

SLAVERY IN COLONIAL NORTH AMERICA

Jane Landers
Vanderbilt University

If you ask most Americans about the origins of slavery in this country, they would probably tell you that the terrible institution began in 1619 at Jamestown. Many U.S. history textbooks still say so and efforts are underway to establish a museum recognizing that supposed first. The assumption is that the first slaves were Africans—which they were not—and that United States history begins with English settlement—which it does not. Nor is the history of Africans synonymous with slavery.

In fact, indigenous slavery predated African slavery in the lower South and some of the first Africans to reach the shores of what would later become the United States were free men. Moreover, both free and enslaved Africans arrived more than a century before 1619. A free African named Juan Garrido accompanied Juan Ponce de Leon when he claimed La Florida for Spain in 1513. African slaves also trekked in all the major Spanish expeditions through the lower South where they encountered natives who seemed also to be in some form of bondage.

Queen Isabella had forbidden the enslavement of her new Indian subjects, but the alleged ferocity of the Caribs and their reputed cannibalism led her to authorize "just war" against them and, by extension, other hostile groups. After 1511 Indians who rejected Christianity or Spanish dominion might could be legally enslaved. The Indians who resisted Ponce de Leon's second landing in Florida in 1521 had probably already experienced slave raids launched from Hispaniola.

The first large contingent of African slaves brought to the present-day United States arrived from Hispaniola in 1526 with the ill-fated colonizer, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón. Ayllón landed some 600 Spanish, men, women and children at a site believed to have been located near present-day Sapelo Sound in Georgia. His settlement, San Miguel de Gualdape, was quickly undermined by disease, starvation, and Ayllón's death. Mutiny ensued, and disaffected elements took control of the failing colony. Finally, African slaves set fire to the compound of the mutineers and the Guale Indians attacked. This episode marked the first known alliance of Indians and Africans against Europeans in what came to be the United States. The surviving Spaniards straggled back to Hispaniola, but some

of the Africans took up residence among the Guale and became the region's first maroons (from the Spanish word *cimarrón*). Other maroons already inhabited the remote mountains and swamps of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Cuba, and Mexico, as they later would also in Brazil.

Despite the slave rebellion at Gualdape, all subsequent Spanish expeditions through the lower South also incorporated slaves and more Africans deserted to take their chances among the indigenous nations. For the next three centuries, the Indian nations of the vast territory of La Florida--which the Spanish considered stretched from Key West to Newfoundland and west to "the mines of Mexico"-- provided a potential refuge for enslaved Africans.¹

The presence of vast unsettled hinterlands populated by still-numerous Indians shaped the development of slavery in the lower South as did differential types and rates of immigration and of economic development. Ira Berlin has described the evolution of slavery--from "charter generations" of slaves, who worked in relatively equal conditions alongside European masters in rough frontiers--to full blown slave societies--characterized by plantations and staple crops such as rice, sugar, and cotton.² Plantation slavery was slow to develop in the lower South because Spain was more determined to plant an effective settlement and guard the Atlantic passageways of its treasure fleets than to initiate plantation economies.

Around the middle of the sixteenth century, as French Huguenots were challenging the Portuguese for control of Brazil, some of their fellows attempted to settle Florida. These unlucky Protestants were dispatched by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés who finally established St. Augustine in 1565 and made Florida a permanent outpost of the Spanish empire. The high costs of slaves meant Menéndez probably brought with him fewer than fifty slaves. Some he later sent to help establish his second settlement of Santa Elena, in present-day South Carolina. The colonization of La Florida was not easy. Earlier Spanish expeditions through the lower South introduced diseases which had taken a devastating toll on the native populations and the new settlements only added to the burden on Indians whom the Spaniards expected to give them food, labor, and obedience. Before long Menéndez was also facing indigenous rebellion.³

As disease, flight, and war made native labor more problematic, Spaniards tried to acquire

more Africans, but the numbers of slaves in the region remained relatively low, as Peter Wood's demographic study of the South has shown. ⁴Spain relied on Portuguese slave traders whom they contracted to import Africans into the circum-Caribbean, but Florida was a minor post and most of the available slaves went to areas where the investment might be recouped—such as Mexico or Peru.

During the first century of Spanish occupation, a two-tier system of African slavery developed in the lower South. As unacculturated Africans called bozales did hard labor on early cattle ranches and on government fortifications and other public works, Spanish-speaking Catholic slaves known as ladinos filled a wide range of urban domestic, artisanal, and lower-status economic roles, working in occupations as varied as tailoring to masonry. Urban slaves generally received better treatment than their rural counterparts, based on older metropolitan slave relations, on their access to legal and religious protections, and on their integration into a cash economy. In St. Augustine, as in Havana and other circum-Caribbean cities, slaves were allowed to earn work for themselves on Sundays and feast days and also to hire themselves out for an agreed upon return to their owners. With effort, slaves could accumulate sufficient income to buy their freedom or that of their kin through a legal mechanism called coartación. Owners and the state also freed slaves, and African freedom and enslavement coexisted in most Spanish colonies. Because it was basically a military outpost, supported by annual Spanish payrolls, and only secondarily a ranching and timbering economy, Florida developed as “a society with slaves” rather than “a slave society” to use Berlin's categorization.⁵ Meanwhile, during the first half of the seventeenth century, sugar planters in Brazil were importing an estimated 4,000 slaves a year.

The Southern regions of North America took on a different profile in 1670, however, when after more than a century of Spanish settlement in the region, Barbadian planters established an English colony at Charles Town “but ten days journey” from Spanish St. Augustine in 1670. The English newcomers were intent on establishing profitable plantations such as they had known in Barbados, and this would require the hard work of African slaves--and many of them. Spanish slavery was based on Roman law which considered slavery a mutable legal condition. Slaves were always still human and, as such, entitled to legal protections, church membership, and freedom via testament, self-purchase, and state or private manumission. The slave codes English planters developed in the Caribbean, however, considered slaves as chattel or “moveable property”, not

unlike their cattle or furniture. The English slave system featured harsh regulatory codes and minimal protections and it strongly discouraged manumissions. Slaves were quick to learn the differences in these slave regimes and fled southward asking for religious sanctuary in Spanish Florida. In 1693 the Spanish king issued a decree "giving liberty to all ... the men as well as the women ... so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same."⁶ The English in Carolina denounced Spain's provocative sanctuary policy and instituted regulatory slave codes, ticket systems, and land and water patrols, but not even diplomatic negotiations nor military action stanching the flow of runaways. Spanish governors encouraged the freedmen to return and raid English plantations and the former slaves formed an effective guerrilla force against English and Indian expeditions from Carolina and later, Georgia. As more slaves came seeking sanctuary, Florida's governor, Manuel de Montiano, followed a model that had been used to pacify maroon populations in Panama, Mexico, Hispaniola, and Colombia, and in 1738 established the former slaves in a town of their own, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, two miles north of St. Augustine.⁷ The Mandinga Francisco Menéndez, who had initiated the successful suit for freedom and had led the black militia, also governed the new settlement and Governor Montiano referred to the inhabitants of Mose as Menéndez's "subjects."¹ Governor Montiano clearly considered the benefits of a northern outpost against anticipated British attacks. And who better to serve as an advance warning system than grateful ex-slaves carrying Spanish arms? The freedmen apparently understood their expected role for, upon receiving the land, they vowed to be "the most cruel enemies of the English," and to risk their lives and spill their "last drop of blood in defense of the Great crown of Spain and the Holy Faith."²

Meanwhile, South Carolina's colonists were attempting to replicate the Barbadian plantation model. In the early years of settlement in Carolina, Africans experienced slavery that was much like that in Spanish Florida. Africans chased cattle through the woods and worked alongside their owners to build the first homesteads and indigo works in the colony. Once the Carolinians hit on rice as a staple export crop, however, all would change. Rice cultivation is labor intensive, requiring the construction and maintenance of intricate systems of dikes and fields, and soon British traders were importing more and more slaves from the Congo-Angola region and lesser numbers from Sierra Leone. No other colonial city imported more slaves than Charleston, and Sullivan's Island, which sits in Charleston's harbor, might be considered the Africans' Ellis Island. By the early decades of the eighteenth century Carolina was said to be "like a Negro country" and

outnumbered colonists lived in dread fear of slave uprisings. Slaves revolted in 1711 and 1714, and the following year slaves joined the Yamasee war that almost succeeded in eradicating white settlement in Carolina.⁸

As Carolina was taking this demographic turn, French planters began importing shipments of “Bambara” slaves from the Senegambia region to break in new plantations in Louisiana. This “charter generation” of slaves was unlike that in Florida in that the slaves came almost exclusively from one African location and they came in large numbers over a brief period of intense importation. These factors contributed to cultural continuities that still mark the area. Senegambian labor enabled Louisiana planters to move rather quickly into plantation development, first of indigo, but, later, and more importantly, of sugar cane. African slaves also labored on government fortifications and public works, and built and repaired the levees that protected New Orleans. The French slave system, called the Code Noir, was, like the Spanish, based on Roman law, but modern scholars and contemporaries alike, considered the French to be much harsher slave masters. Unlike Spain, France had no long history of milder urban slavery on which to draw and it focused on developing profitable colonial plantations.⁹

Louisiana’s African slaves meanwhile faced grueling work in breaking in new indigo and sugar cane plantations. They also faced some of the same dangers as their counterparts in Florida and Carolina in living on an Indian frontier. Spanish, English, and French colonizers all exploited the depleted Indian populations on whom they intruded—making excessive or inappropriate labor demands on them, charging excessive prices for their deer hides, abusing their women, or interfering in their religious and social practices. Inevitably, the Indians in all these regions rose against their oppressors. The history of the lower South is scarred by hundreds of years of Indian/European warfare and all of it involved African slaves in some way. The Guale, Timucuan, and Apalachee Indian wars in Florida, the Yamasee war in Carolina, and the Natchez war in Louisiana all engulfed the slaves in danger and violence, whether they fought with the Europeans or the natives.¹⁰

When Spain acquired Louisiana in 1769, many French planters stayed behind and managed their sugar plantations as before. Spaniards alleged that their cruel treatment of their slaves led to major slave revolts such as Point Coupee in 1795. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Kimberly S. Hanger have shown that Spain introduced the two-tier slavery already operating in other Spanish colonies and expanded possibilities for freedom. The

freed persons of color concentrated in New Orleans filled artisanal and occupational roles much like those of their counterparts in St. Augustine, and like them, also formed loyal black militias for Spain.¹¹

Some slaves took advantage of the frequent periods of chaos that wracked the lower South to escape into the still unsettled hinterlands. Maroons were a product of slavery and the lower South, like Brazil, has a rich history of marronage. The Savannah River area, the swamps and bayous surrounding New Orleans, the Apalachicola River region and the interior central Florida were all home to fairly large maroon communities. Although none of these achieved the size of Brazil's famed Palmares, local authorities and planters usually failed in attempts to eradicate them.¹²

The maroons of the Savannah River were runaways from Carolina or from the new colony of Georgia established by James Oglethorpe in 1732. Oglethorpe envisioned Georgia as a sort of buffer state between South Carolina and Florida where the debilitating system of slavery would not enter. Despite Oglethorpe's early moralizing, however, Georgian colonists envied their northern neighbors their African-based wealth and before long slavery was legalized in Georgia and indigo and silk-worm farms gave way to rice and cotton. Georgian planters purchased their slaves in Charleston from the same English traders who provisioned South Carolina and so the Atlantic coastline of the lower South developed a fairly homogenous cultural tradition, based on that derived from the Congo/Angola region. Some of Georgia's new African imports promptly ran to Florida, while others found refuge in nearby maroon camps.¹³

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries unknown numbers of Lowcountry and Georgia runaways followed the southern route to freedom and Spanish government officials, laypersons, and church figures corroborated that many of the incoming maroons were of the Congo "nation." Spanish authorities often made surnames of the "nation" names and carefully recorded ethnic origins on censuses, notarial records, military rosters, and a wide variety of other documents. Parish registers dating back to the mid-seventeenth century are a rich source of information on ethnicity and record the baptism of numbers of adults declaring themselves to be Congos. Others who stated they had come from Carolina may also have been from Kongo/Angola and some with no connection to Carolina identified themselves as of the Angola nation.¹² Tax records in which owners legitimated prior slave purchases (*indultos*) provide another rich source of

ethnographic information for Florida. Congos were the most numerous single ethnic group listed on the *indultos* for the years 1752-1762--thirty eight of 204 slaves. If other Central African nations such as Manicongo, Soso, Sozongo are added, Central Africans formed almost one-fourth of the total list.¹³

Scattered references by slave owners about material items they understood to be of cultural importance to their slaves also offer clues about ethnic origins and cultural persistence. The Florida slave trader and planter, Zephaniah Kingsley, noted that when taken onboard a slave ship the later-to-be famous Gullah Jack carried with him a sack full of "conjuring implements" which he always kept with him and a Georgia planter advertised that his runaway slave Juan Spaniard wore "something in a small bag suspended by a string around his neck." These items may have been Kongo *nkisi*.¹⁴ As archaeologists like Leland Ferguson have demonstrated, enslaved and escaped Africans spread Kongo traditions southward down the Gullah Coast from South Carolina to Florida.¹⁵ Some of these traditions survive to this day in the famous cemetery at Sunbury, Georgia and in the Bosque Bello cemetery on Amelia Island, Florida where black graves are still decorated with white ceramic chickens and white conch shells--Kongo cultural markers described by Robert Farris Thompson and others.¹⁶

Kongo traditions also found their way into interior Florida as Central African slaves escaped bondage and became vassals of the Seminole nation. Some runaways lived in Seminole villages like Bowlegs Town, but many resided in autonomous black villages like Pilaklikaha, Payne's Town, Mulatto Girl's Town, King Heijah's Town, Bucker Woman's Town, Boggy Island, and Big Swamp in the Alachua and west central Florida savannahs and along the Suwannee, Apalachicola, and Withlacochee Rivers.¹⁷ The Africans of varied ethnolinguistic backgrounds who came to be called Black Seminoles--from cimarrones, the Spanish term for maroons--- practiced different settlement and agricultural patterns than their indigenous hosts, to name only a few of the obvious cultural differences. Both Spanish and later American sources, however, indicate that the escaped slaves quickly learned indigenous languages and adopted indigenous dress and well-tested architectural patterns suited to the environment.¹⁸ The Florida maroons moved into areas previously not occupied by the Seminoles and soon cultivated sufficient rice, corn, sugar cane, peanuts, Benne seed, and other products. Archaeologist Brent Weisman argues that they were so good at it that their surplus provided the tribute which supported the Seminole shift to a plantation economy in the late eighteenth century.¹⁹ At

the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, Florida became a British colony (1763-1784) and Daniel L. Schafer and David Hancock have shown that planter/slave traders imported thousands of slaves directly from Africa to work the large rice and indigo plantations they established in their new colony. One early investor in British Florida, Richard Oswald, imported hundreds of Africans from his slaving factory on Bance Island in the middle of the Sierra Leone River. One of Oswald's contemporaries estimated that as many as 1,000 African slaves were imported into Florida in 1771 alone, a peak year of the Africa/Florida trade. The "new Negroes" came from the Windward, Grain, Gold, and Guinea Coasts of West Africa, from Gambia, and from Angola. ¹⁴

The outbreak of the American Revolution disrupted slavery throughout the lower South. When the Loyalists lost first Charleston, and then, Savannah, the evacuated over 9,000 slaves southward to their last remaining colony--Florida. Loyalist hopes for re-establishing their plantations in Florida were dashed when, in a few short years, the war was over, and Spain regained Florida. Hundreds of slaves belonging to the outgoing Loyalists rushed to claim the religious sanctuary Spain established in 1693 and they remained in Florida as free Spanish subjects. Like their predecessors who lived at the free black town of Mose, these Africans became loyal defenders of the Spanish Crown that had freed them.

By the time the British evacuated Florida, African slaves had built flourishing rice plantations and cattle ranches along the St. Johns River and helped extract great profits in timber from Florida's dense forests. The incoming Spanish, thus, inherited an established plantation economy.¹⁵ All they lacked was sufficient population. To remedy that deficit, the Crown opened Florida to American homesteaders who, like their former Loyalist enemies, brought many new slaves into the colony. Their hopes for the future were also undone, however, by raids by French-inspired revolutionaries, Seminole attacks, American-backed invasions, pirates disguised as Latin American revolutionaries who seized the important port of Fernandina, on Amelia Island. The United States, which one Spanish official described as "as industrious as it is ambitious" had already acquired Louisiana by purchase in 1803 and was determined to have Florida as well. Finally, in 1819, the Adams-Onís Treaty gave the Americans legal title to Florida. Florida was the longest-lived colony in what is today the United States and it ended as it began, a Spanish settlement. Many of the former slaves whom Spain had freed evacuated to Cuba with the outgoing Spaniards and their slaves. The free black subjects who trusted treaty provisions and stayed behind hoping to preserve their homesteads, like their counterparts in Louisiana,

lost most of their hard-won gains over the next years as chattel slavery and all its social implications took root in Florida.¹⁶

Endnotes

-
1. Jane Landers, Black Society in Spanish Florida (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), ch. 1.
 2. Ira Berlin, Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
 3. Landers, Black Society, 14-15; Henry Dobyns, Their Number Became Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1983).
 4. Peter H. Wood, "The Changing Population of the Colonial South: An Overview by Race and Region, 1685-1790," in Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast, ed. Peter H. Wood, Gregory A. Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln, NE, 1989), 35-103.
 5. Landers, Black Society; Berlin, Many Thousands Gone.
 6. Royal edict, Nov. 7, 1693, Santo Domingo 58-1-26, Archivo General de Indias, cited in Landers, Black Society, 25.
 7. Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York: Norton Books, 1974); Landers, Black Society.
 1. . Manuel de Montiano to the king, Sept. 16, 1740, SD 2658, AGI. On Spanish recognition of natural lords and the autonomy they enjoyed see Amy Turner Bushnell, "Ruling the 'Republic of Indians' in Seventeenth-Century Florida," in Powhatan's Mantle, 134-50.
 2. . Fugitive Negroes of the English plantations to the king, June 10, 1738, SD 844, microfilm reel 15, PKY.
 8. Wood, Black Majority, 113, 116, 127.
 9. Daniel H. Usner, Jr. Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-

Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Kimberly S. Hanger, Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Blacks in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

10. Eugene Lyon, Santa Elena: A Brief History of the Colony, 1566-1587 (Columbia, SC, 1984); Wood, Black Majority, 113, 116, 127.

11. Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 100-105.

12. Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana; Landers, Black Society.

13. Julia Floyd Smith, Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia, 1750-1869 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), ch.1; Betty Wood, Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995; Landers, Black Society, 79-80.

12. Black Baptisms, Cathedral Parish Records, Diocese of St. Augustine Catholic Center, Jacksonville, FL, on microfilm, P.K.Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

13. Book of Indultos, 1752-1762, Cuba 472, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain (hereafter cited as AGI). Others who may have been Central Africans (as spelled in Spanish) include Mumbat (1), Mumbata (1), Mumboma (1), Mungoma (1), Mungundu (1), Musicongo (1), Soso (2), Sozongo (2).

14. Zephaniah Kingsley, A Treatise on the Patriarchal or Cooperative System of Society as It Exists in Some Governments and Colonies in America, and In the United States under the Name of Slavery, with Its Necessity and Advantages (1829; reprint, Freeport, NY, 1971), 13-14; Charles Harris to Governor Peter Early, November 29, 1813 in "East Florida Documents," Georgia Historical Quarterly 13 (March 1929): 154-58; Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 134-37 and Face of the Gods, 56-60, 92-3; Art and Healing of the Bakongo Commented by Themselves: Minkisi from the Laman Collection, Kikongo texts translated and edited by Wyatt MacGaffey (Stockholm: Folkens Museum, 1991).

15. Ferguson, Uncommon Ground; Theresa A. Singleton, "I, Too Am America": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

16. Landers, Black Society, 131; Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," in Africanisms in American Culture, Joseph E. Holloway, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 148-84.

17. Howard F. Klein, Florida Indians II : Provisional Historical Gazeteer with Locational Notes on Florida Colonial Communities (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974). Klein worked from lists created by the Mikasuki chief, Neamathla and by Captain John Bell at an Indian conference convened by Andrew Jackson on September 18, 1821; Landers, Black Society, chap. 10; Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., Africans and Creeks From the Colonial Period to the Civil War (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 3-83.

18. William Simmons, Notices of East Florida, facsimile of 1822 edition, ed. George E. Burke (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1978), 32-53.

19. Brent R. Weisman, "The Plantation System of the Florida Seminole Indians and Black Seminoles During the Colonial Era," in Colonial Plantations and Economy of Florida, ed. Jane G. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 136-49 ; Report of Horatio S. Dexter, enclosed in Wm. P. Duval to John C. Calhoun, August 26, 1823, in James David Glunt, "Plantation and Frontier Records of East and Middle Florida, 1789-1868, Vol. I, Ph.D. University of Michigan, 1930), 279-98. For the same time period Gregory Evans Dowd also argues that "among the Cherokees as among the Creeks, African American slaves may have been the most important agents of cultural change...". Gregory Evans Dowd, A Spirited Resistance: the North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 159-60.

14. Daniel L. Schafer, "'Yellow Silk Ferret Tied Round Their Wrists': African Americans in British East Florida, 1763-1784," in The African American Heritage of Florida, ed. David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville, Fla., 1995), 71-103; David Hancock, Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 5, and chap. 6.

15. Daniel L. Schafer, "'A Swamp of an Investment'?" Richard Oswald's British East Florida Plantation Experiment, "in Jane Landers, ed. Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida, ed. Jane G. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 11-38. in Jane Landers, ed. Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida, ed. Jane G. Landers (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

16.Landers, Black Society.