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Fear and Rebellion in South Carolina: The 1739 Stono Rebellion and Colonial Slave Society

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The Stono Rebellion was a rebellion of enslaved people outside of Charleston, South Carolina, that occurred in early September 1739. Exploring the event and its surrounding context helps historians to understand how the rebellion was the result of political institution and exploitative social practices. This work is a history of colonial South Carolina through the rebellion, asking questions of what led to the rebellion, how the rebellion fit into the broader history of resistance, and what events compounded the rebellion in the historical record. Chapter one is a survey of the origins of South Carolina, and the development of its slave codes. This chapter serves to illustrate the foundation of colonial slave society. Chapter two chronicles the early events of the rebellion, including an exploration of the plantation setting. Chapter three details the end of the rebellion and its suppression. Additionally, this chapter looks at how the colonial government responded to the event, and how it became wrapped up in the political dynamics of the era. This work serves as an effort to survey enslaved communities and culture, and explore how they acted as agents of change in the colonial context.

Introduction

September of 1739 held a pivotal moment in the history of South Carolina. On September 9, a number of enslaved laborers broke from a road crew, where their labor was commandeered for a regional drainage project. They armed themselves at a local storehouse, amassed dozens of followers, and travelled south to escape the colony. Existing accounts offer differing numbers as to how many rebels took part, but it is the largest known rebellion of enslaved people to take place in the North American mainland colonies. Despite this, the party that formed on September 9 never found lasting freedom. From the moment they joined together until the rebellion met its end, they were no longer beholden to planters. Their legacy endures, and story offers opportunity to revisit their world. The rebellion was not isolated nor inconsequential, but bound up in all aspects of colonial South Carolina.

Stono provides a unique opportunity to understand colonial America, and American history at large. It is a break in the narrative, where members of the enslaved black majority fight back against the ruling planter class. It is precisely because of this rupture in the power struggle between the planter and enslaved classes that makes the Stono Rebellion unique as a historical event. Ruptures offer glimpses into the past. Michel Foucault wrote of history, “‘Effective’ history, however, deals with events in terms of their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, *but the reversal of a relationship of forces*, the usurpation of power... the entry of a masked ‘other.’”¹ Understanding South Carolina colonial history purely through its political

¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 76-97, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 88.
 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 76-97, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 88.

leaders, from the proprietorship through the revolution, would lead one to very different conclusions than studying it through the people it enslaved. In the Stono Rebellion, historians see enslaved Kongoleses, not far removed from their military training, revolt against the colonists and head for the porous border of an imperial rival for freedom, an empire that also embraced slavery. The story seems counter to traditional histories of the colonies.

Rebellion speaks to the contested nature of political hierarchies. It is a clear rejection of the power structure. As Jill Lepore poetically writes in her history of the United States, *These Truths*:

The revolution in America, when it came, began not with the English colonists but with the people over whom they ruled. Long before shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, long before George Washington crossed the Delaware, long before American independence was thought of, or even thinkable, the revolutionary tradition was forged, not by the English in America, but by Indians waging wars and slaves waging rebellions.

Rebellion is rupture. The rebellion at Stono inverts the dominant political history of the United States. Over a century later, Americans waged war for independence based in the philosophy and ideals of natural rights. At Stono, they fought for something much more basic, the freedom to live on their own terms. Lepore continues on, “They asked the same question [as revolutionaries], unrelentingly: *By what right are we ruled?*”²

This thesis will attempt to illustrate the political hierarchy in South Carolina that led to rebellion. Politics, here, is meant in the most broad of terms, as understanding how power is distributed among different groups of people. To establish a framework for an exploration of the colonial context, chapter one of this thesis will chronicle the history of

² Jill Lepore. *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 55.

South Carolina's slave code system, from its inception as a descendent of Caribbean slave laws, through several revisions in the decades prior to 1739. As W.E.B. DuBois wrote of slave codes in the seminal *Black Reconstruction*, "these laws and decisions represent the legally permissible possibilities, and the only curb upon the power of the master was his sense of humanity and decency, on the one hand, and the conserving of his investment on the other." The slave codes, in DuBois's words, serve as proof of the "absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner and to 'the cruelty and injustice which are the invariable consequences of the exercise of irresponsible power...'"³ Slavery in South Carolina, and throughout the Atlantic colonies, was defined first and foremost by custom, but the legal structure created as the result of local customs provides a framework to understand how the institution of slavery functioned in the colony. This framework, used to enforce the absolute subjection of Africans, was present at the colony's inception.

In addition to surveying South Carolina's slave codes, chapter one attempts to illustrate the ways in which all aspects of colonial life relied in some way on slavery and the slave trade. In eighteenth-century South Carolina, slave labor was periodically commandeered to work on infrastructural projects. In this sense, enslaved people were not only enslaved to the planter, but also enslaved to the planter class at large. Not only was their work exploited within the confines of the plantation, but throughout the colony at will of the legislature. Drawing on the work of UC Santa Cruz historian Gregory O'Malley, this section will emphasize the importance of the slave trade in the Charleston economy. Absolute reliance on slavery as a labor force, and as an economic boon, alongside limited

³ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* [1935] (New York: Free Press, reprint 1998), 10.

white emigration to the colony, created the enslaved black majority of South Carolina. This chapter will attempt to describe the slaveholding society in several ways, based around the question of how the slave codes mobilized a slave-centric society. It was this power structure the rebellion subverted.

Certainly, this oppressive hierarchy was constantly contested. Chapter two of this thesis will chronicle the beginning stages of the rebellion, using the narrative of the event as a way to delve into several aspects of enslaved life and resistance. The rebellion took place almost entirely within the spatial confines of a single road, the Pon Pon, a portion of the King's Highway. As the rebels moved south on the road, they passed the fields of plantations. Much of this chapter will analyze the history of those plantations, the development of rice as a cash crop, and how that development led to a greater reliance on slave labor. To understand how rice and slavery influenced events in the colony, it is worth contrasting South Carolina with Virginia. To do so, this chapter draws on the work of Philip Morgan in his book *Slave Counterpoint*. The purpose of this comparison, for this thesis, is to understand how the cultivation of rice created a multicultural colony.

None of the historical records on the Stono Rebellion come from black voices. Consequently, the historical narrative very often overlooks the African background and culture of the rebels. Because of this, a goal of this chapter is to create a narrative of the rebellion from the rebels' perspective. Chapter one ends, and chapter two begins with an enslaved labor crew working on a drainage expansion project going on at the time. The story follows the crew as they break into a storehouse, arm themselves, and begin their march southward. Much of the course of the rebellion shows at the very least a basic knowledge of military knowledge and training. To explore this, the chapter draws on the

work of John Thornton and Mark Smith, historians who have made connections between the Stono rebels and contemporary African confrontations with colonial powers. What this chapter will attempt to illustrate is the rebels' background as Kongolese soldiers and prisoners of war.

Chapter three of this thesis will look at the conclusion and aftermath of the rebellion, how the colonial militia suppressed the rebels, how the legislature revised the slave codes, and how the rebellion was wrapped up in growing tension between South Carolina and Spanish St. Augustine. Chapter three will continue and finish the narrative set forth in chapter two of the events of the rebellion. With a focus on the rebels' encounter with the lieutenant governor, William Bull, this chapter will highlight the contingent moments that shaped the course of the event. Following the rebellion, the legislature revised the colony's slave codes to be stricter, employing more punitive measures for violations against both enslaved and free persons. The goal of these measures was to make the suppression of the enslaved class the common interest of free colonists, regardless of whether or not they owned slaves themselves. These revisions further solidified the political hierarchy established in the early decades of the colony, as outlined in chapter one. These revisions formed the prototype of antebellum slave codes that would become more prevalent in following years.

An important component of the aftermath of Stono is how it became swept up in the growing proxy conflict between the Spanish and English. In the immediate aftermath of the event, colonial officials contextualized the rebellion as a part of Spanish interference. Rather than viewing the rebellion as an independent event, officials painted it as a Spanish plot. This was largely done to quell white colonists' fears of further rebellion. If the

rebellion came as the result of Spanish action, then colonists had no reason to fear their own slaveholding society. To illustrate this anxiety over regional conflict, this chapter will draw on government reports of the rebellion, and extant letters from the period, contextualized within the military conflict. Certainly there was a larger conflict going on at the time between the imperial powers, but South Carolina's framing of the event was done largely to assuage fear of further internal conflict.

Slave rebellions did not occur *ex nihilo*. They were the product of enslaved blacks resisting bondage, subverting the plantation power structure, and claiming freedom. But those involved were historical figures prior to rebelling. The lack of written black accounts of the Stono Rebellion should not prevent the historical exploration of the black participants, and how they responded to the ruling planter class. Because of the paucity of sources, the rebellion exists in a historical fog. The historical record, crafted by white South Carolinians amidst notable political turmoil in the colonial Atlantic region, omits black agency in the revolt. In the written sources, African-Americans exist only as the problem that the South Carolina government responded to. Subsequently, representations of the Stono Rebellion risk reproducing this mistake, the misunderstanding that the rebellion came out of nothing, an event with no buildup. This does not mean that the African-American voice is lost. Historian Peter Charles Hoffer describes the difficulty of understanding the event:

There is a curious backward flow of events to the conventional account. If there were Angolan soldiers leading the band in the morning, there must have been Angolan soldiers leading the mayhem the night before; if the plan in the morning was to raise rebellion, there must have been a plan in place the evening before to raise rebellion; if all who marched down the road in the morning had committed themselves to rebellion, then all who took some part in the night's activities must have had the same solemn motivation as the

rebels. This is the logical fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc – if later, then before.⁴

By nature of the sources available, understanding the history of slavery during the colonial period presents many challenges. Hoffer's quote illustrates this, but it also illustrates the opportunity for a unique understanding of South Carolina during the period.

The story of the Stono Rebellion is the story of a group of enslaved people outside of Charleston rejecting bondage. They were members of the enslaved majority of the colony, fighting back against the planter class. Many of them were Kongolese. Many of them were soldiers. All of them, in their collective action, showed that what W.E.B. DuBois called "the absolute subjection" that slavery coerced, was impossible to maintain forever. This is a story of people fighting back.

⁴ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono Slave Rebellion of 1739* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiii.

Chapter One: Control of the Majority

Chaos began in a ditch. In early September 1739, enslaved laborers throughout the lowcountry worked as a conscripted workforce in a huge infrastructure project. South Carolina recently undertook a massive public works project to expand drainage alongside the more trafficked roads in the colony. This required landholders to give up some land along right of ways, and perhaps it resulted in inconvenience for colonial commissioners tasked with laying out the new drainage paths, but the labor fell squarely on South Carolina's enslaved population, as it had time and time before. In order to ensure expediency, South Carolina disposed of even the modest breaks allotted for people enslaved under the slave codes. They were expected to labor from sunrise to sundown, with no breaks.⁵ That month a rebellion embroiled South Carolina for several days when one of these road crews broke into a storehouse and armed themselves, setting out for Florida. Today, a roadside sign near one of those drainage ditches reads:

The Stono Rebellion (1739). The Stono Rebellion, the largest Slave insurrection in North America, began nearby on September 9, 1739. About twenty Africans raided a store near Wallace Creek, a branch of the Stono River. Taking guns and other weapons they killed two shopkeepers. The rebels marched south toward promised freedom in Spanish Florida, waving flags, beating drums, and shouting 'liberty.'⁶

Maybe it was the result of a plot. Maybe it was just one final straw at the end of a hard day. Maybe it was a spontaneous act. Nearly everything about that sign near the Stono River is debated. The events of the rebellion, when it began, the numbers of people involved, all are unclear. What is clear is how societies like South Carolina could create an environment where rebellion is possible. Historians will likely never know the sequence of events

⁵ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62-65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

wherein a group of enslaved African men began a rebellion. This does not mean the rebellion occurred *ex nihilo*. Rebellions do not begin in a moment. The rebellion was the result of system of control passed down from the Caribbean to South Carolina over the course of decades in a genealogy of oppression. The events that led to the Stono Rebellion were put into place with the colony's founding and every further codification of bondage. They rebelled against the system that exploited their labor for the success of the planter class. In South Carolina, slavery was more than a labor force; it was the very nucleus around which colonists built their government and society.

"Slavery is so vile and miserable an estate of man," wrote John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government*.⁷ Slavery was inherently political, a way of organizing power. As historian Jill Lepore writes in *These Truths*, "Slavery does not exist outside of politics. Slavery is a form of politics, and slave rebellion a violent form of political dissent."⁸ The Stono Rebellion was a product of colonial South Carolina society. Despite the paucity of sources from the participants, the event did not occur outside of history. It was the result of a political structure that situated enslaved Africans at the bottom of a hierarchical class system. They rebelled against a system built on the exploitation of their labor, of their bodies. Despite South Carolina's legal code explicitly outlining the dehumanization of enslaved Africans, the rebellion is evidence of the ultimate failure to do so. To understand what happened at

⁷ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1689, <http://www.yorku.ca/comninel/courses/3025pdf/Locke.pdf>, 7.

⁸ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018.), 64.

Stono, why rebels chose to revolt, and what fueled the response from the South Carolina colonial government, one must understand the political context that shaped the events.

At its beginning, South Carolina was little more than an outpost on the fringe of the Atlantic colonies. Carved out of the land between the Virginia colony and Spanish Florida, the colony's origins were tied to the Caribbean. Before Europeans named the land Carolina, it was known by several named distinctive to the various groups of Native Americans living there. The Spanish began the European presence there in the sixteenth century. Slavery was present from the start. The first enslaved Africans arrived in 1526 as part of a Spanish expedition searching for waterways in surrounding territories. Even during the brief period of Spanish settlement, Africans fought back against their captors. After the leader of the Spanish expedition passed away, he named his nephew in Puerto Rico as his successor as governor. A power vacuum broke out within the settlement as lieutenants jockeyed for control, often exhibiting arbitrary control over those enslaved as a show of power. The Africans rebelled against the Spanish, burning the hut of the settlement's leaders. The attempted expedition fell apart soon after.⁹

The English colony began to take shape after the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. In 1663, Charles II granted a charter to eight men as a reward for their support of him during his exile. Naming them as lords proprietors, he gave them claim to "all that territory, or tract of ground called Carolina scituate lying, and being within our dominions of America."¹⁰ Concurrently to the creation of the 1663 charter, the colony in

⁹ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974.), 3-4.

¹⁰ Jennie Holton Fant, *The Travelers' Charleston: Accounts of Charleston and Lowcountry, South Carolina, 1666-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), xi.

Barbados increasingly faced an overcrowding issue. Two Barbadian elites, Peter Colleton and Thomas Modyford, relatives of proprietor, John Colleton, wrote to London on the prospect of moving colonists to South Carolina immediately. They wrote that two hundred Barbadians, “among them many persons of good quality,” were ready to emigrate. The two additionally assured the proprietors that should their expedition and settlement be a success, “many hundreds of noble families” were “willing and ready to remove speedily thither to begin a settlement [sic].”¹¹

Even with Modyford and Colleton’s proposal came the promise of slavery. Stressing the potential of the colonists to be an economic success, they described “the aptness of... persons here engaged to further such a work as well as for their Negroes and other servants fit for such labor as will be there required.”¹² The degree to which the London proprietors were complicit is particularly damning. In response to the proposal, they drafted a declaration granting planters land proportionate to the number of people they brought with them, enslaved or free. The proprietors responded to the Barbadians, encouraging the inclusion of enslaved Africans “by all ways and means.”¹³ Slavery was foundational to the creation of the colony.¹⁴

In 1666, a Barbadian expedition set out for the colony under Captain Robert Sandford. After landing at Edisto Island, one member of the expedition, Joseph Woory, saw

¹¹ T. Modyford and P. Colleton to Proprietors, Aug. 12, 1663, *Coll.*, V, 10-11, quoted in Wood, *Black Majority*, 14; Wood, *Black Majority*, 13-14.

¹² T. Modyford and P. Colleton to Proprietors, Aug. 12, 1663, *Coll.*, V, 10-11, quoted in Wood, *Black Majority*, 14.

¹³ *Coll.*, V, 15, quoted in Wood, *Black Majority*, 15.

¹⁴ Wood, *Black Majority*, 14-15.

the land as a veritable paradise for colonists. The nephew of a wealthy planter, Woory affirmed the agricultural potential, describing the fertility and variety of plant life he saw.

He wrote:

The land is generally very choice, and good... It bears large oaks, walnut and few pines unless spruce pines. The woods afford very good pasture for cattle being richly laden with English grass; for fowl and fish it affords like that of Charles River, there is turtle in abundance. The same afternoon we went a mile eastward... and landed on a dry marsh where we found an Indian path which we kept, and it led us through many fields of corn ready to gather, also other corn, peas, and beans which had been later planted there and was not so forward as the rest... We also found many peach trees with fruit thereon near ripe. After that we crossed a large creek and marched three miles into the country upon an island and did not see an inch of bad land but all choice...¹⁵

Woory was confident that South Carolina could be the solution to Barbados's overpopulation issue. He wrote in near hyperbole of the quality of the land, concluding:

What I have here written is no more than I have seen and I am sure the truth. I have not in the least been guided with falsehood but have rather writ the worst than the best, and those who travel into any of these parts, will I am confident say that they find things rather better than worse... And indeed it is a great pity, that such brave places should lie unpeopled and [an] abundance of our nation want land.¹⁶

Woory described the land as "unpeopled." This was not out of ignorance for the Native Americans living in the area. He wrote with great detail of their hospitality and generosity towards his party, going as far to say that "one of the principle Indians" showed "his great desire of having the English to settle here."¹⁷ This was indicative of the larger attitude towards Native Americans, a general disregard for their livelihoods and land claims. While

¹⁵ Joseph Woory, "A Discovery of the Coasts Rivers Sounds and Creeks of that Part of the Province between Cape Romano and Port Royal vizt, by Joseph Woory," 1666, in *The Traveler's Charleston*, 3.

¹⁶ Woory, "Discovery," in *The Traveler's Charleston*, 6.

¹⁷ Woory, "Discovery," in *The Traveler's Charleston*, 6.

Woory wrote of the Native Americans' generosity towards him and the party, the leader of the expedition, Robert Sandford, wrote elsewhere, "Being gone about a mile up I landed and, according to my instructions, in presence of my company took a formal possession by turf and twig of that whole country."¹⁸ So began the English presence in South Carolina.

South Carolina's creation coincided with the Enlightenment-influenced movement towards constitutionalism, as a means for justifying the government of a people. In South Carolina's case, the colonial constitution would come straight from the pen of John Locke, whose work was the foundation of the concept of natural rights. Locke worked as the secretary of an associate of colony's board of proprietors. Because of this connection, as Locke drafted his *Two Treatises of Government*, the board of proprietors called on his services to write the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, putting commitment natural rights in government constitution to the test.

Slavery was a central tenant to Locke's beliefs on natural rights. He began his seminal *Two Treatises* commenting on the mere idea of it. "Slavery is so vile and miserable an estate of man, and so directly opposite to the generous temper and courage of our nation, that it is hardly to be conceived that an Englishman, much less a gentleman, should plead for it," Locke argued.¹⁹ This was his response to Robert Filmer, who in *Patriarchia* argued that kings' right to rule over subjects was of divine will, and was absolute.²⁰ Locke understood this unshakeable hierarchy as slavery. He believed that if government does not

¹⁸ Robert Sandford, "A Relation of a Voyage," 1666, in *The Traveler's Charleston*, 3.

¹⁹ Locke quoted in Lepore, 54.

²⁰ Ibid.

form from divine origins, then it is of natural origin. In the patriarchal terms and understandings of the era, he argued fervently that the rights of man are negotiated from the state of nature; all men, Locke understood, are entitled to the rights of life, liberty and property.²¹ Any violation of this amounted to slavery.

When Locke pondered slavery, he understood it in concrete, visceral terms. Slavery was “nothing else, but the state of war continued, between a lawful conqueror and a captive,” he believed. A state of war, a state of constant violence, was the only thing maintaining the relationship between master and slave, not the terms of a civil society. Thus, as Locke wrote the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, it was contradictory at best, and hypocritical at worst, that slavery would be embedded as part of the colony’s constitution. Yet, the right for one man to own another reads clear, “Every Freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and Authority over his Negro slaves.”²² Either this was a blatant contradiction of Locke’s own beliefs, or there was something about this slavery that stood outside his reasoning in *Two Treatises*. As Jill Lepore writes, “The only way to justify this contradiction, the only way to explain how one kind of people are born free while another kind of people are not, would be to sow a new seed, an ideology of race.”²³ With that, South Carolina’s original sin was codified, and with that, it would persist.

In the colony’s very creation was the idea that not all people are created equal. The idea that some people fundamentally had the right to own others was in the foundation of the colony’s legal code, and subsequently in all legislation moving forth. For colonists, this

²¹ Ibid.

²² quoted in Lepore, 55.

²³ Lepore, *These Truths*, 55.

meant that either it was either okay for one man to enslave another, or there was something about Africans that made for an exception. Compounded with South Carolina's growing agriculture, and the exploitation of African slave labor as a means of production, this cognitive dissonance would only continue to become entrenched in colonial society. Viewed against Locke's writing in his *Two Treatises*, there was nothing natural about South Carolina's understanding of rights.

The *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* established the first government for the colony. It created what amounted to a feudal system, with the board of proprietors selecting a governor, to whom colonial landowners were subservient. Landowners elected their own representatives to negotiate with the proprietors, in a body that would evolve into South Carolina's Commons House of Assembly. Periodically, the government system would change slightly as the colony transitioned away from the board of proprietors' power. Nonetheless, as the proprietorship waned, the power of the planter class steadily grew. Increasingly, they made sure that the colonial government protected their interests, looking to define how power would be distributed and defined in the colony. To protect what they viewed as their natural right to property, to maintain control over a massive enslaved population, they pushed for laws to codify how this racial caste system would be maintained. The *Fundamental Constitutions* represented the South Carolina the colonists wanted to create, but they would create it through exploitation outlined in a different set of laws. As South Carolina's planter class descended from that of Barbados, so too would its slave codes.

Few figures were responsible for the development of slavery in the Atlantic like Thomas Modyford. Modyford first gained prominence as a planter and politician in

Barbados before his appointment as governor of Jamaica. His appointment brought a vote of confidence from the Barbadian elite, and planters began moving to Jamaica in greater numbers. Most importantly, in his journey from Barbados to Jamaica, Modyford brought with him the Barbadian slave code, the Barbadian Slave Act of 1661, which the Jamaican assembly soon enacted in their own colony. Historians of the Atlantic world have pointed out that colonists frequently favored looser legal definitions of slavery, defining the institution by practice rather than law.²⁴ Nonetheless, the genealogy of these slave codes reveals what kind of order colonists attempted to bring about with each new attempted government. As scholar Edward Rugemer argues in his article, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," most scholars describe the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion marking a clear shift towards racialized slavery in the late seventeenth century, but this shift is evident in the Caribbean fifteen years prior.²⁵ It is this tradition, the legacy of Modyford's slave codes, which slavery in South Carolina descended from.

The reasoning of the law is implicit. The point of the codes was not to elucidate the place of enslaved persons in colonial legal structure. Rather, they were drawn in order to ensure control of the enslaved population, and ensure their role in the production of cash crops. They focus on ticketing systems, hours of allowed work, and regulating numbers of enslaved people allowed to assemble at any given time. The slave codes in the region began to take on a distinct shape particularly following 1684. In that year, Jamaica revised its

²⁴ M. Eugene Sirmans, "The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina, 1670-1740," *The Journal of Southern History* 28, no. 4 (Nov. 1962): 462-473: 462.

²⁵ Edward B. Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," *William & Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (July 2013): 429-458, 431.

codes in response to resistance from the colony's sizable Maroon population, who despite their size, resource, and geographic disadvantages were able to resist Jamaican slavery throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In no place was South Carolina's racial caste system more evident than in the legal books. Act after act made clear the fact that being white entitled a person to liberties that being black did not. The first piece of legislation outlining the laws of slavery passed in 1690, drew on legislation passed in Barbados and Jamaica. In it, the South Carolina assembly mirrored their Caribbean counterparts, instituting a ticketing system, monitoring the movement of enslaved people. They outlined punishments for certain crimes, and created a trial system for those enslaved persons accused. Articles like these, those that stripped black South Carolinians of any basic liberty, would remain consistent through each revision of the document. Other articles would not. The earliest draft of the slave code criminalized unjustified punishment of slaves, in theory. Article one described a basic protection for enslaved people from their masters: "...If any one of willfulness, wantonness, or bloody mindedness, shall kill a slave, he or she, upon due conviction thereof, shall suffer three months imprisonment... and also pay the sum of fifty pounds to the owner of such slave."²⁶ However, there was clarification, a nod to the planters, ensuring it was their interests the colony protected: "If any slave, by punishment from the owner for running away or other offense, shall suffer in life or limb, no person shall be liable to the law for the same."²⁷ The codes were enforced through fear and torture.

²⁶ "An Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves," 1690, in *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, ed. David J. McCord (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 347.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

The laws explicitly condoned the torture of those enslaved. The 1690 code prioritized an order of punishment. First it outlined a policy for execution. Upon complaint to a justice of the peace, the law ensured the swift execution of enslaved persons deemed guilty “of the offence complained of.” Should capital punishment be excessive, the legislation outlined, “If the crime committed shall not deserve death, they shall condemn and adjudge the criminal or criminals to the party or partys injured, and to his, her, or their heirs forever, after they have received such corporal punishment as the justices and freeholders shall appoint.”²⁸ The code outlined some process for a trial, but a trial juried by the peers of the free holding planters, the peers of the ruling class. Descriptions of these trials conducted in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century show that torture was not only punishment, but also very often a part of the trial. Accounts of contemporary trials include descriptions of hangings, gibbeting, and burning at stakes as means of procuring confessions from enslaved people. One prosecutor went so far as to complain about an enslaved defendant, “They died very stubbornly, without confessing any thing.”²⁹

Nonetheless, slavery in South Carolina was defined by custom, not law. At times the codes contradicted the ways in which planters made slavery manifest. In a prime example, the slave codes of the Caribbean are notable for their definition of enslaved people as freehold property, bound to the land unless sold to pay a master’s debt. While the South Carolina slave codes followed suit in defining enslaved people as freehold, unique in the mainland colonies, the reality of slavery was very different. In a pamphlet promoting the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 91-92. These descriptions come from accounts of the 1740 New York slave conspiracy trials, in which dozens of enslaved people were executed or tortured to force confessions.

revisions of 1712, one planter wrote, "When these people are thus bought, their Masters, or Owners, have then as good a Right to and title to them, during their lives, as a Man has here to a Horse or Ox, after he has bought them."³⁰ Regardless of what the law said, planters regarded enslaved people the same way they would their beasts of burden, as chattel property. If there was any point left vague, it was clarified in 1725 by Governor Arthur Middleton, who made plain, "[Slaves] have been and are always deemed as goods and Chattels of their Masters."³¹

The slave codes were periodically used as a political tool. The colony's transition from proprietorship brought turbulence. At times, the codes were used as a way to unify politically disparate factions around the understanding that the colony still protected their slaveholding interests. The Goose Creek faction was a group of early Barbadian immigrants who opposed efforts by the proprietors to exert greater control over South Carolina as the colony grew. Concerned over trade between indentured and enslaved labor, the faction pushed for increased control over the enslaved population. Many revisions and acts passed by the legislature in the 1690s and early 1700s were used as attempts to assuage the faction, including the "Act Inhibiting the Trading between Servants and Slaves," and multiple revisions of the "Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves..."³² These revisions broadened the racial scope of slavery to include "Mollatoes," in addition to Africans and

³⁰ John Norris, *Profitable Advice for Rich and Poor...* (London, 1712), 17-18. Quoted in Sirmans, "The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina, 1670-1740," 467.

³¹ Journal of the Council of South Carolina, September 10, 1725, Colonial Office papers (Public Record Office, London; microfilm in the Library of Congress), section 5, CCCCXXVIII, folder 108. Quoted in Sirmans, "The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina, 1670-1740," 467.

³² Thomas J. Little, "The South Carolina Slave Laws Reconsidered, 1670-1700," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 94, no. 2 (April 1993): 86-101, 91-92.

Native Americans. Additionally, revisions of the slave code declared slavery hereditary; the children of the enslaved would be considered property as well.³³

Most notably, however, these new laws passed in acquiescence to the faction prescribed significantly harsher punishments. Concerning the punishment of persons caught running away from the plantation, the 1696 slave act called for caught first offenders to be branded with an "R." Already barbaric, the consequences for second-time offenders who were caught were even more severe. Caught second offenders were to be castrated if a man, or have an ear severed if a woman. The law fined slaveholders who refused or failed to punish runaways in this manner, or conversely, granted twenty pounds to slaveholders who accidentally killed the person in the process, clearly encouraging planters across the colony to comply with the new standards of punishment. Historian Edward Rugemer argues that the purpose of castration was clear to those enslaved: "Rather than a direct assault on black masculinity or an effort to protect white women, the South Carolina provision to geld two-time offenders should be understood as a method of bestializing black men. It was rooted in the common practice of gelding bull calves."³⁴ For enslaved men tasked with the care of livestock, gelding was a process they were intimately familiar with. Gelding, in addition whippings, facial mutilation, other means of bestialization, sent a clear message. To the planters, and to the colony, they were property.³⁵

³³ Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race...", 453-454.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 456.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 454-457.

By nature of seventeenth and eighteenth-century politics, this body of landowners would govern over more groups than they represented themselves. When the proprietors distributed land grants to emigrant Barbadian planters between 1670 and 1690, they defined a small planter as one who owned fewer than twenty slaves, a middling planter as owning between twenty and sixty, and a large planter as owning more than sixty. As grants were larger for those emigrated with larger estates, it was advantageous for planters to make the journey with a larger group of enslaved people. This set up a system where every free white planter with a sizable estate came to the colony outnumbered by dozens of enslaved black emigrants. In 1675, early in the land grant system, the estimated population of the colony included six hundred and seventy-five white inhabitants to one hundred twenty-five black inhabitants. In 1708, as the colony came to be more firmly established, the population was comprised of four thousand and eighty white inhabitants, and four thousand, one hundred enslaved, black inhabitants.³⁶ By 1710, people of African descent constituted a clear majority of the population. Rather than discourage the trend of being outnumbered by those they enslaved, South Carolina's elite class further encouraged this trend, building system that required the intense control over a massive body of people.

The planter class fueled the growth of the colony. Much has been written about how the colony's growth depended on the success of rice and indigo as cash crops. So too have historians long understood the relationship between cash crops and slavery. Low country agriculture was labor intensive, and its growth compelled further reliance on chattel slavery. While these crops were certainly important in establishing an export economy for the colony, and certainly they did lead to an increased reliance on slavery, these analyses

³⁶ Thomas J. Little, "The South Carolina Slave Laws Reconsidered," 89.

overlook the centrality of the slave trade itself to South Carolina's developing economy. As historian Gregory O'Malley describes in his article, "Slavery's Converging Ground," "If slaves were the muscle building the region's economy, the slave trade was the system's lifeblood, and the coursing of it through Charleston mattered deeply." He continues, "Of 308,189 enslaved individuals whose port of entry into what became the United States is known, 149,429 landed in Charleston."³⁷ Before the revolution, more than ninety percent of Africans who were brought to the American South came through the port of Charleston.³⁸ Ships carrying kidnapped cargo in their hulls arrived every spring, and every spring planters from across the low country flocked to Charleston, bringing the city its most profitable season of the year.

When the slave trade season came, every aspect of colonial business and trade was tied up with it. Not limited to planters and traders, merchants of all kinds, innkeepers, doctors, lawyers, theater owners, and more made business off of the city's sudden growth in population. Much of this had to do with the fact that slave trading was of such a serious concern to South Carolina's planter class. Planters frequently distrusted representatives to negotiate the slave market on their behalf, preferring their own direct involvement. When planters traded crops, they often worked through rice factors, agents who conducted the planters' business on their behalf. Not so when matters pertained to the slave trade. When they arrived in town, often for their only trip of the year, they lodged in one of several inns or boarding houses for several days. Once business for the day wrapped up, once the

³⁷ Gregory E. O'Malley, "Slavery's Converging Ground: Charleston's Slave Trade as the Black Heart of the Lowcountry," *William & Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (April 2017): 271-302, 274.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 277-278.

auctions of enslaved individuals were completed, planters might have met with doctors and lawyers who inspected both their newly acquired slaves and their legal paperwork. At night, the colonial elite took to the town's theaters and taverns for entertainment, with additional auctions sometimes taking place during intermissions. White colonists of all trades and professions across class lines benefitted from the commerce brought with the slave trading ships.

And while Charleston's slave trade, the lifeblood of the town's economy, brought white planters from across the low country to town to conduct business and personal affairs, the idea that the colony's founders envisioned never fully came to materialize. When the proprietors and Barbadian planters envisioned South Carolina, they envisioned an agricultural paradise that would absolutely compel emigrants with its fruitful possibility. In his recounting of how successful the expedition was, Joseph Worry noted only four men "became sick of the fever & ague," in the few days they were on the mainland.³⁹ As he wrote of how fruitful the land was, he made one small qualification. "The worst land we saw that day was the spruce pine swamps," he wrote.⁴⁰ He underestimated the lowland swamps.

South Carolina never achieved the European migration that the founders hoped for largely due to the sickly nature of the climate. Abundant swamps and marshes, seasonal invasive swarms of mosquitoes, and the cultivation of indigo and rice, which required large amounts of standing water, made diseases like malaria rampant. Malaria, then referred to by names like "country fever," or "the ague," was common particularly in low-lying regions,

³⁹ Woory, "Discovery," in *The Traveler's Charleston*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

like that of Charleston. In 1682, the colony's Board of Proprietors instructed that future townships should be built "farr from Marshe swamps or standing water."⁴¹ A Scottish immigrant to Charleston remarked in 1684, "We found the place so extraordinarily sicklie... That sickness quickly seased many of our number and took great many."⁴² Sometimes, waves of disease were concurrent. In 1711, epidemics of malaria, smallpox, and yellow fever overlapped.

White supremacy, the ideological foundation of control, was present in South Carolina's founding, and the spread of disease furthered the belief in some fundamental difference between the races. South Carolinians' poor health fueled their racially driven fears. At the time, white colonists held the belief that people of African descent were less susceptible to these illnesses. At the very least, they saw white colonists falling ill more frequently. One South Carolinian wrote in 1753, "The subjects which were susceptible of this fever were both sexes of the white colour... Mulattoes of all ages... escaped the infection."⁴³ This belief that people of African descent had some sort of immunity to disease

⁴¹ Samuel Wilson, *An Account of the Province of South Carolina* (London, 1682), quoted in Wood, *Black Majority*, 65.

⁴² Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 65.

⁴³ *A Description of the American Yellow Fever* (Philadelphia, 1799), quoted in Wood, *Black Majority*, 82.

What the colonists may have observed was the sickle-cell blood trait. The sickle-cell type, if passed down from both parents, produces sickle-cell anemia, a detrimental blood disorder. If only passed down by only one parent, however, it produces a resistance to malaria, a blood born disease. It is still important to note that what the colonists believed was a racial trait absolutely was not. Sickle-cell traits can be found in all populations where malaria is found, regardless of racial background.

is part of what led to the increase of chattel slavery in South Carolina, and the decline of indentured servitude. Whites pointed to it to rationalize the practice of slavery.⁴⁴

Disease, too, was an issue the colony believed could be controlled along racial lines. The South Carolina low country is a veritable haven for gnats, flies, mosquitos, and a myriad of other disease-carrying agents. More than simply the pests, however, the lowcountry climate made the previously mentioned diseases like malaria, smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera commonplace. In 1738, one year before rebellion broke out, over six hundred and fifty white South Carolinians were diagnosed with smallpox, and one hundred and fifty-seven of them died. In the same time, out of nearly one thousand believed cases of the disease, one hundred and thirty-eight black South Carolinians died. Charles Town and its surrounding, swampy area seemed particularly susceptible to disease, with its poor drainage and sanitation. In 1738, one third of the town was sick, leading many to flee to elsewhere in the colony. Concern over public health was significant enough that Lieutenant Governor William Bull called off the legislative session in the fall. As one Charles Town merchant wrote, "Death was everywhere."⁴⁵

The fact that the colony's roads and canals were nonexistent at worst, and primitive at best did nothing to help this issue. In the 1720s and 1730s, planters wrote to legislators that the "deep and almost impassable swamps" made travel to and from Charles Town, either for business, pleasure, or to flee disease, especially difficult.⁴⁶ Creeks and swamps'

⁴⁴ Wood, *Black Majority*, 85.

⁴⁵ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 4-5.

⁴⁶ "An Act for Making a New Road between the North and the Middle Branch of the Stono River" 1726, *The Earliest printed laws of South Carolina, 1692 - 1734*, ed. John Cushing (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1982), 464. Quoted in Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 11.

regular flooding with heavy rain and high tides left the colony at an impasse. Between the issues of disease and eroding infrastructure, tension was high. The colonial legislature addressed the issues the way they had before, through increased control of the colony's black majority. To address the issue of disease, out of the belief that the colony's black population was somehow more immune to the increase in sickness, the legislature passed the Security Act in 1732, requiring all men to carry firearms when travelling outside of their homes, including on Sundays when going to church. During this period, it wasn't uncommon to see a church full of white parishioners in pews, and the enslaved servants lined the back walls, holding the rifles of their masters who worshipped. The colony saw the issue as significant enough to police the black majority with a constant armed presence.

To address the further issue of transportation, the colony passed numerous laws calling for the expansion of drainage ditches throughout the surrounding roadways of Charles Town, including the "Act for Making a New Road..." and the "Act for Cutting and Making a Path." Underneath benign titles, acts like these called for construction to be done by commandeered groups of enslaved people to work on roads local to their plantations. Local planters, who put up bonds to ensure they oversaw the completion of the projects, monitored the laborers throughout the day. They worked from sunrise to sunset, even after the supervisor went home.⁴⁷ These projects, enabled by the legislature through the simple "Act for Cutting and Making a Path," put enslaved men from the plantations of Ann Drayton, William Cattell, John Williams, Henry Williamson, Frederick Grimke, and others local to the

⁴⁷ "An Act for Cutting and Making a Path," *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, November 10, 1736 – June 7, 1739*, 255-256, quoted in Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 103.

Stono River, in a single place on the evening of September 9.⁴⁸ The colony's attempt to control the enslaved population created the impetus for the rebellion that later took place.

At a basic level, South Carolina was born out of pursuit of English colonists in the Caribbean to acquire land for a growing population. From the beginning, they relied on slavery to ensure colonial project's success. Occupying land on the North American continent, planters imported kidnapped enslaved Africans by the hundreds every year, relying on them for their labor, the sale of their bodies, and their place in the political structure. When the proprietors drafted the first constitutions of the colony, they discussed what they believed white planters' inherent right to own people alongside their belief in natural rights. The natural right they most fervently protected was that right to own slaves. Code after code further reified the power structure maintaining bondage in the colony. Nearly every piece of law produced in the colony relied on slavery.

Colonial South Carolina was the embodiment of fear and control. The planter class feared the enslaved black majority, and pushed for the continued codification of their control. The elite feared insurrection, rebellion, and the potential overthrow of their precarious minority rule. They sought control of enslaved people in every way, relying on and exploiting the black majority for their success, everything from the success of their personal plantations to the success of the colonial economy as a whole. Furthermore, the colony came to view control of the enslaved population as a way to control other issues. When colonists became embroiled in fear of disease, they addressed the issue with further control over the enslaved. Fear and control shaped the lives of those who were enslaved.

⁴⁸ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 103-104

When a group of enslaved men who would go on to lead a rebellion that lasted the course of several days found themselves on the side of the road digging drainage ditches, it was the result of this system. Whether it was something as large as the creation of an economic system, or as small as infrastructure issues, South Carolina created their colony through the exploitation of an enslaved class, a class subject to clearly codified oppression.

Chapter Two: Early Moments of Rebellion

*Rise like lions after slumber,
In unconquerable number!
Shake to earth your chains, like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you!
Ye are many! They are few!*⁴⁹

In September of 1739, black South Carolinians revolted. Twenty miles outside of Charleston, a group of enslaved men broke into a storehouse, killed the two attendants inside, and obtained guns and ammunition. They set out towards Florida, gaining followers from neighboring plantations as they marched southward. They marched to the beat of drums, carried white banners, and cried out for liberty as they worked their way to a possible freedom. It took the colonial militia's brutal suppression to keep them from their goal. The Stono Rebellion of 1739 is generally remembered for the white colonists' response to the event. The South Carolina government revised the slave code in the aftermath, criminalizing literacy, music, and movement among enslaved communities. However, half of this story is black. Examining the details of the rebellion gives insight into the world of the black participants at Stono: who the rebels were, what led them to rebel, and why they rebelled in the way they did.

The rebellion made a lasting impact on memory. In the 1930s, as part of the WPA Writer's Project, one journalist interviewed a fifty-year old man living in Columbia, South Carolina, named George Cato, who claimed to be a descendent of the rebellion's leader. Cato introduced himself, "I sho' does come from dat old stock who had de misfortune to be slaves but who decide to be men, at one and de same time, and I's right proud of it." To

⁴⁹ Percy Shelley, [*The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*](#) (1847), 231–235.

George Cato, the event represented the rebels reclaiming their humanity in the midst of bondage. More than enslaved, they were individuals who made an impact on their historical context. He recalled the story passed down to him of his ancestor, that he was a literate man of good health and reputation. Why did he rebel? As George Cato recalls, it was on behalf of his community. “As it come down to me, I thinks de first Cato take a darin’ chance on his life, not so much for his own benefit as it was to help others.”⁵⁰ Slavery was constantly contested. Enslaved people fought back in quiet moments of resistance, and in violent ruptures against the status quo. Bondage was reified in the movement to control enslaved communities, but constantly ebbed in the face of indomitable humanity. Of course, slavery in the United States existed as a legal institution until 1865, but not without contest. Understanding Stono, a rupture in slavery’s narrative, helps to explain that story.

In his recount, George Cato made mention of a road. He recalled, in the stories passed down to him, the Stono leader and his son often walked together along the road where the rebellion eventually took place. “He say his daddy often take him over de route of de rebel slave march, dat time when dere was sho’ big trouble all ‘bout dat neighborhood.”⁵¹

Bondage depended on the defined geographic boundaries of the plantation space, but this road that George Cato spoke of, the Pon Pon, part of the King’s Highway, was the artery linking those carceral grounds. The rebellion erupted from a season of particularly hard labor. In the summer and fall of 1739, the South Carolina legislature enacted plans to

⁵⁰ “The Stono Insurrection Described by a Descendant of the Leader,” in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, edited by Mark M. Smith (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 55-56.

⁵¹ Ibid.

expand roads and drainage systems in the area surrounding Charleston, along the Edisto and Stono Rivers. This meant enslaved laborers worked sun up to sun down until the projects were completed. In a report on the rebellion commissioned by Georgia governor James Oglethorpe, an officer reported, "On the 9th day of September last being Sunday which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty."⁵² According to the report, the rebellion broke out on what would normally have been a day off, though while the colony's drainage project was underway, crews had to work during these traditional breaks. For one of these crews, that would be the proverbial straw.

On the evening of the ninth, the work crew did not return to their plantations. They set out to free themselves. Gathering at a bridge crossing the Stono River, the party soon moved to a storehouse, where they broke in, killed two white attendants, and armed themselves for a southward journey. That September, South Carolina was embroiled in the greater imperial conflict between England and Spain. St. Augustine offered a chance at freedom for slaves who escaped South Carolina. The group turned to a nearby tavern, where they continued to supply themselves. They burned surrounding plantation houses, and freed any slaves willing to take part in their cause. What started as a small party at the storehouse became a small army, as the party amassed followers along the way. All along the Pon Pon, the Stono party ignited rebellious cause among the neighborhood's enslaved community. Under white banners and to the beat of a field drum, they took off.⁵³

⁵² "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," In *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 14.

⁵³ Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, xiii.

Plantations dotted the landscape. On the Pon Pon, the rebels passed by the fields of Ann Drayton, William Cattell, John Williams, and Thomas Sacheverell. They passed by the plantations of Frederick Grimke, John Smith, Henry Williamson, and Benjamin Wilkinson, planters who, days before, commissioned their slaves to work for the colony now saw them take off in this infant exodus, marching as a troop. In the aftermath of the event, several of these planters would petition the South Carolina for compensation of lost property, the rebels themselves.⁵⁴ To these planters, the rebels represented their labor force, weaponized against them. However, even when taking into consideration the fact that the Stono Rebellion took large numbers of enslaved people from Lowcountry plantations, and additionally disrupted life in South Carolina for several days, if not weeks, the planters still enslaved massive amounts of Africans, most of whose numbers were unaffected by the event.

Where the Chesapeake was a region where the cultivation of a cash crop, tobacco, drew planters to rely increasingly on enslaved labor, colonial South Carolina long had a labor force but was in search of a cash crop. In its infancy, South Carolina inherited a tradition of chattel slavery from established colonies in the Caribbean. To establish South Carolina, the early planters brought with them a rigid and brutal custom, where their practices often pushed ahead of even what the slave codes, generous to the planter class, would allow. From the founding of the colony until the rebellion in 1739, hundreds of slave ships arrived on a yearly basis, to the extent that the city of Charleston relied on the seasonal economy that came with the ships' arrival. Ships like the *Sereleon*, captained by

⁵⁴ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103-104.

Brits Parnum Jenkins and Robert Cole, brought Africans to the colony in droves. The ship departed from Gambia with one hundred and ninety-three people chained in its cargo hold, but only one hundred and seventy-one survived the brutal middle passage to arrive in Charleston.⁵⁵ Other ships, like the Hopewell, captained by Richard Shubrick, brought fifty “seasoned” slaves to South Carolina from Barbados.⁵⁶ Whether from the Caribbean or direct from the African continent, South Carolina imported and exploited slave labor from its inception.

As historian Philip Morgan put elegantly, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, “South Carolina had a labor force in search of a plantation economy.” Though the colony ultimately found success in growing rice, the rigidity of South Carolina’s system of slavery predated its success as a cultivator. Early on, it was enslaved laborers who cleared the land for the planters, before planting even began. The earliest enslaved emigrants to South Carolina came from the Caribbean, most often speaking fluent English. It was not until the 1700s when the colony imported slaves from Africa in droves. In the earliest examples from the new colony, enslaved life consisted of pioneering. Slaves cleared forest and brush to make way for the new planter class, on its way from Barbados. Morgan argues that for the first decades, the primary function of South Carolina plantations was to grow food. “The diversified character of the youthful South Carolina economy owed little to the fluctuating

⁵⁵ Trans-American Slave Trade—Database, Slave Voyages, Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>

⁵⁶ Intra-American Slave Trade—Database, Slave Voyages, Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/database>

fortunes of a dominant staple and more to the harsh realities of a pioneer existence.” He continues, that if “South Carolina specialized in anything, it was ranch farming.”⁵⁷

South Carolina would have looked very different had it not been for rice. In South Carolina, tobacco was not as prevalent as it was in Virginia. In the upper south, tobacco was wildly profitable, and had a relatively low labor cost. A group of fewer than ten could operate a tobacco plantation, but cost became disruptive on the backend. While it only took a small group to grow and harvest tobacco, the crop ravaged the soil. On tobacco plantations, most of the land was kept fallow, with crops only dotting the landscape. What Chesapeake planters saved in startup costs, they paid in land costs. One planter, Sir Dalby Thomas, described in his *Historical Account of the Rise and Growth of the West-India Collonies*, “Fortunes are rarely made by tobacco planters... it is much more common to see their estates eat out by mortgages.”⁵⁸

Seeing the inefficient use of land in Virginia, South Carolina planters looked for an alternative. For decades, the colony struggled to find a cash crop in the way Virginia or the colonies in the Caribbean had. Tobacco and indigo produced mixed results. Ultimately, it was rice that made the colony profitable, and it was also rice that turned the colony into the slave society it became. While the swampy humidity of the Lowcountry covered the islands in a thick blanket of damp air, encouraging pests and the spread of disease, the heat and humidity gave the coastal region of South Carolina a particularly long growing season of around three hundred days per year. In what some called, “the Golden Mines of South

⁵⁷ Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Lowcountry and Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 2-5.

⁵⁸ Sir Dalby Thomas, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Growth of the West-India Collonies* (London, 1690), quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 35; *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Carolina,” planters took to experimenting with rice cultivation towards the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Rice cultivation had hurdles that tobacco planting did not. The coastal waterways made rice particularly well suited to the colony, but land and labor were still necessary to grow the crop in any serious number. In 1710, one South Carolina planter estimated that starting a rice plantation required one thousand pounds sterling, at a minimum.⁶⁰ Land had to be irrigated, canals cut, and damming system built. Once the land was prepared, planters needed to acquire costly tools to pound out the rice grains after harvest. Of course, before any of this was possible, a labor force was needed. Thus, the most costly element of rice was not the crop, and not the land. It was not the preparation required, or the tools necessary, but the cost of human life.⁶¹

“You’ll never make yourself whole with less than thirty Negros,” wrote South Carolina governor James Grant to a prospective planter in 1769.⁶² In colonial South Carolina, this was the number that the planter elite considered essential to start a successful plantation. A huge amount of land was required to make growing rice profitable, but it was also necessary simply to pay for the amount of enslaved laborers the planters believed were necessary to begin with. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, planters expected to raise roughly one thousand pounds of rice per acre of land in order to be successful, and that number rose to fifteen hundred pounds by the revolution. In

⁵⁹ George Milligen, *A Short Description of the Province of South Carolina* (London, 1770), quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 33.

⁶⁰ In 2019, this number is roughly £171,717.75, when adjusted for inflation. Calculation from <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

⁶² James Grant to the Earl of Cassillis, July 22, 1769, quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 35.

comparison, by the mid-eighteenth century, planters expected the average enslaved person to harvest well over two thousand pounds of rice per year. Enslaved communities in South Carolina were wrapped up in a system that exploited their labor in massive numbers, to the degree that by the mid-eighteenth century, only one tenth of South Carolina's enslaved population lived on plantations with fewer than ten slaves.⁶³

In the 1670s, one third of the colony was enslaved, and by the 1720s, the majority of South Carolina was enslaved.⁶⁴ The increase of the slave trade coincided with the rise of rice in more ways than one. Early on, as planters relied on methods from the Chesapeake, where rice was experimented with grown in small quantities, they did not see rice as the cash crop they sought. It was not until the late seventeenth century, after the slave trade to South Carolina saw a marked increase, that rice became so successful in the coastal region. One could attribute this coincidence to the observation that a larger enslaved population would equal a larger work force. This reasoning would conclude that it was simply manpower that drove rice to success. Yet, as South Carolina imported enslaved Africans at an increased rate in the 1700s, they not only imported a labor force, but a group of people whose technical knowledge of crops likely surpassed their own.⁶⁵

In many parts of western and central Africa, rice not only grew, it grew wild. People from those regions had substantial technical knowledge of rice cultivation. For South Carolina planters, technical knowledge of a crop was an advantage that came at a premium. Very often, planters sought out enslaved people already acquainted with a certain crop. As

⁶³ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University press, 1981), 98-103.

one prospective planter wrote in 1763, “As to the Negroes, I must get them either in Carolina or Georgia, and must choose such as are used to the different Cultivations I begin with as Rice, Cotton, Indigo, etc.”⁶⁶ In 1749, a French traveller in Senegambia reported seeing rice grow so plentifully it could be mistaken as a weed, and in the same region, a British official commented similarly that the land was “abounds in prodigious Quantities of Wax, Rice, Cotton, Indigo, and Tobacco.”⁶⁷ It stands to reason that, as enslaved people from different colonies were acquainted with those regions’ principle cash crops, so too people from different regions of Africa had crop knowledge that planters would have considered advantageous. Very often, people from these regions knew more about rice than the planter.

Rice and slavery shaped the early South Carolina plantation. Planters’ successful cultivation of rice as a cash crop coincided with the dramatic increase of slave importation at the turn of the century. It brought people from Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, and as far south as Angola to the colonies, creating a society more diverse than just free and enslaved. South Carolina’s enslaved population was made up not of a single demographic, but of people from diverse backgrounds, and their cultural backgrounds informed how they resisted slavery in the colonies. Those who rebelled in 1739 at the Stono River represented a multitude of experiences drawn together under the common cause of resisting bondage. They left no record themselves, but their background exists in traces from surviving accounts. Exploring how those at Stono rebelled sheds light on what role violence played in subverting plantation society.

⁶⁶ William Stock to Earl of Cassillas, June 14, 1763, quoted in Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 76.

⁶⁷ Governor Lewis to the Board of Trade, July 25, 1766, quoted in Littlefield, 77.

In *Slave Counterpoint*, Philip Morgan explores how, despite the fact that explicit policing and monitoring of enslaved communities was conducted on a sporadic basis, violence against white planters was often prevented because, “White supremacy was a more effective authority than any patroller or watchman could ever be.”⁶⁸ Despite the fact that enslaved people often carried arms, particularly in South Carolina during the early eighteenth century, any rebellion was against the class that controlled the arms, the politically powerful, well-armed planter class. Enslaved communities were aware of this fact, and thus subversion of the slave system often took on subtler forms than armed rebellion. Rebellion, as seen in numerous cases, often met a dismal end. However, the fairly rare occurrence of violence against whites, or the scarcity of attempted insurrection does not equate to complacency. Slavery was maintained as a web of power, distributed through the planters, and enslaved people often contested the nature of that relationship.

Violence against whites occurred more frequently in South Carolina than elsewhere in the colonies. Plantations were more isolated than in the upper south, and white emigration to the colony did not take off in the numbers that it did in Virginia. Planters in the region were acutely aware that their hold on power in a majority black and enslaved colony was precarious. One Lowcountry planter, Richard Oswald, wrote in 1767, “I am sensible the progress [in expanding the plantation] ought to be gradual, that there should with a view to safety) be an addition of strength of whites, before I can venture to increase the number of Negroes.” Other planters were not so cautious, and instead placed their bets on the financial advantage they gained in amassing a large enslaved labor force. As Oswald

⁶⁸ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 391.

continued, “The life of the settlement and the profits arising from it must depend on the Negro.”⁶⁹ The inherent violence of slavery was a compromise planters were always willing to make.

Several accounts of enslaved people in South Carolina resisting bondage through violence survive. In one story from Beaufort, South Carolina, an enslaved man broke into the house of his planter, armed with a “Scymeter,” and threatened to hold the people in the house hostage until he was given his freedom. Stories like his, where enslaved people took up arms, often ended with brutal punishment. In the case of the Beaufort man, he was shot and gibbeted, but not before he and the other black men being put to death that day attempted to escape to St. Augustine in a commandeered schooner. As the *South Carolina Gazette* concluded after reporting the event, “Instances of Negroes murdering, scorching, and burning their own masters or overseers are not rare.”⁷⁰ As Philip Morgan characterized the plantation culture of violence, “The response of whites to the prospect of slave violence has been aptly likened to listening to static on an old radio.”⁷¹ Planters concluded, rightfully so, that violence was inherent to slavery. As slavery required at the very least the implication of violence, and often-explicit displays of violence in order to coerce labor, sometimes that violence reverberated back in how enslaved people responded to the planter.

⁶⁹ Richard Oswald to James Grant, March 15, 1767, Papers of Governor James Grant of Ballinalloch, quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 397.

⁷⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 397-398; “Johann Martin Answers a Questionnaire on Carolina and Georgia,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1958), 245.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 398.

Slavery as a legal, political, and social institution in the United States existed for centuries mostly uncontested, but slavery as a relationship confined to the plantation space, between the planter class and enslaved class, was constantly contested. Though violence against planters was rare as a form of resistance when compared to other, subtler forms of resistance, violence very effectively broke the plantation relationship of bondage. When understood in that context it is perhaps unsurprising to see how the events of the Stono Rebellion unfolded. In the first moments of the rebellion, the Stono participants broke into a storehouse and killed its two attendants, John Gibbs and Robert Bathurst. As Peter Hoffer describes in his narrative history of the event, what the rebels did at the storehouse complicates what exactly they were trying to accomplish. "They did not set the store afire. Burning would have been an act of rebellion... Fire was so common in slave rebellions as to be symbolic of them." He continues, "If a rebellion was planned, fire and gunshots would have signaled it. In short, if rebellion was an open call is an open call to resist to a regime, the slaves who remained in the store did not yet portray themselves as rebels."⁷² Having said that, the Stono rebels' next course of action points to an effort to liberate more than their own party.

The events of the Stono Rebellion parallel other stories of violence in colonial South Carolina. After taking the storehouse, the party continued along the Pon Pon. In an account of the rebellion written for General Oglethorpe in Georgia, the report detailed, "Next they plundered and burnt Mr. Godfrey's house, and killed him, his daughter and son."⁷³ The

⁷² Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 85-86.

⁷³ "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," October, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 15.

Godfrey plantation was situated along the Stono River, and the Godfrey's maintained a landing. While the party went to a tavern afterwards, the Wallace tavern, it is possible that at Godfrey's they were looking for a quick escape down the river. For whatever reason, that escape was not viable, and the party moved to resupply at a local tavern owned by one Mr. Wallace.⁷⁴ In the morning, violence returned. The Stono party's path crossed over several farms and plantations; two more were mentioned by name. Oglethorpe's report of September 9 briefly described the rebels' encounter with the Lemy family: "They broke open and plundered Mr. Lemy's house and killed him, his wife, and child."⁷⁵ Lemy was likely a renter, leaving no record of a land patent in the area. If Lemy was a rice grower, as most in the area were, then he likely owned a few slaves, who could have drawn the rebels' attention.⁷⁶ The rebels then moved to the neighboring plantation of Thomas Rose. The Oglethorpe account described how the rebels "marched on toward Mr. Rose's, resolving to kill him but he was saved a Negro, who having hid him went out and pacified the others."⁷⁷ The enslaved man, named Wells, likely understood the futility of rebellion. Rebellion freed enslaved people from the bond of the plantation, but past plantation boundaries, the web of slavery was nearly impossible to escape.

In the later tellings of the Stono Rebellion, written decades or centuries after the fact, there are descriptions of rape, and more brutal violence. There is no evidence from the earliest documents to suggest that this actually occurred. Later descriptions of rape and violence can be explained as part of the literature on racial violence pervasive in antebellum culture.

⁷⁴ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 86-88.

⁷⁵ "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," October, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 15.

⁷⁶ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 91.

⁷⁷ "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," October, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 15.

The Stono party covered nearly twenty miles over the course of the night and early morning. What they accomplished in such a short time period required some knowledge of the land and people. Of course, these people had pasts before they were enslaved, and the record of the event gives clues as to what enabled the Stono participants to rebel in the way they did.⁷⁸ In one telling of the Stono Rebellion written a century after the event, abolitionist Edmund Quincy charted a narrative of events in which a man named Arnold led the rebel party. In the Quincy account, the story of Arnold parallels that of Cato in George Cato's account from the 1930s. Arnold was an enslaved man who worked as servant and companion to one Colonel Verney, of the Mount Verney plantation nearby the Stono River. Because of his connection to Colonel Verney, Arnold was afforded education in England, and was well acquainted with the local planters of the region, similar to the Cato account. The story speaks to how rebellion, coordinated violence, required immense knowledge and planning. Rebellion was an act of desperation, when the near certainty of death did not dissuade those involved from trying to gain their freedom. Everyday resistance, while a way for the enslaved to claim some agency, was not a direct confrontation with slavery. In order to reject the plantation, substantial rebellion required political organization and uniform action.⁷⁹ Arnold exhibits this sort of organization in the buildup to the Stono Rebellion. Travelling throughout South Carolina alongside Colonel Verney gave Arnold the geographic knowledge necessary to establish a network. Describing this, Quincy wrote:

The opportunities which were thus given to the restless observation of the slave to discern the strength or the weakness of the different portions of the

⁷⁸ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 97.

⁷⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 598.

province, and to select the disaffected spirits among the servile population on whose cooperation he could rely, were faith fully improved.⁸⁰

Arnold's travel likely acquainted him with enslaved communities on neighboring plantations. Geographic unity was absolutely necessary to mount an insurrection. For a rebellion to be successful, it needed the community's support. In building connections throughout the countryside, Arnold built the foundation for rebellion.⁸¹

Of course, Arnold was not alone. Around twenty enslaved people were involved in the initial revolt, amassing some forty supporters over the course of events. Arnold's literacy and political knowledge would not have been enough to successfully resist the planters. Some military prowess was necessary. In a report drafted the month after the rebellion, the anonymous author noted several points about the enslaved participants, "Amongst the Negroe Slaves there are a people from the Kingdom of Angola in Africa, many of these speak Portugueze (which is as new Spanish as Scotch to English,) by reason that the Portugueze have considerable Settlement, and the Jesuits have a Mission and School in that Kingdom and profess the Roman Catholic Religion."⁸² Slavery in eighteenth-century America was very much a transnational institution. There was considerable fear on part of white South Carolinians that the Stono Rebellion was connected to a Spanish plot to destabilize the colony. While there is no evidence to show that the Spanish actually planned to support the rebels militarily, the idea that the slaves had connections to Spain is not

⁸⁰ Quincy, "Mount Verney: Or, an Incident of Insurrection," in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 47.

⁸¹ Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 4 (2007), 705-706.

⁸² "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," October, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 14.

farfetched, and colonials would have recognized the significance of the author's observations.

The Stono rebels were not American-born. Since the early eighteenth century, South Carolina increasingly relied on enslaved labor brought from Africa. In the 1730s, the majority of those slave-trading ships came from Angola. The anonymous author surmised the Stono Rebels were from Angola, because of the language connection. He implies that they were from the Portuguese colony, Angola, though it is much more likely that they were from the kingdom of Kongo. Enslaved people sold out of Portuguese Angola primarily ended up on Portuguese ships destined for Brazil. Very few Portuguese Angolan slaves ended up in the English trading system, or in the English colonies. The kingdom of Kongo, however, was a trade partner with English slave traders. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Kongo was a Christian country with a fairly extensive school system. It was also a country embroiled in periodic civil wars. The country rapidly transformed during this time in response to encroaching Portuguese imperialism. Kongolese monarchs made a concerted effort to build up the country's academic and religious infrastructure, and funded the project through wars of conquest, following which prisoners of war were sold to the north.⁸³

Those who fought at Stono were former soldiers in Kongo. The point of these Kongolese wars of conquest was largely to capture prisoners of war to sell into the slave trade. Several Portuguese accounts described frequent war in the region during the 1730s when the Stono rebels would have been enslaved. English slave traders were well

⁸³ Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 6-7.

acquainted with this region, and actively participated in the prisoner of war trade. Though referred to as “Angola,” it was common for the English traders to use this name in referring to the coastal region of central Africa, or central Africa more broadly, rather than the Portuguese colony. At this time, the major slave trading company for the English colonies was the Royal African Company, headquartered in Kabinda, north of the mouth of the Zaire River. Kabinda was an independent state, but its major partner in the slave trade was the kingdom of Kongo to the south. Any enslaved people brought into South Carolina during this period were likely of central African descent.⁸⁴

Kongolese origins would have further implications for the background of the Stono rebels. As has been established, the Kongolese were Catholic, which carried with it an emphasis on education in the catechism. The anonymous author of the Stono report believed that the rebels spoke Portuguese, which made them susceptible to the influence of Iberian propaganda from Florida. Kongolese were certainly familiar with the language. Establishing schools was a major way in which the kingdom of Kongo resisted Portuguese imperial influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the seventeenth century, there was a school in every Kongolese provincial capital. Portuguese was still a major trade language in the region, so the Kongolese adopted its usage as a second language, using it in government documents and in schools. While literacy varied along class lines, even lower-class Kongolese were familiar with speaking the language.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991), 1104.

⁸⁵ Thornton, “The African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” 1104-1105.

Catholicism was important to the rebels' cultural identity. As part of his interview with the Works Project Administration in the 1930s, George Cato made a note about conversion. He reenacted a speech given by Arnold when confronted by the militia, saying, "We don't lak slavery. We start to jine de Spanish in Florida. We surrender but we not whipped yet and we is not converted.' De other 43 say 'Amen.'"⁸⁶ While Cato does not go into what Arnold meant by "we is not converted," the context of the rebellion points to a religious explanation. Enslaved people did not necessarily convert to Protestantism upon completing the middle passage. They retained their Kongolese cultural heritage, and with that, Catholic identity.⁸⁷ The syncretism of Kongolese culture and Catholic religious practice was a unique background; nonetheless, the Kongolese self-identified as Catholic, and that brought with it a distinct set of practices and beliefs, which would have further set them apart in South Carolina.⁸⁸ Consideration of the African elements of transatlantic slavery during this time strongly points to the Stono rebels being Kongolese Catholics, with at least some degree of literacy and Portuguese. Despite the planters' intentions, they brought in more than just rice farmers.

The events of the Stono Rebellion unfolded in the space of a single road. The rebels' march to freedom met a tragic end when the party encountered South Carolina's colonial

⁸⁶ "The Stono Insurrection Described by a Descendant of the Leader," in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 56.

⁸⁷ Mark M. Smith, "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion," *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 3 (2001), 526.

⁸⁸ Thornton, "The African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," 1106-1107.

lieutenant governor, William Bull, by chance. Bull himself owned land in the area, and was returning north to Charleston. Rebellion represented the opportunity for enslaved people to liberate themselves from the plantation power structure. To be enslaved bound a human to a defined ground. Without those boundaries, it was difficult to enforce the slave system. More broadly, however, when an enslaved person escaped the plantation, they did not escape the legal, political, social, and economic structures that held them there to begin with. They did not escape the slave codes. They did not escape the rice economy. They did not escape militias, or slave patrols. What freedom rebels found was nearly always tragically brief.

But the rebellion was not doomed from the start. When understood as a political and legal structure that existed on the North American continent until 1865, slavery was an unstoppable force, only brought to an end by full war, but when understood as a relationship between people, it was contested on a daily basis. What ended the rebellion was a chance encounter with the acting governor of the colony. The enormity of the goal hung on the contingency of a single event. Perhaps if the rebels didn't encounter Bull on that day, they could have continue to amass numbers along the way adequate to make it to St. Augustine, where they were promised freedom. Perhaps they could have known the fate of the Israelites of Joshua, their scripture, crossing the river Jordan. "Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving them, to the Israelites."⁸⁹ The Stono rebels certainly carried words like these with them as they marched, just as they drew on their pasts as soldiers. Perhaps they could not have freed all of their comrades in bondage, but they could have been free.

⁸⁹ Joshua 1:2, NRSV.

Chapter Three: Remembering Rebellion

In early September of 1739, a party of enslaved rebels rose up in South Carolina and mounted the largest slave rebellion on the North American mainland in the colonial period. They travelled dozens of miles over the course of two days, and amassed between sixty and one hundred followers. In those moments, the rebels were not bound to the plantation. They were not bound to a master. They marched south, under white banners and to the beat of a drum, calling out for liberty and searching for refuge. For two days, they escaped bondage. On September 9, the party's infant exodus met its end, in part due to coincidental contact with colonial officials, who were unaware of the day's events. On that day, colonial officials roused the local militia, who brutally suppressed the party, effectively ending the Stono Rebellion. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the colonial government passed legislation revising the slave codes, and placed blame for the event on Spanish St. Augustine, to the south. Even in the context of periodic resistance on part of enslaved people throughout the greater Atlantic community, South Carolinians refused to believe, at least officially, that this party could have acted on their own. The rebellion ultimately proved unsuccessful, but it stands as a testament to how enslaved people constantly resisted the institution of bondage. Despite its failure, despite attempts to prevent it from happening again, slavery was never simply enforced. People who sought to carve out space for themselves despite brutally oppressive measures opposed it at every turn.

Slavery was inherently political, a way of organizing power. As Jill Lepore writes in *These Truths*, "Slavery does not exist outside of politics. Slavery is a form of politics, and slave rebellion a violent form of political dissent."⁹⁰ To understand what happened at Stono, and

the response from the South Carolina colonial government, it is necessary to understand the political context that shaped the events. The participants of the Stono Rebellion were governed by the South Carolina slave code. “An Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves” was the legislation that outlined what it meant to be enslaved. The act was first ratified in 1696, and was revised several times in succeeding decades. After a revision in 1712, the document went without revision until 1740, when it was revised and amended in response to the Stono Rebellion. In each revision, Carolinian legislators’ fears of what might become of the enslaved majority are evident. Articles added to the act in 1740 treated the rebellion as a large-scale insurrection. Following the 1740 revisions, enslaved people in South Carolina had to comply with random interrogation at the will of whites, carry passes when traveling off their plantation, and were forbidden from carrying firearms unless under the supervision of an armed white person. Furthermore, the legislature made teaching enslaved people to read and write a punishable offense, and retroactively pardoned the torture committed in suppressing the rebellion.⁹¹ This was all in response to an event that, by conservative estimates, involved about sixty people. In the two days of the Stono Rebellion, white South Carolinian society was brought to its knees by the potential of what the rebellion could have become. They feared a revolution. The general assembly’s response was not only a response to the events at Stono, but more so a response to the uprisings in the Caribbean, looming conflict with Spain, and the fragility of the colony’s racial caste system.

⁹⁰ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 64.

⁹¹ “Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves in this Province,” May, 1740, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 20-27.

South Carolina was part of a larger colonial network including the mainland British colonies and colonial settlements in the Caribbean. Individual colonies were well aware of events throughout their Atlantic neighborhood. During the early eighteenth-century, the growing prominence of colonial newspapers meant the widespread availability of news from throughout the colonial world.⁹² News reports from the Caribbean often included accounts of rebellion. Hoffer notes in *Cry Liberty*, “The long decade of the 1730s was filled with real and imagined slave uprisings throughout the Caribbean and British mainland colonies. What may be called a ‘conspiracy panic’ grew out of the compounding of these rumored and real rebellions, a kind of aftershock phenomenon one sees following an earthquake.”⁹³ In colonial South Carolina, news of insurrection in places like Antigua and Jamaica fueled fear that their own fragily maintained slave society would implode in on itself.

From the beginning of institutionalized African slavery, people fought back against bondage. News of Caribbean slave revolts spread quickly throughout the Atlantic community. Often, word of mouth was quicker than the newspapers. Jill Lepore notes, “English colonists on the mainland had family on the islands – and so did their slaves, who, like their owners, traded gossip and news with the arrival of every ship.”⁹⁴ Gossip spread news of enslaved people elsewhere making a stand. The Caribbean and southern part of North America were often destinations for recently enslaved Africans, where bondage

⁹² Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), 57-59.

⁹³ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 157.

⁹⁴ Lepore, *These Truths*, 58.

enforcement was particularly violent.⁹⁵ Naturally, people enslaved there did not willingly submit to the brutality. In the late seventeenth-century, Barbados was the site of periodic rebellion, causing the colonial governors there to ban further slave importation for a time. In the 1730s, the West Indies was a hotbed of revolt. In 1733, enslaved Africans in St. John's rebelled, conquered the island, and maintained control for over a year. In Antigua, three years later, the enslaved revolted. White colonists on the island, and elsewhere, feared it was the beginning of a racial coup.⁹⁶

Elsewhere in the Caribbean, the events in the First Maroon War fueled colonists racially driven fears. At some point during the early 1730s, a group of enslaved people in Jamaica, led by a literate man named Cudjoe, fled the coastal towns and plantations, and took to the mountainous center of the island. They formed what were called "maroon towns," or "maroon settlements," where groups of people who escaped slavery lived in a state of constant flight from their captors. Their escape and establishment of towns led to the English army's involvement. A small war broke out where the army attempted to coerce the maroons back to the coasts, either to be re-enslaved, or executed. The war lasted a decade, ending in 1739 with a treaty recognizing the independence of the maroon towns.⁹⁷ Resistance to slavery on the Caribbean islands often took the form of a more military-like, general revolt, as rebels were geographically isolated. There was no place to flee to, as on the continent. Nonetheless, news of Caribbean rebellions heightened a sense of dread among white South Carolinians that their black majority population, too, may raise

⁹⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 48-49, 112.

⁹⁶ Lepore, *These Truths*, 56-57

⁹⁷ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 15.

a general rebellion. This dread, and the overall precarious nature of colonial society in the Atlantic, fueled imperial disputes on the continent.

One can imagine a world where the Stono Rebellion was successful. It is possible to imagine that the rebels might have marched for days to St. Augustine, and gained their freedom. Only a porous border between what became Georgia and Florida separated the English from the Spanish in North America. Amidst colonial tension, in order to weaken English society and territorial claims, the Spanish adopted a policy of freeing escaped slaves who made it across the border from the English colonies into St. Augustine. Both the Spanish and English recognized that enforcing slavery on the large scale that South Carolina did carried the potential to be both a military and political vulnerability. In 1693, the Spanish Crown issued a proclamation offering “Liberty and Protection” to any escaped slaves from the English colonies. “Freedom,” here, did not mean equality. Escaping to Florida did not necessarily give former enslaved people an equal footing with European colonists. As Ira Berlin describes, “They put the fugitives to work for wages, instructed them in the tenants of Catholicism, and allowed them to marry – in short, providing runaways with all the accouterments of freedom but its title.”⁹⁸ Spanish Florida did not offer escaped slaves a perfect solution, but it gave them a greater opportunity to break their bondage than they experienced in South Carolina. The precarious proposition of escaping to Florida offered a chance to fight back.

The proclamation rattled South Carolina officials. Just one month after the Stono Rebellion, South Carolina official William Bull wrote of his concern over “the desertion of

⁹⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 72.

our Negroes, who are encouraged to it by a certain proclamation published by the King of Spain's order... declaring freedom to all Negroes who should desert thither from the British colonies... several parties have deserted and are there openly received and protected."⁹⁹

Freedom from the Spanish was contingent on conscription. The Spanish incorporated former captives from South Carolina into the militia, and then fought to gain the very territory they escaped from. The Florida provincial government maintained this practice even before the official Spanish proclamation. In 1683, when the Spanish attacked the English at Edisto Island, they did so with a company of freed black men. The English, since the beginning of the colony in Carolina, conscripted enslaved men in their militias, very rarely offering them freedom for their service.¹⁰⁰ Whenever the Spanish militias clashed with those of the English, black men fighting for their freedom fought against black men coerced into fighting against theirs. The opportunity for freedom in Florida, at the very least, encouraged enslaved people who were already resisting bondage to take up arms under the Spanish flag. This fostered extreme anxiety in South Carolina that the Spanish would foment a general slave uprising that would threaten their presence on the continent.

In a world where the Stono rebels escaped, the event would have likely been lost to history. Historians lament the loss of sources detailing exactly what rebels planned to do, but going unnoticed was key to rebels' success. In colonial South Carolina, white colonists may have communicated through writing, but enslaved black South Carolinians communicated in historical silence; to go noticed meant being caught. Historian of South Carolina, Peter Charles Hoffer describes communication in enslaved communities,

⁹⁹ William Bull to the Board of Trade, Oct. 17, 1739, quoted in Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 64-65.

“Whether slaves fled in silence, or malingered in silence, or simply left the quarters at night in silence, it was silence that created space and time for slaves away from their bondage. Muted talk, gesture, and glance were part of all conspiracies, from those formed to steal eggs to those arranged to run away.”¹⁰¹ Had the Stono party been successful, they likely would have fled to Florida, unnoticed by the historical record.

Thus, both the fate and the legacy of the rebellion hung in the balance as the Stono rebels travelled south along the King’s Highway. Ultimately, it was a chance encounter that sank their efforts. The area between the Stono and Edisto rivers was filled with plantations whose enslaved communities took part in the rebellion, but it was also home to William Bull, lieutenant governor of the South Carolina colony. On September 9, Bull was unaware of the events that transpired throughout the previous night. He was no model leader. He was the embodiment of political jockeying through social affiliation. In the late seventeenth century, Bull’s father immigrated to South Carolina and successfully built a fortune through land speculation. His son built on that wealth planting rice through the hands of enslaved labor. Bull sought the favor of British royal officials, anticipating the crown’s acquisition of South Carolina in 1729. His appointment as lieutenant governor was in return for his early support. Usually the position was akin to a figurehead, with little political power, but again, the events of the fall of 1739 put things into flux.

At the time of the Stono Rebellion, Bull was not only in the position of lieutenant governor, but as the governorship of the colony was in transition, he was acting as the royal governor as well. Bull’s acting position gave him power as head of the militia. In his written

¹⁰¹ Ibid., xvi.

account, the only known eyewitness account of the rebellion, he described the moment he came upon the rebels:

On the 9th of September last at night a great number of Negroes arose in rebellion, broke open a store where they got arms, killed twenty-one white persons, and were marching the next morning in a daring manner out of the province, killing all they met... I was returning from Granville court with four gentlemen and met these rebels at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and fortunately discerned the approaching danger time enough to avoid it...¹⁰²

Based on his account, Bull claimed to have come upon the band of rebels while travelling along the King's Highway, a substantial road in the colony. Despite travelling towards each other from opposite directions, Bull claimed to have discovered them very suddenly. He left little details as to how this happened. In part, this was to explain his actions in suppressing the rebellion, or to avoid explaining what he didn't do.

One of Bull's duties to the colonial government, as acting governor, was to head the militia. Upon discovering the rebels, Bull wrote that he "discerned the approaching danger time enough to avoid it and to give notice to the Militia."¹⁰³ But it was not he who alerted the militia; it was a member of his party, a Mr. Golightly, who rode to nearby Presbyterian Church in Willtown to alert the locals. Details of what happened next are clearer in the Oglethorpe report of the rebellion, which was largely informed by the Bull account. The report described:

The Negroes were soon routed, though they behaved boldly several being killed on the Spot, many ran back to their plantations thinking they had not been missed, but they were there taken and Shot, Such were taken in the field also, were after being examined, shot on the Spot; and this is said to be the honour of the Carolina

¹⁰² William Bull, "Lieutenant Governor Bull's Eyewitness Account," October 5, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 16-17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Planters, that notwithstanding the Provocation they had received from so many Murders, they did not torture one Negroe.¹⁰⁴

Bull's account represents a pivotal moment. In the story he told, it was thanks to his stumbling upon the party that the rebels were "soon routed." Despite the fact that Bull submitted his written account to the colonial legislature over one month following the rebellion, there is little detail included that he might have gathered from sources local to the area. He includes no information on why he did not lead the militia himself, as he was expected to do.

In many ways, the Bull's account of the rebellion is not about the rebels, but about himself. According to Peter Charles Hoffer's understanding of Stono, the encounter between the rebels and Bull defined both the turn of events and how the rebellion came to be remembered. Hoffer argues that Bull shaped his account largely in an attempt to save face. He writes, "Instead of confronting the band and ordering them to disperse, or himself leading the militia against them, he fled. There is no evidence that he took part in the military actions that day or later, though his appointment as acting lieutenant governor included a commission as the commanding officer of the militia."¹⁰⁵ The colonial response to the rebellion was primarily shaped by Bull's account. The idea that the party moved south, towards Florida, originates with Bull encountering the still party while moving north. This is not to say the slaves did not know that Florida offered a chance at freedom, but it is to say that Bull wanted draw that connection. He allegedly interviewed local planters in the aftermath to get his figures for how many escaped slaves were involved, but

¹⁰⁴ "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," In *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 107.

amount of detail does not erase the fact that producing the only firsthand account of the rebellion gave Bull significant power in shaping the narrative.¹⁰⁶

Notably, Bull was not so much concerned about what happened at Stono as he was what could have happened. His account focuses on the threat of enslaved insurrection during wartime. He blamed the Spanish for fomenting rebellion in the British colonies. The participants in the Stono Rebellion, according to Bull, were “encouraged to it by a certain proclamation published by the King of Spain’s Order at St. Augustine declaring Freedom to all Negroes who should desert thither from the British colonies.” Bull warned that rebellion could be a weapon should war with Spain come to fruition. He wrote, “If such an attempt is made in a time of peace what might be expected if an enemy should appear upon our frontier with a design to Invade us?”¹⁰⁷ Bull advised that the general assembly should take action to ensure against a possible revolutionary insurrection in the future. While Bull was the first to connect the rebellion to Spain, there were long since growing concerns over the possibility that the Spanish could foment insurrection in the colony. It was these narratives that shaped both the response from the colonial legislature, and the historical record.

The Oglethorpe report left a description of the brutal violence that followed Bull’s escape, with the author notes only happened “with much difficulty.” The account described the band as consisting of sixty to one hundred people, led by a man named Jemmy, who the author alleged were drinking and dancing following Bull’s escape. In reality, this was likely preparation for battle, as many of them did in past lives as Kongolese soldiers. Travelling

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 107-108.

¹⁰⁷ William Bull, “Lieutenant Governor Bull’s Eyewitness Account,” October 5, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 16-17.

only on foot, it did not take long for the mounted planter militia to catch up. By one oral history of the rebellion recorded some time later, there was a brief, climactic stand off between the two parties. The leader of the party, recognizing what was by then dire odds of escape, proclaimed, "We surrender but we not whipped yet and we is not converted."¹⁰⁸ From there, the militia nearly summarily executed the group. As the colony recently passed laws requiring men to arm themselves at all times, there was no shortage of long arms in the area. Most of the Stono rebels were shot on the spot. Some were captured and hanged. By the end of the day, at least forty blacks and twenty whites died in the violence, the largest rebellion of enslaved people to occur in the mainland colonies. Meanwhile, the report commended the militia for their restraint. "They did not torture one Negroe, but only put them to an easy death."¹⁰⁹

But a few of the Stono rebels allegedly escaped. The report mentioned that thirty rebels escaped, and group of ten were caught travelling further south. Historian John Thornton argues that this, too, was evidence of military training, that this was, in fact, a fighting retreat. The report ended with a lack of confidence that all of the rebels were apprehended. In the days following the militia's suppression of the rebellion, Oglethorpe ordered units of rangers to patrol roads and river crossings throughout Georgia, in the event that some may have made it across from South Carolina. "It is hoped these measures will prevent any Negroes from getting down to the Spaniards," the report concluded.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ "The Stono Insurrection Described by a Descendant of the Leader," In *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 56.

¹⁰⁹ "Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina," In *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 14-15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

The Spanish specter looms over every government document assessing the rebellion. Fear that the North American colonies could devolve into a proxy war for their imperial counterparts affected how every colonial official thought about the issue. Much in the same way Bull connected the rebellion to the idea of freedom in St. Augustine, the Oglethorpe report began noting a recent series of escapes to the Spanish colony. It addressed the issue of the Spanish Edict of 1693 directly, "Sometime since there was a proclamation published at Augustine, in which the King of Spain (then at peace with Great Britain) promised protection and freedom to all Negroe slaves that would resort thither. Certain Negroes belonging to Captain Davis escaped to Augustine..."¹¹¹ The author noted the diplomatic issues the edict caused when representatives from South Carolina attempted to negotiate. He described the series of events, "They were demanded by General Oglethorpe who sent Lieutenant Demere to Augustine, and the Governor assured the General of his sincere friendship, but at the same time showed his orders from the Court of Spain, by which he has to receive all run away Negroes."¹¹² These reports had enormous influence in how the South Carolina legislature and planters responded to the rebellion. It was accounts from officials like Bull and Oglethorpe that dictated the record, and fueled suspicion of a Spanish plot.

The Bull and Oglethorpe accounts gave greater conviction to those who already feared conflict with Spain. Two journal entries from Colonel William Stephens, one of Oglethorpe's rangers in Georgia tasked with patrolling passages, are indicative of the heightened tension with Spain. In the first entry, dated July 29, 1739, Stephens described

¹¹¹ Ibid., 13-14.

¹¹² Ibid., 14.

an encounter with a person he believed to be a Spanish spy. By his account, Georgian authorities detained a man claiming to be a German Jewish doctor after he was “skulking” about Savannah for some time. The authorities interrogated the local Jewish population, who claimed to not know the man. Stephens then arrested the man, and found on him papers indicating that he changed names on a periodic basis. Stephens recalled, “When he found that it was in vain for him to deny, what we could quickly prove, he confessed himself born in Old Spain... He was no better than a spy.” The man was jailed for later trial.¹¹³

Stephens wrote a second entry in the aftermath of the rebellion further illustrating the anxiety of the region. On September 13, he conferred news of the event, which by then had evidently circulated throughout the southern colonies. He began, noting tensions with Spain, “In the Midst of these Hostilities from abroad, it was now their greatest Unhappiness to have a more dangerous Enemy in the Heart of the Country to deal with: For their Negroes had made an insurrection.” He then told the common series of events, though he omitted figures. In his telling, a number of enslaved people broke into a storehouse, stole guns and ammunition, and killed the white people on the plantation. They then went about the countryside repeating the same process until the countryside was “full of Flames.” Stephens told that the militia members feared the rebellion might become a general uprising. Stephens wrote that, in response to the rebellion, the Georgia militia secured passes along the Savannah River, whether or not the rebel part was actually moving south. Notably, his thoughts returned to the alleged Spanish spy from his previous entry. He

¹¹³ William Stephens, “Spanish Designs and Slave Resistance,” July 29, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 3-4.

wrote, "...The securing that Spaniard some Time ago was not upon a groundless Suspicion (as some People then termed it, who are rarely pleased with whatever is done, because they have not the doing it) for it is more than probable, that he had been employed a pretty while, in corrupting the Negroes of Carolina."¹¹⁴

This is not to say officials' fears of Spain were without reason. As established previously, the Spanish edict offered freedom as part of an exchange. It was a military proclamation. It exploited an English vulnerability. Freedom from the Spanish was contingent on conscription. The Spanish promise of freedom for those fled from bondage in the English colonies did entice some who chose to run. The fact that these refugees then became part of the Spanish militia made the issue not only an economic vulnerability for South Carolina, but also a military one. It was a practice that existed far prior to the edict, one that would be mirrored centuries later as the Union army conscripted formerly enslaved refugees from captured Confederate territory. In the colonies, there were very often enslaved people in competing armies, conscripted out of their enslavement, or to ensure their freedom—either coercion or contingency. For South Carolina, this dynamic was a constant reminder of their vulnerability.

However, it is to say that there is a distinct callous ignorance in how South Carolina officials addressed the rebellion. It speaks of the South Carolina planter class that the issue of slavery itself is not addressed in any of the documents, barring the slave codes themselves. In one of the few records of the rebellion to come from outside the ruling political class, one man saw the rebellion originating from a very different cause. Johann Martin Boltzius was minister in Georgia, who emigrated from Salzburg to cater to the small

¹¹⁴ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 64-65.

Lutheran community there. On September 28, weeks after the rebellion began, Boltzius wrote a different account of the event. "A man brought the news that the Negroes or Moorish slaves are not yet pacified but are roaming around in gangs in the Carolina forests and that ten of them had come as far as the border of this country just two days ago."

Boltzius implied that the quelling of the rebellion in the days around September 9 were not as final as official reports depicted. He was against the institution of slavery, as was Oglethorpe, and blamed the rebellion on a very different issue than Spanish tension. He continued, "Mr. Oglethorpe told us here that the misfortune with the Negro rebellion had begun on the day of the Lord, which these slaves must desecrate with work and in other ways at the desire, command, and compulsion of their masters and that we could recognize a *jus talionis* in it." *Jus talionis* was an interesting choice of words for Boltzius, calling the rebellion just retaliation. His was the lone account to draw connections from the rebellion not to the meddling of foreign powers, but to an abusive and oppressive institution.¹¹⁵

But it was not the comments from Boltzius that would influence how the legislature responded to what happened at Stono. It couldn't be. As Peter Charles Hoffer writes in his book, *Cry Liberty*, "The fears of the Stono residents would never be entirely stilled and the colony would never be quite as comfortable with its peculiar institution after the uprising." Practices of the South Carolina slavers did not change in the aftermath. The budding economy, infant as it was, was built on slavery. Rice cultivation required labor, and rebellions only hurt the chances of increased immigration further. In the city, merchants and tradesmen relied on slavery as a yearly boon to the economy. The slave trade brought

¹¹⁵ Johann Martin Boltzius, September 28, 1739, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 11.

masses from the countryside, and they relied on slave labor for the operations of the harbor. South Carolinians were simply unwilling to give up this way of life, reliant on the bondage of a laboring class, continuing a racial caste system. The tentacles of slavery wrapped around every aspect of lowcountry life. As Hoffer writes, “If Stono left whites paralyzed with fear, South Carolina’s very existence as a colony with a black majority would become untenable.”¹¹⁶

The goal of the South Carolina legislature then became casting the event in a broader narrative that colonists were already familiar with. When the legislature reconvened in the final months of 1739, their singular goal was assuaging fears that rebellion could happen again. They revisited the slave code, the document passed down to them by the Caribbean planter class that they utilized with zeal. While the codes were revised several times throughout the previous decades, they were still largely within the framework created by the original 1690 document. It made few provisions to prevent the overwork and abuse of enslaved people, and established a system of punishment for enslaved people accused of a crime. However, slavery was defined by custom, not rule, and the rebellion made it apparent that the planter class’s grip on the enslaved majority was slipping. One can read the fears of Stono into the 1740 document, not only the story of the rebellion, but the fear of a Spanish plot as well.

Prior to Stono, the disorganization of South Carolinian society allowed very limited freedom to those enslaved. This is not to say they enjoyed the freedom of the likes of European colonists, or even indentured servants, but the hectic state of affairs in the Carolinas allowed for more paths of resistance to an oppressive system. Peter Wood notes,

¹¹⁶ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 126-127.

“Freedom of movement and freedom of assembly... to learn and read English – none of these rights had ever been assured to Negroes and most had already been legislated against, but always the open conditions of life in a young and struggling colony had kept the vestiges of these meager liberties alive.”¹¹⁷ Following the revisions of the South Carolina slave code in 1740, those remaining vestiges vanished as planters tightened the vice of bondage. The legislature responded to the rebellion as if it were a total uprising, orchestrated by the Spanish. In the official report of the rebellion, submitted to the general assembly two years later, one legislator wrote, “That the Negroes would not have made this Insurrection had they not depended on St. Augustine for a Place of Reception afterwards was very certain; and that the Spanish had a Hand in prompting them to this particular Action there was but little Room to doubt.”¹¹⁸ Following the rebellion, the legislature attempted to prevent their enslaved majority from ever becoming a military threat again. The 1740 act prohibited banned literacy in the enslaved population, prevented more than five enslaved people gathering without the supervision of an overseer, monitored the physical whereabouts of slaves at all time by implementing a pass system, and subjugated enslaved people to random interrogation at the whim of whites.¹¹⁹ The chattel system became harsher than ever before.

By placing punishment on whites, rather than enslaved blacks, the legislature attempted to create the idea among white South Carolinians that association with enslaved

¹¹⁷ Wood, *Black Majority*, 324.

¹¹⁸ “Late Expedition Against St. Augustine,” July 1, 1741, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 28-29.

¹¹⁹ “Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves in this Province,” in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 20-27.

people could implicate them. It made slack enforcement of the slave codes by a planter a punishable offense. But while it created penalties for white South Carolinians, it was not out of benevolence, or anything approaching an anti-slavery spirit. Looking back on the slave laws in 1770, the son of William Bull, William Bull, Jr., praised the South Carolina slave code for what he called its “happy temperance of justice and mercy.” He did not pretend the laws were merciful to the enslaved class, rather he praised them for their mercy towards planters. He was critical of laws in the northern colonies that made abuse of enslaved people a capital offense. The southern colonies were different, he wrote:

But in... all southern colonies and islands, it has been thought dangerous to public safety to put them on a footing of equality in that respect with their masters, as it might tempt slaves to make resistance, and deter masters and managers from inflicting punishment with an exemplary severity tho' ever so necessary.¹²⁰

In this, Bull made it apparent why it was so necessary to stress the possibility of a Spanish plot. If the enslaved rebels at Stono acted on their own, there was nothing, not even slave codes, which could prevent them from doing it again. If the South Carolina legislature aligned the rebellion with the Spanish threat, they effectively incentivized all white colonists to engage in the more strict enforcement of bondage, for fear they may face punishment if they acted otherwise. This narrative became so pervasive in the history of Stono that even in an 1847 dramatic telling of the rebellion, written by abolitionist writer Edmund Quincy to portray the Stono rebels as heroes in the struggle against slavery, the events of the rebellion only unfold after a Spanish agent named Da Costa promises the

¹²⁰ William Bull, Jr., “A representation of the present state of religion, polity, agriculture and commerce,” 1770, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 31.

rebels freedom on behalf of the authorities in St. Augustine.¹²¹ It is entirely possible that the rebels knew of what the Spanish crown promised them in Florida, but the idea that the rebellion only happened as the result of Spanish intervention only served the aims of the planter class. Regardless of conflict between colonial powers, the Stono rebels acted on behalf of themselves.

Those enslaved throughout the Atlantic rejected a brutal system that relied on the violent coercion of labor. In one of the first historical descriptions of the rebellion, historian Alexander Hewatt eloquently remarked, "Upon the slightest reflection all men must confess that those Africans, whom the powers of Europe have conspired to enslave, are by nature equally free and independent... as Europeans themselves."¹²² The revolts of the 1730s constituted the largest-scale resistance to slavery by enslaved people until the American Civil War. In rebellion, they made a stand for themselves, despite the formidable challenge of rejecting bondage. Whether or not it was a coordinated effort on part of the participants to rid the colonies of slavery may never be known. When taken into consideration that over forty thousand South Carolinians were enslaved in 1739, the effect of fewer than one hundred rising up in rebellion is considerable. The mere possibility of rebellion threatened white South Carolinian society. The idea that the events at Stono could be carried out entirely on the accord of its participants was unthinkable for South Carolina's ruling class. They feared the political turmoil of the Atlantic world, and that fear augmented their understanding of the rebellion. By many accounts, after the Stono rebels escaped their

¹²¹ Edmund Quincy, "Mount Verney: Or, an Incident of Insurrection," *Liberty Bell*, 1847, in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 49.

¹²² "An Early Historical Account," in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, 33-35.

plantations, they sang out and danced, because they gained their liberty, if only for a short while. Whatever the origins of the Stono Rebellion, those enslaved people who took part rose up in defiance of bondage, and demanded their freedom.

Conclusion

Slave rebellions do not occur out of nothing. They are not ahistorical fissures, with only an affect but no cause. They were a part of their context, a weapon of the voiceless, and a way of acting against the powers that put people in bondage. More so than anything, they were the products of the planter class, and the plantation system. They were the products of slave society. When those participants at Stono decided to break from the plantations in early September of 1739, they were a part of a broader, longer struggle between the planter class and the enslaved.

The Stono rebels did not rebel against the law, they likely knew very little about the slave codes, but it was the law that laid the foundation for their bondage. South Carolina was built on bondage, a slave colony from its inception. As the colonial project grew out of the aims of Barbadian planters, slavery in the colony took on the form seen elsewhere in the Caribbean, where the codes existed to maintain control a population. The codes that laid the foundation for South Carolina were revised in response to rebellions elsewhere, and South Carolina, in turn, would revise them in response to their own rebellion. It was because of the laws surrounding slavery that an entire economy was built on the backs of enslaved Africans. Not only did planters exploit them for their labor, they exploited them as commodities, with the seasonal slave trade supplying a huge boon to port city economies. At every turn, colonial South Carolina relied on slavery.

Systematically, this reliance took the form of the economy of the slave trade, but on the small scale, on the plantations, the reality of slavery was far from a clinical description of markets and commodities. For the people exploited in bondage, slavery meant kidnapping. It meant the middle passage. It meant separation from families. It meant corporal punishment, and even death. It meant what W.E.B DuBois called the “absolute

subjection to the individual will of an owner.”¹²³ However, this exploitation never went uncontested. As evident in Stono, enslaved people resisted. Despite their bondage, they did not lose their humanity, their culture, and their history. Over the course of the rebellion, the participants’ cultures were on full display. For many of them, their Kongolese background and their Catholic faith informed their course of events.

Of course, most of them did not make it to lasting freedom. As far as the sources show, none of the participants were known to have made it to St. Augustine. It is unknown how many escaped the militia, but the sources imply that some did. If the Stono rebels did make it to Spanish territory, their freedom was contingent on their fighting on behalf of the Spanish authorities. Freedom from one slave power meant working on behalf of another. The historical record, dictated by South Carolina officials, paints the Stono Rebellion as a failure, showing the rebels’ efforts ultimately futile. This was a convenient for those in power. As Peter Charles Hoffer illustrates, “The master class could do without slave labor. The laboring classes aspired to be planters. The white city folk depended upon slavery for street cleaning, unloading the ships in the harbor, and bringing fresh fish, and game to the markets.”¹²⁴ South Carolina had a social ladder, and below the bottom rung were the enslaved. The foundation for any semblance of social mobility, of any continued financial success, relied on the idea that slavery worked, and that it would always work. After Stono, white colonists were afraid, and their fears were assuaged at officials’ assurance that this event was not the result of their own practice, but of Spanish incite.

¹²³ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 10.

¹²⁴ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 127.

It is the result of the people in power that rebellions appear isolated, sporadic eruptions in otherwise stable societies. Perhaps it is more convenient to traditional political narratives to understand them in this way. But these rebellions were not isolated. They were all parts of the drawn out conflict that was American slavery, from 1619 through 1865, and they are parts of the institutional racial disparities that have continued since. Slavery was never an uncontested institution, and to understand it as such would portray it as ahistorical, and without explanation. It was a conflict that coerced Africans and African-Americans into what amounted to a colonized people. Their labor and resources were exploited and exported for the gain of the master class. This conflict resulted in death tolls not limited to the dozens at Stono, but the numbers reaching the millions.

The conflict did not end with the suppression of the Stono Rebellion, and certainly, neither did whites' suspicion. White South Carolinians' fear of rebellion was on full display in the years after Stono, as residents frequently suspected enslaved communities of attempting insurrection. In 1759, three black men in Saint Helena Parish were accused of plotting an insurrection. South Carolina's governor claimed John Pendleton, a free black man, attempted to "stir up sedition among the negroes, by telling them he had seen a vision, in which it was reveal'd to him that in the month of September the white people shou'd be all under ground." Pendleton allegedly disappeared in the woods for weeks, encouraging local enslaved communities to fight.¹²⁵ Just a few years after that, in 1759, fear

¹²⁵ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 648-649; South Carolina Council Journal, no. 28, 105-111, quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 649.

circulated in Charleston of a slave rebellion, in the midst of protests against the Stamp Act. There, a free black man named Thomas Jeremiah was hanged for the alleged plot.¹²⁶

To understand these events, these rebellions, and these moments of resistance, one has to understand that the enslaved actors were responding to their political and social context. Too often, scholars have written about rebellions as if they were natural disasters, like earthquakes, a moment when tension releases, but with no historical background. The risk here is losing track of how enslaved participants could truly be agents of change. The sources on Stono written by white colonial officials largely share one thing in common, they begin with a group of enslaved men breaking into a storehouse. The account of George Cato, dated from the 1930s, shows something different. He begins much earlier. His story, an oral history passed down through generations, begins by describing their community. He described his enslaved ancestor, Cato, and his knowledge of the area's geography, and his relationships with people in other enslaved communities. The account from George Cato and his ancestors show that the story of Stono does not begin with the rebellion, it does not begin with the violence of the rebels, it begins with why they were in South Carolina to begin with.

The conflict did not begin with Stono, and it did not end with Stono. Stono was a part of the same conflict that included numerous rebellions, countless acts of resistance, and innumerable moments when enslaved people carved out quiet moments for themselves, away from the annals of history. It was the revolutionary spirit of the Stono rebels and so many others that led the charge against bondage. Liberty came from black resistance.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Hoffer, *Cry Liberty*, 134.

¹²⁷ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1-2.

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