Overview
In this lesson, students will examine the origins of slavery in Colonial North Carolina, particularly the work of those enslaved in the naval stores industry and cultivation of rice. Students will then participate in a perspective activity in which they explore the complex attitudes of people living in Colonial America as they either condemn or defend slavery.

Grade
8

North Carolina Essential Standards
• 8.H.1.5 - Analyze the relationship between historical context and decision-making.
• 8.H.2.1 - Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (e.g. war, slavery, states’ rights and citizenship and immigration policies) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
• 8.H.3.1 - Explain how migration and immigration contributed to the development of North Carolina and the United States from colonization to contemporary times (e.g. westward movement, African slavery, Trail of Tears, the Great Migration and Ellis and Angel Island)
• 8.H.3.3 - Explain how individuals and groups have influenced economic, political and social change in North Carolina and the United States.
• 8.G.1.3 Explain how human and environmental interaction affected quality of life and settlement patterns in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. environmental disasters, infrastructure development, coastal restoration and alternative sources of energy).
• 8.C&G.1.4 Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).
• 8.C.1.3 - Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).
• 8.C&G.1.4 Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).

Essential Questions
• Why is North Carolina called the Tar Heel state?
• What is a naval store?
• What are pine resins used for?
• Why were naval stores so popular in North Carolina in the 1700s?
• Based on the way tar, pitch and turpentine are produced, what are some possible dangers associated with its production?
• What was life like for a person enslaved in colonial North Carolina?
• What were some responsibilities of slaves?
• What were the prevailing perspectives regarding slavery of various people living in Colonial America?
• Despite some opposition, why did slavery persist in America for as long as it did?

Materials
• Tar Heel Image
• “Naval Stores and the longleaf pine,” reading from http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/4069 (handout attached)
• Perspective Activity Role Cards, attached
• Perspectives on Colonial Slavery Activity Instructions, attached
• “Colonial Origins of Slavery in North Carolina” Power Point (optional), available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format) 
  o To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
  o To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to cnorris@unc.edu

Duration
Two 60 minute periods

Procedure
Day 1

What is a “Tar Heel”? 
1. Display the attached “Tar Heel” image where it is visible for all students and have a volunteer read aloud the accompanying “toast”:

   “Here’s to the land of the long leaf pine,
   The summer land where the sun doth shine,
   Where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great,
   Here’s to "Down Home," the Old North State!”

2. Ask students to write, on a sheet of scrap paper, what they believe the phrase “Tar Heel” means, where it originated, why it has become such a popular phrase in North Carolina, and anything else they might know about it. Once students have approximately 5 minutes to write, explain that the exact history of the phrase is unknown, but that it is so ingrained in North Carolina’s history that the “toast” read aloud is actually, by law, the official toast of North Carolina. Further explain that many legends have developed in order to explain it. Select several student volunteers to share what they wrote regarding the phrase. Note and discuss differences in responses.

3. Explain to students that there are several explanations for the origination of Tar Heel. One explanation historian’s offer is that the phrase stems from North Carolina’s abundant tar, pitch and turpentine, referred to as naval stores, a result of the vast pine forests in the state. Naval stores were some of state’s most important exports early in its history. Enslaved people and others who worked

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in the pine forests to extract tar in the form of sap from trees often found the sticky tar on the bottoms of their feet, hence the phrase “tar heels.”

**Naval Stores in North Carolina**

4. Distribute the attached short reading “Naval Stores and the longleaf pine”, attached for students to read individually or in partners. Afterwards discuss:
   - What is a naval store?
   - What are pine resins used for?
   - Why were naval stores so popular in North Carolina in the 1700s?
   - Based on the way tar, pitch and turpentine are produced, what are some possible dangers associated with its production? Why might naval store-related work be difficult?

5. Additional information to share with students:

   “The naval stores industry in North Carolina started during the early 1700s. In 1720, the English Parliament enacted a bounty to encourage colonists to engage in the industry, because Great Britain’s dependence on its naval trade necessitated many boats. In the 1720s and 1730s, the industry in the Northeast Cape Fear region of present-day Duplin County attracted Welsh migrants from Pennsylvania and Delaware. By the 1770s, the production of naval stores was widespread in Eastern North Carolina, as noted by Janet Schaw, a well-educated Scot who toured the Cape Fear region a couple years prior to the American Revolution. Small farmers and their slaves (typically one to four on each farm) provided the infrastructure of the naval stores industry while growing grains and raising cattle.

   During the colonial period, **turpentine** was used mainly as a laxative or as a water repellent for cloth and leather, but demand for it increased exponentially during the nineteenth century. Although soap manufacturers started using leftover resin from the stills in which turpentine had been extracted, turpentine was used primarily from 1800 to 1860 as an illuminant; the substance when combined with alcohol provided a cheap form of lighting that was used in homes, public buildings, and streets. This mixture was known as camphene, Teveline, or palmetto oil. By 1860, a less costly illuminant replaced the turpentine-based one: kerosene.”

(Source: [http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/103/entry/](http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/103/entry/))

6. Explain to students that slave labor was used in a variety of ways in Colonial North Carolina, particularly for jobs that required working in dangerous, grueling, and nasty conditions in which injury or death were part of everyday life. Production of naval stores was one such job. Ask students:
   - Has anyone ever accidentally been burned by oil splashing when someone is cooking? Describe what it felt like.
   - Imagine sticking your hands or feet in a pot of hot oil – what do you imagine this would feel like?

7. Explain that when enslaved people would stir pine tar, pitch and turpentine, it was often in huge cauldrons that required them to stand on the edge and use a long stirrer, almost like an oar. One slip could lead to severe burning, instantly deforming the flesh, and sometimes necessitating amputation or even death. In this case, being a “tar heel” was certainly not a good thing.
8. Further explain:

“…slaves in the naval stores industry were often bored and lonely while for consecutive months cutting boxes, or holes approximately six to eight inches, to collect resin in barrels placed at the base of trees. A boxer worked typically from November to March and cut anywhere from 80 to 500 boxes per week. Overworked slaves in the pine forests were often subjected to cruel punishment and labored in conditions similar to slaves on sugar cane plantations. Temporary housing was another difficulty. Unlike plantation slaves, bondsmen in the naval stores industry primarily lived in crude lean-tos, no more than four feet high, and were therefore constantly exposed to the elements. Many were also poorly clothed and fed, and more than a few suffered illnesses caused by breathing the fumes of the portable copper turpentine stills.” (Source: http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/103/entry/)

9. Next, go through the “Colonial Origins of Slavery in North Carolina” Power Point (a short, 10 slide presentation) available in the Database of Civic Resources or by e-mailing a request to hinson@sog.unc.edu, to further student understanding of the origins of slavery in Colonial North Carolina.

10. At the end of class, remind students what a grueling job slaves engaged in when cultivating rice in the wet tidal plains of Cape Fear, North Carolina. Those people enslaved were forced in stand ankle to knee deep in stagnant, smelly mud contending with blazing sun and mosquito bites for weeks at a time. Distribute the reading “Rice and Slavery: A Fatal Gold Seed,” attached, and instruct students to read it for homework.

Day 2

Rice Cultivation

11. As a warm-up and review of the homework reading, discuss:

• Why did Samuel Eveleigh say he was positive that rice could not be produced by whites? What does this tell you about blacks during this period?
• How was rice produced?
• What were some of the factors that made the cultivation of rice so grueling and dangerous?
• What percentage of slaves died within a year of their arrival? What percentage of slave babies that survived birth died before turning 16?
• Given the harsh conditions slaves endured when cultivating rice, why was slavery accepted and even encouraged in colonial North Carolina?

12. Ask students to consider the fundamental reason slaves were brought to the New World as laborers. The answer: money. Drive home the fact that America was built on the backs of enslaved people, and unfortunately, slave labor became the most important thing for the economy in North Carolina during the Colonial period.

Exploring Colonial Perspectives

13. Divide students into groups of 5. Explain that the class will be participating in an activity in which they will assume the perspective of a North Carolinian during the Colonial period. Through participation in this activity, students will gain an understanding of all the different views on slavery during the 1700s. Take the following steps to set up the activity:
• Give each student in each group one of the attached “Perspectives Cards,” so that each group is comprised of the attached 5 different perspectives.
• Teachers may also want to assign specific administrative roles to each student so that groups stay on task, such as:
  o Manager: Ensures that the work of the group is running smoothly, and that each group member is contributing and fulfilling their responsibility
  o Timekeeper: Ensure that the group is completing sections of the activity in a timely manner
  o Recorder: Responsible for taking notes during group discussion
  o Reporter: Responsible for presenting and summarizing perspectives to class on behalf of their group
  o Questioner: Keeps track of any questions students have; communicates with teacher if questions regarding the activity arise
• Tell students to take a minute to read their assigned role and independently consider what they believe their position on slavery would be.
• While students read and ponder, distribute the “Perspectives on Colonial Slavery Activity Instructions,” attached, one to each student. Read the instructions for number #1, #2, and #3 aloud, ensuring that students understand expectations.
• Allow students 10 minutes to individually brainstorm their perspectives and create a colonial character based on the information provided. Students will have to make inferences based on what they have learned though out the lesson. Encourage them to be creative and realistic as they develop a 2minute introductory speech to deliver to the remainder of their group when the activity begins. This introduction will let other group members know who all is at the table and how each feels regarding slavery.
• **Teacher tips:** As students work on fleshing out their assigned perspective into a character, circulate around the room to ensure students are on the right track. Students who struggle can partner with a student from another group assigned the same perspective. Teachers should also provide some ground rules regarding acceptable language when playing such diverse perspectives (for example, even though some students are playing slave owners, it is advised students be told not to use racist language during the activity.) Give students intermittent time warnings as they develop their introduction.
• Once students have completed their 2 minute introductory speech to deliver to their group, teachers should remind students of their administrative responsibilities (if assigned) as well as go over group work behavior expectations.
• Finally, tell students to begin introducing themselves to their group members. Tell students to take notes on the differing perspectives presented in their groups.
• Once all group members have introduced themselves to the group, tell students to individually answer the questions under section #4. Teachers should then allow around 4 minutes for students to pose and answer questions that they created in section 4. This will allow for some open discussion in character.

14. Next, move students on to step #5, in which students respond to particular primary sources in character. Teachers can choose to project each primary source for student review, or hand out a copy to each group. Groups should have approximately 4 minutes to discuss and then respond in writing to each of the 4 items (A-D) attached.
15. Upon reviewing all primary source items, praise students for a job well done and ask them to return to their individual seats. Debrief by discussing as a class:
   • Was it difficult to assume the perspective assigned to you? Explain.
   • For plantation owners, retail merchants, and Lords Proprietors, justifications for slavery did you make? Were there any arguments against slavery that struck you?
   • For slaves and Quakers, how did listening to the pro-slavery perspectives make you feel? What counter arguments do you feel you made that were most convincing?
   • Quakers actively sought the prohibition of slavery over 100 years before the Civil War. Why do you think slavery persisted for as long as it did?

   **Culminating Assignment: Seeing Things from the Other Side**

16. As a culminating assignment (which can be completed for homework), instruct students to switch roles and assume an opposite perspective. (For example, if a student was originally assigned the perspective of a plantation owner, retail merchant, or Lords Proprietor, they should now assume the perspective of either a slave or a Quaker; if they were a slave or a Quaker, they should assume the perspective of a plantation owner, retail merchant, or Lords Proprietor.) Instruct students to write a letter to the colonial North Carolina legislature expressing their new character’s views on slavery. Give students some parameters for the letter. (For example, “In order to receive full credit, letters should be at least 3 full paragraphs in length.”) Tell students that in their letters, they should:
   • Introduce yourself (in character)
   • Explain how you feel about slavery and why you feel this way
   • Explain why you think the legislator should support your views over opposite views
   • Be grammatically correct
   • Be creative, yet realistic
Here's to the land of the Long Leaf Pine.
The Summer land where the Sun doth Shine,
Where the Weak grow Strong and the Strong grow Great.
Here's to North Carolina, the good Old Tar Heel State.
## Perspectives Activity Role Cards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>North Carolina Plantation Owner</strong></th>
<th><strong>Enslaved Person</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a plantation owner, you depend on slaves for your livelihood. Slaves, which you paid top dollar for, provide the intensive labor needed to work in the naval stores and rice industry to ensure you have large amounts of goods to sell to merchants. Without slave labor, you cannot provide your family with food, shelter, and clothing, among other things. Slaves are the backbone of your business and economic security. In your mind, you have no choice but to use slave labor. You feel less guilty about it since it is only seldom that you are forced to physically punish slaves for refusing to work or for talking back to you.</td>
<td>As an enslaved person, you have had to endure some of the worst conditions imaginable: you have been separated from your family and forced to work in dangerous, grueling conditions when cultivating rice or working in the naval stores industry. You are treated poorly, occasionally whipped or beaten, receive only enough food to survive, and live in small quarters with 5 others. You don’t understand how any decent human being can justify having slaves. You breathe and bleed just like any other person, and thus you shouldn’t be treated like an animal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>North Carolina Quaker</strong></th>
<th><strong>North Carolina Lords Proprietor</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a devout Quaker, you believe that slavery is wrong and you are vocally opposed to it. In order to help make the lives of enslaved people more bearable, you hold regular religious meetings to lift the spirits of those poor souls who are enslaved and urge plantation owners to treat enslaved people with kindness. Despite economic benefits to the state, you ultimately believe slavery should be outlawed and take every opportunity to try and convince people of this. Even though your position angers many slave holders, you don’t care. You know that slavery is wrong.</td>
<td>You are one of the eight Lords Proprietors of North Carolina. You received your title when the British King appointed you to rule in “Carolina” during the early Colonial period. You seek easy profits and believe that slavery is the answer to quick economic growth in this colony. In fact, to encourage slavery you promise new settlers in North Carolina a certain amount of land for each slave they bring to the colony. You feel this is the only way to ensure North Carolina grows and is successful.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>North Carolina Retail Merchant</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a successful retail merchant, your best selling items are naval stores, rice, and tobacco, which are all produced with slave labor. The more goods you receive from plantation owners, the more you can sell. The more you sell, the higher your profit and income. While you do not deal directly with slaves themselves, you are in favor of slavery because it makes you better off financially.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perspectives on Colonial Slavery - Activity Instructions

1. Read the perspective assigned to you and begin individually brainstorming who you are. Take time to consider what your life in Colonial North Carolina is like, what your goals are, and what your feeling regarding slavery is. Your role will give you a basic understanding of who you are, but you must use the additional knowledge you have learned and your own creativity to determine your full identity.

2. Once you have brainstormed some ideas of who you are, answer the following (BE CREATIVE but REALISTIC!):
   - Describe yourself. What is your life like?
   - What is your perspective on slavery? Why?
   - Why should others care about your perspective?

3. Each of your group members will have alternate perspectives than your own, thus you will each have to introduce yourself in character. Using your brainstormed information above, write an introductory speech in first-person. This speech should be no longer than 2 minutes and will introduce yourself (feel free to assume a name other than your own) summarize who you are, what your life is like, what your perspective on slavery is, and why. Write your final draft here:

   I am…
4. When given instructions to do so, each of you will introduce yourselves to your group by reading your introductory speech. As you listen to the other perspectives in the group, summarize who each of the other people are below:

A.

B.

C.

D.

Which person in your group do you most agree with and why?

Which person do you disagree with the most and why?

Create one question for a person in your group who has an opposing view:

Is there anything all of your characters have in common? Or, is there anything you can all agree on? Explain.
5. Your teacher will give you items to discuss in your characters. After each of you have discussed your opinion, note your character’s thoughts in first person below:

A. What is your opinion of this image? How do you feel about the actions represented here? What do you think should be done with this piece of art?

B. What is your opinion of this quote from Carolina’s Fundamental Constitutions? Should Article 110 remain as written, or do you recommend changes to the article? Explain.

C. How does this excerpt from the Declaration of Independence make you feel? How do you interpret its meaning?

D. Based on this description of slave work, what recommendations would you make regarding slavery and why?
Items for Discussion During Perspectives Group Activity
(These items can be displayed in the front of the classroom using a projector or overhead, or individual copies can be made for distribution to each group.)

A. [Image description]

B. “Every freeman of Carolina, shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever.” Carolina’s Fundamental Constitutions, Article 110; 1669

C. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, 1776

D. “Slaves worked in the naval stores industry and would “box” a pine tree by cutting deep holes in it. The resulting flow of turpentine was then ladled into barrels. One man can readily care for 3000 boxes, and that number is generally assigned one negro, the negroes doing the most of this work. At the best and warmest season one negro can easily fill 15-20 barrels of turpentine a day...After three years the turpentine flow will cease and the pine trees collapse. Slaves then cut them up and burn them in kilns to make tar. It sometimes happens through ill management, and especially in too dry weather, that these kilns are blown up as if a train of Gun powder had been laid under them by which accident their Negroes have been very much burnt or scalded.”
Naval stores and the longleaf pine

By David Walbert

In a time before cars, trains, and airplanes, water was often the easiest — or the only — means of long-distance transportation. Eighteenth-century ships were sailing ships, and they were made almost entirely of wood. Building and maintaining wooden ships required specialized materials and a global industry to produce them.

Naval stores are goods (stores, or things stored for later use) used in building and maintaining ships. Originally, “naval stores” included everything used to build a ship, including wood and cloth, but by the end of the colonial period it meant tar, pitch, and turpentine. All of these products were manufactured from pine trees, which North Carolina had in abundance. For that reason and others, North Carolina became a key supplier to the British Navy, and naval stores became central to the colony’s economy.

Tar, pitch, and turpentine

If you’ve ever mistakenly thrown an evergreen bough on a campfire, used a chipper-shredder to clear brush, or even put up a Christmas tree, you know that pine trees and their relatives have gummy, sticky sap. Pine resins make a sticky mess that’s hard to wash off your hands and when burned make a smelly smoke that will ruin any s’more, but they also make pine trees a valuable natural resource. Those resins protect the tree, and they can also be used to protect other wood from the weather — especially, in the colonial period, the wooden hulls of ships.

- **Tar** is a dark, thick, sticky liquid produced by burning pine branches and logs very slowly in kilns. Seamen painted coats of tar on riggings that held masts and sails in place. It was also used on land, as axle grease, to preserve fence posts, and to cover wounds on livestock to help them heal. You may have smelled it when you passed a new road being laid down.

- **Pitch** is produced by boiling tar to concentrate it. It was painted on the sides and bottoms of wooden ships to make them watertight. At room temperature, pitch is nearly solid, much like modern caulk, which has similar uses. When heated, it flows like a liquid and can be used as a paint.

- **Turpentine** is distilled from a gum that living pine trees secrete to protect wounds in their trunks. It was not much used in the colonial period, but by the nineteenth century it was used in manufacturing paint and a variety of other goods as well as for medicinal purposes. You may have used this colorless but strong-smelling fluid used as a thinner for oil-based paints.
Life and work in the pine woods

In the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted, a journalist and landscape designer from Connecticut, traveled extensively through the South to report on slavery, southern people, and the southern economy. In his book *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy* he gave a detailed description of how naval stores were produced at that time, and he also made some observations about the people, white and black, who lived and worked there. What Olmsted described is probably not too different from the process of making naval stores a hundred years earlier, and will give you a sense of what the work was like.

The growth of an industry

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the English needed more and more ships for trade and war, most of England’s forests had been cut down for lumber and firewood. During the 1600s, England relied on imports of naval stores from Sweden. But Sweden’s naval stores industry fell under monopoly control by a single company, which more than doubled prices. At the same time, demand was growing. As European nations fought not only on the European continent but around the world, they built bigger navies and needed to replace ships lost in battle. A series of wars around the turn of the eighteenth century raised the demand for naval stores rapidly, and prices went even higher as supplies dwindled.

Clearly, England needed a new source of naval stores, and it turned to its North American colonies. To encourage the American naval stores industry, Parliament passed a law in 1705 that required the British Navy to pay inflated prices for tar, pitch, turpentine, rosin, hemp, and masts from British colonies.

England had tried before to encourage its colonists to manufacture naval stores. In Virginia, the Jamestown colonists had briefly tried making tar, but they quickly found that tobacco could bring them more money. Efforts to build a naval stores industry in New York and New England failed for similar reasons: Other crops and other industries were more profitable, and the colonists did not want to take on the messy work of making tar and pitch. And by 1700, New Englanders had cut down most of their native pine forests, which made manufacturing naval stores nearly impossible.

The southern colonies, though, had a longleaf pine forest that covered 90 million acres, including nearly all of North Carolina’s coastal plain and much of the southern Piedmont. And while Virginians and South Carolinians could grow other crops for export — such as tobacco, indigo, and rice — the soil and climate of most of eastern North Carolina didn’t make it profitable to grow those crops on a large scale. Farmers in the pine belt who needed cash found that naval stores were their best option.

Until about 1720, most of Carolina’s naval stores were produced in South Carolina, but as settlers moved up the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, they began to manufacture naval stores there. North Carolina’s industry grew so quickly that the ports of Brunswick (established in 1727) and Wilmington (in 1739) grew up to handle exports. The industry then spread into the areas around New Bern and Washington and up the Neuse River and the appropriately named Tar River. By the 1770s, North Carolina was responsible for 70 percent of the tar exported from North America and 50 percent of the turpentine, and naval stores were the colony’s most important industry. Most of that production came from small farmers who might have one or a few slaves and also raised other crops or livestock.

On New Year's Day, many Americans, especially those with southern origins, eat a dish combining black-eyed peas and rice called "Hoppin' John." It's supposed to bring good luck since people who "eat poor New Year's Day, eat rich the rest of the year." Most would be surprised to learn that rice is not a plant native to the New World. They would be even more surprised to learn that the dish has roots in tragedy rather than in luck.

Rice Comes to the New World

Tradition says that rice arrived in South Carolina around 1685 when sea captain John Thurber's ship was being repaired in Charleston. Thurber gave a sack of "Gold Seede" rice from Madagascar, a great rice-producing island off the east coast of Africa, either to Dr. Henry Woodward or Thomas Smith, who was a landgrave (governor of a major land grant). However, a bushel of rice had been sent to the colony on the supply ship William and Ralph as early as spring 1672. By September 26, 1691, the General Assembly of South Carolina passed an act permitting colonists to pay their taxes in rice, as well as other commodities. Rice cultivation was centered in the Low Country of South Carolina, with the Georgetown District emerging as a major production zone. North Carolina's Lower Cape Fear Region (from the 1720s onward), northeastern Spanish Florida, and coastal Georgia (after the 1750 repeal of the Trustee's ban on slavery) also produced rice throughout the colonial and antebellum eras.

Many of early settlers of the Carolinas (both the Cape Fear settlers of 1663 and the Ashley River emigrants of 1670) came from Barbados. These experienced sugar planters were offered land incentives to bring slaves; for example, contracts from 1664 guaranteed emigrants from Barbados a bonus of 20 acres for every male slave and ten acres for every female slave they brought to the new colony. However, the Carolinas were too cold for the cultivation of sugar, and the exports of lumber, cattle, and deerskins provided slim profits.

Slavery in the Rice Fields

The English settlers began to enslave the region's Native Americans in large numbers, selling them in the slave trade and using them as laborers. African slaves were imported from the earliest days, as well. In 1671, Sir John Yeameans arrived at the Ashley River settlement (the future Charleston) with 200 African slaves. According to South Carolina's 1708 census, there were 3,000 African slaves and 1,400 Native American slaves in a total population of 9,500. However, smallpox and yellow fever killed many Native Americans and it was impossible to get enough European indentured slaves to provide the colony with adequate labor. Indeed, Charleston merchant Samuel Eveleigh asserted in 1735, "I am positive that the Commodity can't be produced by white people. Because the work is too laborious, the heat very intent, and the whites can't work in the wet at that season as Negros do to week rice." By the 1730s Carolinian slavery was predominantly African.

A Feat as Great as Building the Pyramids

Rice cultivation is dirty, hard, dangerous work. Contemporaries compared the work of converting 150,000 acres of virgin land into tidal plantations as an undertaking comparable to building the Pyramids or re-channeling the Euphrates River. An acre of mud flats would be measured into a rectangular field. Slaves would clear the land, chopping down and burning or removing any trees. Oxen were the only draft animals that might be used to assist, but they had to wear a special boot or else they would sink in the muck. Using only picks and shovels, slaves excavated a five-by-five foot ditch through the clearing that would serve both as the canal that brought tidal waters to the field and its main drain. The slaves used the
muddy soil they had excavated to form a levee as high as six feet tall around the field. Slaves constructed sluice gates (first of cypress plug trunks and later hanging floodgates) to drain the water from the field for sowing and flood it for cultivation. Typically the following season, the field would be divided into four ¼-acre sections. Slaves added quarter drains (secondary canals) and cleared stumps. With the extra weight of water-laden soil, the danger of snakes and alligators that had been stranded behind the levee, mosquitoes and hot summer temperatures, the slave's work was dangerous and exhausting.

The cultivation of the rice began in late spring, around April, with the seed being sown. Ploughs were dragged through the wet soil to create furrows about three inches deep spaced 18 inches apart. Then, the slaves planted the rice in rows called drills. Slaves' daily work included operating the sluice gates with the tides. They flooded the fields following their planting of the seeds to the time of sprouting. After three weeks, they weeded and flooded the plants to cover the top of the young plant, gradually draining it halfway down the stem after a few days. The fields were drained and weeded, and the ground around the plants "hilled up" (hoed). Around mid-June or early July, the plants were gradually flooded and remained underwater for two months. Slaves freshened the water in the fields to keep it from stagnating. Tidal water is where fresh, inland water meets the salt water of the ocean. Fresh water rises on top of salt water, so the rice fields would be sown below the level of the high tide. A slave would open a sluice gate to skim off the fresh water floating on the top of the tidal waters to irrigate the crop, shutting it off before the salt water could intrude and kill the plants. At low tide, the gates were reopened to drain the fresh water out. A slave would be expected to weed a 105 foot square plot (¼-acre) in one day. Charles Ball, a runaway slave reported:

> Watering and weeding the rice is considered one of the most unhealthy occupations on a southern plantation, as the people are obliged to live for several weeks in the mud and water, subject to all the unwholesome vapors that arise from stagnant pools, under the rays of a summer sun, as well as the chilly autumnal dews of night.

At harvest time, slaves with iron sickles reaped the rice stalks, bound them into sheaves (bundles), and stacked them in mule-drawn wagons. The slaves would unload the sheaves on a piece of hard ground or a barn's threshing floor and allow it to dry before threshing it with flails. (Treading the grain with mules was easier but resulted in more damage to the rice, so slave labor was used rather than animal labor.) Rice must be processed to be the familiar white grain we see at the grocery store. The seed shell has to be removed, and then the brown coat of bran polished off the grain. Slaves used wooden mortars and pestles to mill the rice, separating the hulls from the grain with hand-sewn black rush winnowing baskets. An account from 1775 reported, "When winnowed it is ground, to free the rice from the husk; this is winnowed again, and put into a mortar large enough to hold half a bushel, in which it is beat with a pestle by negroes to free it from its thick skin; this is very laborious work." Following the pounding, the grain was sifted to remove the flour and dust produced in the process, and finally the rice was run through a market sieve, which separated the whole grains from the broken grains. Grains that were damaged in the process were called "little rice" and brought a lower price than whole grains. When the rice was clean, it would be placed in barrels that held roughly 600 pounds each. Rice mills appeared in the late 19th century, first operated by oxen, then by water (Jonathan Lucas, 1787), and finally tide-operated (1792). Although much of the work was back-breaking, unskilled labor, skilled slave artisans, such as carpenters, coopers, millwrights, and surveyors, contributed a great deal to the engineering, construction, and maintenance of the rice plantations.
Rather than the "gang system," where overseers or drivers directly supervised a group of workers, most rice plantations used the "task system," a specific amount of work that an average hard-working slave could complete in ten hours. When the slave completed the work to the driver's satisfaction, he or she could use the remaining hours of the day for their own purposes. Typically work began at dawn to avoid the worst heat of the day. Sam Polite, a freedman, explained:

Every slave have task to do, sometime one task, sometime two, and sometime three. You have for work till task through. Have to cut cord of marsh grass maybe. Task of marsh been eight feet long and four feet high...If slave don't do task, they get licking with lash on naked back.

Fugitive slave Charles Ball reported one overseer's method of controlling slaves:

I gave them a hundred lashes more than a dozen times; but they never quit running away, till I chained them together, with iron collars round their necks, and chained them to spades, and made them do nothing but dig ditches to drain the rice swamps. They could not run away then, unless they went together, and carried their chains and spades with them. I kept them in this way two years....

**Deadly Work**

The mortality of slaves working in the rice fields was extremely high. One 18th-century writer declared:

If a work could be imagined peculiarly unwholesome and even fatal to health, it must be that of standing like the negroes, ankle and mid-leg deep in water which floats an ouzy mud, and exposed all the while to a burning sun which makes the air they breathe hotter than the human blood; these poor wretches are then in a furness of stinking putrid effluvia.

Up to a third of Low Country slaves died within a year of their arrival. Records from Somerset Place Plantation in North Carolina indicate that 80 Africans were brought to the site in June 1786 to transform the land into a rice plantation. By 1803, only 15 of the original 80 slaves were still alive. At Gowrie Plantation in South Carolina during an eight-year period between 1846 and 1854, 92 more slaves died than were born; 90 percent of the infants who survived birth died before they were 16 years old.

Part of the problem was poor health. The environment in which rice is cultivated is the perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes. Both malaria and yellow fever may have been introduced from Africa to the rice cultivation regions by the slave trade. Slaves suffering from malaria may have brought the disease to the New World, where it infected mosquitoes. Yellow fever victims would not have survived the Middle Passage, but mosquitoes could have bred in the slave ships' open-water barrels. A sickle cell genetic defect provided protection from malaria to some slaves, while yellow fever survivors had a lifelong immunity to the disease. Nonetheless, malaria and yellow fever claimed the lives of many slaves working the rice plantations.

As rice plantations expanded, the demand on slaves and their labor increased. Modern economists have noted that, unlike virtually every other slave-produced commodity, the output per slave in the rice industry grew from 2,250 pounds around 1750 to over 3,000 pounds by 1800. In human terms, this represented an enormous amount of physical hardship and arduous labor.