on December 17, Middleton could not know that he had crossed his own Rubicon. In effect, by signing his name to that document, he signed away much of his own patrimony. By the time the war ended, his slaves had freed themselves, and most of his home was in ashes.29

The Civil War wrought tremendous changes to rice culture and lowcountry society. “Of all the major agricultural staples of the Old South, rice was hardest hit by the repercussions of the Civil War and emancipation,” historian James Clifton argues.30 Planters themselves frequently credited the war’s destruction, loss of capital, and disruption of the labor system through emancipation with dooming rice culture. But historian Peter Coclanis correctly points out that rice culture would hardly have remained a static institution in any case. Its gradual decline would have occurred eventually, given market forces. In other words, while the war brought emancipation, destruction, and loss of income and capital, these elements alone do not explain the ultimate demise of Atlantic rice culture.31

Nonetheless no group did more to bring about the Civil War than the planters of South Carolina, and they thereby pulled down the pillars of their own temple. Rice plantations continued to function during the war in an effort to feed the Confederacy, but pressure from the Union forces on the coast combined with the demand for both labor and material in other parts of the Confederacy disrupted rice production. The slaves who built and made the plantations productive threw off their bondage, and
the Confederate army yielded to Union forces. The years that immediately followed the end of the war brought chaos. The question of who owned the land remained unsettled for a time, and even afterward the destruction and neglect, the absence of capital, and racial tensions all inhibited an easy reconstruction of rice culture.

When Union troops finally did advance upon Middleton’s estates, “he had an enormous supply of rice burned . . . rather than let it fall into the enemy’s hands.” This action so enraged Union officers against the signer of the Ordnance of Secession that some sought his life. Union troops accosted Williams’s relative Nathaniel R. Middleton and nearly killed him in a case of mistaken identity. They believed Nathaniel to be Williams, according to Nathaniel’s account.32

Slaves understood that their freedom was at stake in the war, and they longed to be at liberty. Journalist Edmund Kirke, during his trip through wartime South Carolina, recorded a song that few rice planters heard but that captured the promise of freedom and the harshness of slave life. He heard an enslaved carriage driver, Scipio, sing this in Georgetown:

Come listen, all you darkies,
come listen to my song,
It am about ole massa, who use me berry wrong:
In de cole, frost mornin’, it ain’t so bery nice,
Wid de water to de middle to hoe among de rice.33

Emancipation, or the “day of Jubilee,” was among the most remarkable watershed moments in the history of the nation. The moment came for slaves in a variety of ways. Ending the half-measure that had identified them as contraband, the Emancipation Proclamation declared free all slaves in rebellious areas. After January 1, 1863, slaves who succeeded in crossing military lines knew they were free. As Union troops arrived at one plantation after another, a Union soldier or a master announced the new legal reality to entire slave communities.

The war induced by the planters brought destruction down on their heads, but everyone in the lowcountry suffered privations because of it. The entire southern economy went through profound disruption, but the lowcountry felt it even more keenly than some areas. The cost of the war registered in the physical destruction of buildings; the loss of livestock, working animals, home furnishings, and capital, both human and economic; and the decline of infrastructure and private property as a result of war damage or neglect.
South Carolina’s wartime damage approached catastrophic proportions. As in the rest of the Confederacy, destruction resulted from the combination of invasion, confiscation by the Confederacy, and the general chaos of war. Union forces destroyed miles of railroad during Sherman’s march. The Confederates burned many bridges to slow Union advances. The South as a whole experienced losses of one-third of the section’s herds of stock animals. In the Palmetto state, Sherman’s troops took an estimated twelve thousand horses. Likewise the numbers of swine, cattle, sheep, and working animals such as mules and oxen declined significantly, so much so that it took until 1900 for the state to regain its 1860 livestock levels. In the lowcountry the losses in animal power, invested capital, and infrastructure reduced the ability to cultivate, finance, and transport rice.34

**Table 1.2** Civil War Agricultural Losses in South Carolina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South Carolina</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1870</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved land</td>
<td>4,472,060 acres</td>
<td>3,010,539 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of farms</td>
<td>$139,652,508</td>
<td>$44,808,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of implements</td>
<td>$6,151,657</td>
<td>$2,282,946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horses (number)</td>
<td>81,125</td>
<td>44,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mules</td>
<td>56,456</td>
<td>41,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milch cows</td>
<td>163,938</td>
<td>98,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxen</td>
<td>22,629</td>
<td>17,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle</td>
<td>320,209</td>
<td>132,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td>233,509</td>
<td>124,594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swine</td>
<td>965,779</td>
<td>395,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian corn</td>
<td>15,065,606 bu.</td>
<td>7,614,207 bu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>119,100,528 lbs.</td>
<td>32,304,825 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginned cotton</td>
<td>353,412 bales</td>
<td>224,500 bales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet potatoes, bu.</td>
<td>4,115,688</td>
<td>1,342,165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compiled from U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1860 and 1870.

Direct capital losses included the uncompensated emancipation of slaves. At least one-quarter of the South’s wealth in 1860 existed in the form of bondsmen. Emancipation left a capital vacuum for the region and in many cases reduced once wealthy planters to a cash-poor landed class.35

In addition to the loss of capital invested in slave property, the South spent around one billion dollars on the military costs of the war. Southerners, especially the planters and merchants who invested in war bonds out of patriotism or coercion, forfeited that capital. Likewise Confederate currency became worthless at the end of the war. The federally mandated
repudiation of Confederate debt struck another blow to banks and the capitalists that helped finance the war and brought about a wave of business and bank failures. In turn the ruin of the banking and finance sectors slowed the redevelopment of the region’s economy as a whole.36

The economic cost of war and emancipation is reflected in data on agriculture in the four primary rice counties of the lowcountry. Improved acreage plummeted as a result of wartime neglect and abandonment. Beaufort County’s arable land declined by 45 percent during the war years. Colleton County experienced a drop in improved land of 36 percent. Most startling, though, is the steep decrease in Georgetown County, where 73.6 percent of the land fell out of tillage.37

Rice plantations were especially vulnerable to decline through lack of attention. As journalist Edward King observed, “A rice plantation is, in fact, a huge hydraulic machine, maintained by constant warring against the rivers.” During the war many estates lay idle, and even those plantations that continued to function cut corners, reduced the acreage planted, and neglected the maintenance of the hydraulic systems. The rivers meanwhile went about their business with little regard for the human drama being played out during those years. As King noted, to maintain the system, “the utmost attention and vigilance is necessary, and the labor must be ready at a moment’s notice for the most exhaustive efforts.”38

Consider the 1869 evaluation of one of Daniel Blake’s Combahee plantations, Board House, conducted by A. W. Burnet. Four years after hostilities ended, the lingering effects of the war remained evident. While a portion of the tidal rice fields were in good operating condition, “the upper portion of the tide land was overflowed by the tide, there being a large break and one or two small ones in the river dam.” Moreover the appraiser could not examine conditions more closely because the banks were “so overgrown with cane and briars as to prevent all access.” The substantial inland rice fields of the plantation lay underwater “covered with a growth of grass and weeds not having been under cultivation for some years.” On Blake’s plantation 130 of 470 acres were under cultivated in 1868. None of the 960 acres of inland rice fields had produced rice since the Civil War.39

Any planter faced a substantial capital investment in restoring these acres to productivity. Even before one could take on the restoration of the fields and dike system, other parts of the plantation infrastructure needed attention and replacement. The appraiser noted the plantation’s “most valuable buildings, such as the Dwelling House, and the out buildings and stables, also three mills, pounding, threshing, and saw, were destroyed by fire during or immediately after the war.” By 1869 the Blakes had replaced
only one of the infrastructure needs by constructing a brick barn. Key, however, to the infrastructure of any rice plantation was the housing for freedmen. These buildings typically survived the war, as was the case with more than forty former slave homes on Board House.\textsuperscript{40}

The example of Board House helps explain the decline in improved acreage and the plunge in rice production. Production in Beaufort County fell 51 percent between the censuses of 1860 and 1870. Colleton’s production dropped by 61.7 percent, and Charleston’s by 77.1 percent. Before the war Georgetown County led the Atlantic coast in rice production, but it experienced the near annihilation of its industry with a precipitous decline of 90.5 percent (see also table 1.2).

Not surprisingly, then, the value of rice plantations fell sharply. Things appeared so bleak after the war that in 1865 a correspondent for the Nation pronounced, “the South Carolina aristocracy is destroyed.”\textsuperscript{41} A third index of comparison between the heady days of 1859 and the humble ones of 1869, that of farm values, is broadly suggestive of this fall.

\textbf{Table 1.3:} Effects of Civil War on Rice Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1860 Rice, lbs.</th>
<th>1870 Rice, lbs.</th>
<th>% Decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beaufort</td>
<td>18,790,918</td>
<td>9,069,130</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>18,899,512</td>
<td>4,329,217</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>22,838,984</td>
<td>8,742,271</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>55,805,385</td>
<td>5,324,970</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again Georgetown bore the heaviest loss of farm value. Beaufort’s and Colleton’s percentage of decline measured nearly the same at 74 percent and 76 percent, respectively. In Charleston County farm values fell 42 percent despite the increase in improved acres. Charleston County farms held value better than those of the other rice counties. The city of Charleston’s demand for truck crops to feed its population and the spread of small farms holding among freedmen are the likely explanation for these figures.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Table 1.4:} Effect of Civil War on Farm Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1860 Farm Value</th>
<th>1870 Farm Value</th>
<th>% Decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beaufort</td>
<td>18,790,918</td>
<td>9,069,130</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaufort</td>
<td>$9,900,652</td>
<td>$2,554,149</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>$5,202,502</td>
<td>$2,984,178</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>$8,818,772</td>
<td>$2,050,731</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>$5,818,690</td>
<td>$678,089</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beginning in late 1865, and with increasing intensity in 1866, planters began to search for capital to rebuild and for means of saving labor through new tools or techniques for rice cultivation. Despite substantial changes to rice culture, some fundamental continuities remained as constant in the lives of lowcountry folk as the tides.

**Reconstructing Rice Culture in the Lowcountry, 1866**

Reconstructing rice culture in the lowcountry required a reconstruction of society. At the war’s end a general state of turmoil prevailed because of uncertainty on many important questions. Who owned the land? Who would work the land and under what type of arrangement? Where would rebuilding capital come from? How would former masters and former slaves relate to one another? Taken together, of course, these questions constitute the central theme of Reconstruction: what would be the nature of freedom and thus the nature of the postwar South?43

On the lowcountry rice plantations the contest between freedmen and planters over the meaning of freedom lasted for more than a decade. Reconstruction involved a period of intense and complex struggles over nearly every aspect of life and labor. This dialectic occurred in overt ways such as strikes, violence, and the exercise of political power. It also took place in more subdued and private but meaningful encounters over labor contracts, housing, remuneration, and symbols of freedom, such as the title given to the men supervising field labor. Newly freed rice plantation slaves faced genuine fundamental choices about where to live and how to sustain a livelihood. Every freedman and freedwoman had to decide whether to sit back and wait for things to happen or seize the moment to shape their future to their liking. Most chose to act.

A close look at the lowcountry shows us that the postwar South did not just abandon one repressive cultural system in favor of a freer one. Neither did it adhere to an antebellum past. Rather, a complex evolution took place that followed multiple patterns of planter-labor relations and produced different results on different plantations.

Few years proved as chaotic in the history of the Palmetto State as 1865. As in much of the South, a real prospect of famine and privation loomed if food and some cash-valuable products were not grown. By the time Lee and Johnston surrendered in April 1865, the first planting season for rice and other crops had passed in the lowcountry. The state lived under martial law, but Union troops could not be everywhere, and violence between white and black people was rampant. Thousands of people migrated around
the state. Many black and white people traveled back to homes on plantations from inland refuges. Confederate veterans also returned from all over the former Confederacy and northern prisoner-of-war camps. Government agents under the auspices of the Freedman’s Bureau fanned out across the state. Some determined to help the newly free while others were sympathetic to the former masters.44

Diametrically opposed aspirations for the future of the South added to the anarchy. Many freedmen believed that the plantations were theirs by moral right, and they planned to take and hold them. Based on confiscation acts passed during the Civil War, the Union laid claim to most of the rice plantations in the Palmetto State. Planters, on the other hand, assumed they should have their lands restored. Most white people, whether planter, yeoman, or dirt poor, remained unreconciled to the reality of full citizenship for the former slaves. The freedmen themselves aimed to pursue their rights. Differences erupted into violence at times. The Freedman’s Bureau often dealt with cases of assault, as when planter J. Calhoun Cain beat freedman Flanders Brown with a stick or when the planter of Rice Hope plantation excused his hitting a laborer in 1867 because “Lot is a boy, a minor, and not a man.” In the midst of this disorder, the Freedman’s Bureau stepped forward to try and build a functional, fair, and peaceable biracial community. Much, however, remained beyond the bureau’s abilities and resources.45

As a result of the Union army’s experience administrating freedmen, most notably during the Port Royal experiment, along with the agitation of the freedmen’s aid societies, Congress created the Freedmen’s Bureau Act on March 3, 1865. This act established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands within the War Department. As the name implied, the bureau organized relief efforts, labor relations, and the sale of abandoned lands. Freedmen and their supporters held great hope for the successful incorporation of the former slaves into a place of security in the nation as successful members of the yeoman class of small farmers. Thus, securing small plots of land for freedmen families was paramount.46

In early summer 1865, the freedmen from Charles Heyward’s Combahee plantation contracted with him to remain at Sumter, where they had already planted a crop. Once they harvested the crops, Heyward arranged for all who remained to return by train to their Combahee homes. In the meantime fourteen left and apparently walked back to Combahee, anxious to see home again. Despite having known the plantations as places of bondage, strenuous labor, and punishment, some former slaves still saw it as home. Indeed these were the only homes and communities some had ever known.47
One of the central questions, then, for all the parties involved—planters, freedmen, the Union Army, the bureau, the federal government, and the northern supporters of the freedmen—remained: who owned the land? Would it be redistributed in small plots to the former slaves? In the lowcountry—with vast tracts of land held as plantations by a small elite and containing the densest populations of freedmen—answering this question was as difficult as in any region of the former slave states.

The most daring attempt to settle the land question came from William T. Sherman in his Special Field Order 15, issued January 16, 1865, while in Savannah. The sweeping order appropriated the cotton and rice plantation land encompassing “the islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice-fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the Saint John’s River, Fla.,” and ordered that it be used for “the settlement of the Negroes now made free.” While Sherman saw the Special Field Order as a solution to a local wartime problem, others, such as Secretary Stanton, believed it to be a model for the postbellum South.

The dream of true independence and black-run plantations survived the end of political Reconstruction. In one instance, in the Georgetown district, a group of black people pooled their resources and bought a plantation in 1877. They ousted the white overseer, putting his belongings out of the plantation house and “leaving him to get them away the best way he could.” The return of white rule did not cow these freedmen, at least not immediately. More important, though, land ownership and leadership in rice culture continued to be a goal for many black people in the lowcountry.

The lowcountry exhibited the lowest rates of sharecropping in the South. Slave labor in the lowcountry differed from that in the rest of the South because of the prevalence of the task system instead of gang labor. Not surprisingly, this divergence continued into freedom, too. The lowcountry and the specific demands of rice culture resulted in distinctively different labor arrangements. Sharecropping and tenancy in the cotton South had the consequence of substantially altering plantation-housing patterns. Before emancipation, slave settlements typically consisted of parallel rows of houses grouped together for the convenience of the planter or overseer watching the slave community. Under the gang system of slave labor, the overseer could organize his gangs at the settlement every morning before seeing the gangs to their daily work location. Sharecropping and tenancy replaced gang labor with individual or family-cultivated plots of land. Families usually moved near their acreage, with the result that housing patterns became much less dense.
Labor Arrangements during Reconstruction

The density of the slave population, the prevalence of the task system of labor, the impossibility of breaking up hydraulically unified rice plantations, and the attendant ways that system shaped cultural development in the lowcountry all affected the labor systems that arose after 1865. As has been suggested, lowcountry freedmen went into the uncertain post-bellum period with articulated goals. Leslie Schwalm has pointed out that a central assumption for freedmen was that the world had to allow them freedom, and they worked hard toward that end. Among the changes freedmen desired, land ownership was very significant, though it was one of the first efforts planters thwarted. The reorganization of social life along lines of their own design and the creation of their own institutions, such as churches, came closer to realization in the lowcountry. Julie Saville has argued that the early vision of freedmen included keeping antebellum customary rights, such as the opportunity to fish in the rice canals, while reorganizing aspects of work and banishing the lash. The high density of the black population and the planters’ utter lack of alternatives to employing freedmen as workers afforded black people a measure of power that resulted in some permanent changes that served their interests. These factors resulted in several systems of labor and a high degree of variation from plantation to plantation.52

Freedmen demanded and won some changes in work patterns, especially in creating stronger gender distinctions in rice field work. Historian Leslie Schwalm shows that from 1866 to 1868 many black women negotiated with planters to become part-time rather than full-time field labor. As slaves, women had engaged in the hardest, dirtiest, and most dangerous plantation labor. However, in freedom they tried to establish a household economy, raise children, and produce truck crops and livestock. They also sought to reserve substantial hours for their own work as opposed to work in the rice fields. During that time, Schwalm documents, labor contracts show that women increasingly signed on as partial hands. This indicates that women committed part of their time to field work and reserved part of their laboring time for household labor, or for the family’s economic efforts on private plots.53

The Freedmen’s Bureau played a conspicuous role in the early development of free labor systems in the lowcountry and the entire South. As a third party and, in theory at least, an advocate for the freedmen, the bureau acted as an arbiter of labor negotiations. Pressure from planters and politicians caused the bureau to look to the labor contract and its enforcement as the means to restore production.54
In the lowcountry the bureau instituted the labor contract that had been used in other parts of the South. Under this system the agents provided standard contracts with blanks left for the particulars. In the lowcountry each contract between planter and freedmen had to be witnessed and approved by a bureau official. The contract bore the signature of the planter and the names of his hands along with their signatures or marks. Bureau officials believed in a free labor ideology based on private property and the sanctity of contracts, so they hoped that instituting a contract system would result in the kind of behavior they wished to see on the part of planters and freedmen. That behavior was spelled out clearly in a statement by the assistant commissioner: “To provide for the cultivation of the soil, give a proper direction and organization to labor, and insure the raising of sufficient [crops] . . . the freedmen are urged at once to make contracts for labor for 1866.”

The contracts themselves varied. In the first years, planters appeared quite worried about controlling labor. This turned out to be a major point of adjustment for them. Some early contracts reflected this concern, as the laborers on Hobonny and Newport agreed in 1866 to be “orderly, civil and respectful in our conduct to our employers and their agent.” Such clauses sought to discipline labor. A failure to comply resulted in expulsion from the plantation. These evictions occurred frequently and became a common issue for the bureau to adjudicate. On some plantations other strict internal efforts at control existed, such as penalizing a hand one peck of rice for a missed day.

The labor contract introduced by the Freedmen’s Bureau outlasted the bureau and Reconstruction. As with other social relations in the lowcountry, it became normative after those early years of free labor, and black and white people assumed that every December or January a new contract would be drawn up between them.

For generations all that rice planters and all that African Americans in the lowcountry had known was growing rice for the market and for their consumption. The Civil War and emancipation changed the financial conditions and more radically changed labor arrangements, but at first it did not change the practice of rice cultivation. Even with the presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the process of making plantations productive again was a difficult one, and it took place in an atmosphere of distrust. Despite the obstacles black and white people did rebuild rice culture in 1870s and 1880s and made it last well beyond those decades to be run by a different generation.