

Antebellum Days

WHILE EXPLORING NORTH AMERICA'S southeastern coastline in 1520 Francisco Gordillo of Spain discovered a large and beautiful harbor surrounded by enormous moss-draped trees. Native Americans, occupying the area as early as 8000 BC, called this land Chicora. Gordillo named the area Santa Elena. In 1526, Spanish settlers, led by Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, and their African slaves established a colony somewhere in the vicinity, but following a slave revolt and due to starvation and fever only a few Spaniards survived to escape back to Santo Domingo. The escaped slaves integrated into local Native American tribes, thus becoming the first of the new immigrants to settle permanently in North America. During the next forty years the only Europeans passing through the area were pirates and a few Franciscans seeking to Christianize the Native Americans.¹

During the second half of the 16th century, France and Spain struggled over the territory. In 1562, France entered the fray when explorer Jean Ribault named the region Port Royal, describing it as "one of the greatest and fayrest havens of the worlde." The French quickly established the settlement of Charlesfort at Port Royal, but when their supplies accidentally burned, the settlers abandoned the site. In 1564, under the leadership of Rene Goulaine de Laudonniere, the French planned another colony. Learning of these French incursions, Spain's King Philip II dispatched Pedro Menendez de Aviles to North America, and in September 1565, Spanish soldiers slaughtered the French colonists.²

Early the next year, Pedro Menendez de Aviles sailed into Port Royal Sound and established for Spain the colony of Santa Elena on the coast of present day South Carolina. During the early years of the colony, the military garrisons of Fort San Salvador and Fort San Felipe consisted of about 330 soldiers, while nearly 200 civilian administrators, Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, farmers, and artisans resided in the town of Santa Elena.

Working at Santa Elena, modern archaeologists have uncovered a high-status material culture, including Chinese Ming dynasty porcelain and Majolica pottery, indicating that Florida's ruling aristocratic families resided at Santa Elena while her sister city, Saint Augustine, served primarily as a military post occupied by unmarried soldiers.

By 1580, 400 civilian residents occupied the thriving town of Santa Elena. However, their survival still depended on a steady supply line from Spain, and the English and French constantly stalked these trade ships. Eventually, the colony proved impossible to protect. In 1587, following Sir Francis Drake's destruction of Saint Augustine, the Havana government ordered Santa Elena evacuated and burned.³

A hundred years passed before Europeans again cast their eyes on the Port Royal islands. In August, 1684, 148 religious dissenters sailed from Scotland toward the newly established English colony of Charles Town. After a brief stop, fifty-one of these adventurers sailed farther south to Port Royal, establishing a new settlement called Stuart Town. During the next two years, Lord Cardross and Rev. William Dunlop, the leaders of the expedition, expressed high hopes in letters sent to the Lord Proprietors. However, a Spanish invasion from Saint Augustine ended their optimism. As their village burned, the colonists fled north to Edisto Island, but their descendants would play an important role in the area.⁴

Despite Spanish threats, the English still coveted beautiful Port Royal. As Charles Town prospered, the Lord Proprietors in Carolina began bestowing land grants farther south. In 1698 Thomas Nairne and John Steuart each received grants for "One Thousd Acres of Land on ye Island of Saint Helena." By 1710 the expanding Carolina colony laid plans for a new seaport at Port Royal called Beaufort.

As the coastal Carolina colony developed in the early 18th century, certain features distinguished it. Unlike other English colonies in North America whose settlers arrived directly from Europe, Carolina emerged from the already-established English colony at Barbados in the West Indies, and its culture quickly acquired a Caribbean flavor. African slaves arrived

within six months after the colony's commencement, and by 1708 Africans outnumbered Europeans in South Carolina. A Swiss traveler, Samuel Dyssli, commented that "Carolina looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people." By the American Revolution, blacks would outnumber whites in South Carolina almost two to one.⁵

In 1715, Port Royal experienced serious conflict with the Native Americans, and following these battles, few colonists felt eager to return to isolated Saint Helena.⁶ Letters from the period tell of the hardships, the inhabitants being "mostly poor planters of corn, pease, rice . . . living at a great distance from each other." Religious and social life were almost non-existent.

In the early eighteenth century, Saint Helena's closest church lay forty miles away by water, and religious life on the island languished. The colonists at Beaufort erected the first small Anglican church in 1724, but not until the late 1730s did planters on Saint Helena Island consecrate the Anglican Chapel of Ease. It was a beautiful brick structure whose ruins still stand in a grove of pines and oaks veiled by spanish moss. However, religion still occupied few minds. Abigail Capers, a planter's wife, wrote that most people spent Sundays not in church but in amusements and in visiting friends on the island.⁷

Having little interest in their own faith, planters made even less effort to introduce their slaves to Christian doctrine. In 1739 George Whitefield, the famed evangelist, preached on Saint Helena Island and persuaded a few planters to instruct their slaves in the rudiments of Christianity. More important, in 1751 Whitefield helped in the consecration of the Euhaw Baptist Church on nearby Boyd's Creek. Descended from the earlier "Dunlop dissenters" who fled from Port Royal in 1686, this congregation returned to begin evangelization among the slaves on the various islands. Nevertheless, most planters discouraged evangelism among the slaves, fearing that the gospel would bring ideas of freedom.⁸

If Christianity was little known among Saint Helena's slaves in the eighteenth century, then what constituted their predominant religious and cultural practices? The question of how much African culture survived and under what guises has generated much debate concerning the acculturation of the slaves into the American mainstream. E. Franklin Frazier has argued adamantly that African cultural forms could not have survived the passage from Africa to America. He presented several reasons: slaves did not possess a uniform culture because they originated from diverse parts of Africa;

slaves were mixed together on slave ships and sold in the American markets without regard for tribal ties; plantations closely supervised slaves and prohibited the use of African languages; and slaveowners encouraged rapid acculturation into the plantation system.⁹

Melville Herskovits, in contrast, claimed that African religious rituals and beliefs survived well into the 20th century among African Americans, especially in the Carolina Sea Islands. Herskovits has demonstrated that Africans were not necessarily separated from their tribal companions, and that while slaves certainly came to America from throughout Africa, most arrived from West Africa's coastal areas, possessing similar cultural traits which were maintained.¹⁰

South Carolina's rice crop was important for maintaining African culture. By 1720, rice had become a major export and by the mid-eighteenth century, South Carolinians considered it the only commodity of any significance.¹¹ Carolina planters prized slaves from the West African Grain Coast, known today as Sierra Leone and Liberia, because these Africans understood rice production methods. Slave traders on Bunce Island in Sierra Leone specialized in sending slaves to coastal Carolina, and on the Atlantic's American side, major buyers such as Henry Laurens paid close attention to slaves' ethnic origins. South Carolinians' preoccupation with rice insured a greater homogeneity of slaves and enabled West Africans to transplant their culture to the Carolina coast.¹²

Evidence from coastal Carolina also indicates a common African language which survived the Atlantic passage. Lorenzo Turner's linguistic research demonstrated that the Gullah language on the islands is not a corrupt form of English (as believed by many) but rather exhibits African descent.¹³ This common language base not only enabled Africans to communicate with one another, it also altered the English used by Europeans. With slaves outnumbering whites two to one, Gullah was in essence the accepted "trade language." The standard Southern dialect among both blacks and whites, especially along the coast from North Carolina to Florida, has always been a union of African and European linguistic patterns.

African cultural forms also survived because new slaves provided fresh links with the old world. Even after slave importation became illegal in 1808, island plantations received slaves directly from Africa or the Caribbean at their own docks hidden by the over-arching oaks on the dark winding tidal rivers. In the early 1860s, missionaries and army officers wrote about slaves who were "original Africans."¹⁴ Unlike mainland plantations cut off

from African influences, islands like Saint Helena periodically received “booster shots” from the old culture.

Unlike conditions on the mainland, the island plantations often went unsupervised by whites. Planters and their families avoided the malarial islands. These plantation aristocrats made their homes not on Saint Helena Island but at Beaufort or Charleston. Several planters lived in Philadelphia, Boston, or even London, and rarely visited the plantations. Supervision fell to a few white overseers but predominantly to black “drivers.” Such minimal contact with American mainstream culture allowed African culture to thrive.¹⁵

More than mere speculation, archaeological research has uncovered material evidence indicating that African culture persisted in the Carolina Lowcountry. Prior to the 1790s, the architecture in the slave quarters clearly displayed African origins. Furthermore, when the early slaves made pottery for their own use, they modeled it after West African ceramics. Only after 1800 does a decline in African ceramic patterns and architecture indicate increased acculturation.¹⁶

Clearly, slaves transplanted much from their African culture to America and it thrived on the Sea Islands during the eighteenth century. In their religious life, as in other areas, most island slaves continued to practice African rituals and beliefs. Only a few heard the gospel.¹⁷

During the early nineteenth century, slaves began to show interest in Christianity. At the Episcopal Chapel of Ease, the Reverend David McElheran’s wife had instructed island slaves in the Christian faith, but despite her efforts, she was not very successful.¹⁸ However, the Baptists were. In 1801, the Euhaw Baptist Church, long active with slave evangelism, led a revival and established a Baptist church in the city of Beaufort. This revival proved to be a decisive moment in the religious history of the islands, as large numbers of blacks and whites converted to the Baptist faith. Out of this revival arose an institution that has fascinated and frustrated outsiders for almost two hundred years.¹⁹

Unknown in African-American Christianity except on the Carolina and Georgia coast, the pray’s houses dominated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious life on the islands. Numerous scholars have made romantic connections between the pray’s houses and secret African societies, but evidence indicates that the pray’s houses arose as emergency measures when local Baptist churches refused to admit blacks following the revivals of the early 1800s.²⁰

This fits a pattern found across the South. Relations between black and white members of the Baptist church in the South were nearly egalitarian immediately after the Revolution, when everyone worshiped together without segregated seating. However, this changed in the early nineteenth century, when large numbers of slaves were evangelized.²¹ During this period, Beaufort Baptist Church rejected the recently converted local black slaves. Richard Fuller, pastor of Beaufort Baptist, encouraged his house slaves to attend services, but few other slaveholders wanted their slaves, especially the field hands, in church with them. Even Fuller made it clear that he did not desire large numbers of blacks in his church.²²

Soon thousands of slaves desired a place for Christian worship, and yet were denied entrance into white churches. In response, slaves organized into plantation associations under the jurisdiction of the local church. Thus emerged the physical buildings known as pray's houses. Evidence suggests that the geographical region included in the Euhaw Baptist revival is the same as the island areas where pray's houses existed.²³

Although the pray's houses emerged in the midst of revivals led by the Baptists and later by the Methodists, older African practices were transferred into the Christian rituals. White revivalists expressed particular concern about the "fatal doctrines" and the "idolatrous extravagances and superstitions . . . in the modes of worship" propagated by the "superstitious teachers." Missionaries worried about black spiritual leadership at the pray's houses:

If it is a society, you will see a crowd of negroes, the greater part of whom must hear, as best they can, on the outside of the house. . . . But if it is only the missionary's day, you will see but very few. On the present Sabbath, we had four or five.²⁴

A black man, one of them whom they claim for their spiritual father, and, as they say, had brought them through the spirit, became corrupt and inflated with self importance . . . we fear they are rushing to ruin. . . . We have had some trouble at another preaching place, occasioned by puffing up of father S. as he is called. . . . They have appeared spell bound not to move or think without him.²⁵

Despite such opposition, mission workers continued their efforts, and in 1838 another religious revival exploded along the Carolina coast.²⁶ As slaves

flocked to the Christian faith in the early 1840s, additional pray's houses were established.

What made this revivalistic faith, taught by the Baptists and Methodists, so attractive? First, evangelical energy and vitality greatly appealed to African Americans. While Presbyterians and Episcopalians depended on catechism, Baptists and Methodists trusted in the Holy Spirit to move people. Conversion required little doctrinal understanding, only an emotional upheaval.

Second, Baptist congregational polity attracted African Americans by offering them an opportunity for independent leadership. Throughout the antebellum South, slaves found an expressive freedom within the church as independent polity allowed for greater freedom of doctrine and worship. African Americans easily established Baptist congregations since leadership was based not on any organization or education but rather on God's call. Even the illiterate could preach if called by God.²⁷

One other significant element attracted slaves to evangelicalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During these revivals dominated by Baptists and Methodists, the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ combined with an emancipation message. The 1780 Methodist conference in Baltimore passed a resolution requiring all itinerant pastors to manumit their slaves and advised Methodist laity to do the same. By 1800 the Methodist annual conferences were "directed to draw up addresses for the gradual emancipation of the slaves, to the Legislatures of the States."²⁸

John Leland, a prominent Baptist minister in Virginia, presented a similar resolution in 1790 to the Baptist General Committee stating:

Slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government; and therefore recommend to our brethren to make use of every legal measure, to extirpate the horrid evil from the land.²⁹

Did black slaves hear about such doctrines? Louis Philippe, the French prince, during his travels in the United States in 1797, wrote about the abolition seeds sown among the slaves by evangelists:

April 5. . . . There are about 400 blacks scattered among the different farms. . . . Ideas of freedom have already made headway among them; apparently Quakers, Anabaptists, and Methodists circulate the doc-

trine . . . they [the slaves] hoped they would no longer be slaves in ten years. . . .³⁰

The message even found its way to isolated Saint Helena where Hugh Bryan, an island planter, preached to the island slaves, predicting they would achieve freedom.³¹ Although such hopes and predictions proved false, and Methodist and Baptist leaders eventually rescinded their manumission decrees, it was within such a context that many slaves first converted to Christianity.

By 1860 an amazing transformation had occurred. African Americans in the South understood not merely the basics of Christianity but also its finer points of doctrine and church policy. Southern blacks knew how to operate their own congregations and how to pastor their own people. While African practices survived, especially at the pray's houses, these practices took on Christian guises and meanings. In the process of Christianization, the African origins of the Gullah rituals were forgotten as slaves filled their African practices with Christian meanings.³²

It is remarkably short-sighted to suggest that no African practices reached North America, but any defense of an explicit retention of African religion and culture lasting late into the nineteenth century seems improbable. Certainly, African cultural forms were imported and survived on the Sea Islands in the eighteenth century, but historical and archaeological evidence demonstrates that during the early nineteenth century, African customs declined as slaves became acculturated into American society.³³ Religiously, the slaves retained African rituals, customs, and dances, but by the mid-nineteenth century the islanders had packed these traditions with evangelical interpretations as they flocked to the churches to be baptized:

The candidates came ready dressed for the waters. Every one had their head tied up in a Handkerchief . . . nearly all of them were dressed in miserable clothing. . . . After Mr. Phillips, the Minister had read their names and they had responded, and Old Pa Tom had nodded his approval to their examination, the Pastor . . . [led them] to the creek. Together they entered the water. . . . They immersed them, over one hundred and forty.³⁴

Evangelicalism offered a type of freedom. Island slaves, like their poor white co-religionists, discovered within evangelicalism the power "to come

to terms with their social existence."³⁵ In the church, they found an inclusive place even though the world had excluded them. Although converted to Christianity, the slaves also converted this faith to their own culture and thus produced a rich tradition meeting their spiritual and social needs, providing themselves with a taste of freedom even before the Civil War brought emancipation.

From the beginning of the Civil War, island plantation owners felt optimistic about its outcome. In reality, South Carolinians did not understand the power of modern industrialized warfare.

Late into the evening on November 6, 1861, the citizens of Beaufort, South Carolina, and the surrounding islands speculated among themselves. For three days federal ships had gathered until forty-five steamers and gunboats waited outside the harbor. But why? Beaufort and her islands were strategically insignificant. Charleston was the important coastal target. All slept that night assured no danger existed.

However, with war enthusiasm floundering in the North, Lincoln needed an easy victory, and therefore, the Civil War's first naval battle ensued. At dawn, Commodore DuPont's sixty-gun flagship advanced into Port Royal Sound followed by his well-armed fleet. The impotent Confederate batteries opened fire. The Northern fleet easily advanced beyond the guns' range and then turned and directed a shower of shells upon the small island fortifications.

Residents on the islands awakened in a panic to the sound of the "big gun shoot." Shocked plantation owners quickly prepared for flight and their families gathered what belongings they could carry. Food remained uneaten on the tables. Family heirlooms were abandoned. Fine libraries and pianos could not be saved as "every hand was employed and every individual busied in gathering together the flats and boats from every quarter of the Island."⁹ That evening, no white Southerner remained to impede the invading Union Army.³⁷

When the federal troops landed, they encountered bewildered slaves left behind in the panicked flight. The Northern soldiers had rarely if ever seen black men and women. They described the slaves in their diaries as being in "the densest ignorance . . . the blackest human beings ever seen . . . bestial in appearance."³⁸

Union army General Sherman faced an immediate challenge concerning the thousands of slaves and the cotton in the fields. Both were considered contrabands, captured property of war. Within a few short weeks, over

12,000 blacks poured into Port Royal fleeing toward the invading Union forces. Some soldiers offered them assistance; others sought to take advantage of the situation. One Northern officer attempted to ship blacks to Cuba for sale into slavery. The situation grew desperate, and Commodore Du Pont reported that the blacks were “almost starving and some naked or nearly so.”³⁹

Harvesting the cotton was the second dilemma. With the federal war fund running low, United States Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase decided to replenish it by harvesting and selling the valuable Sea Island cotton. Sherman, with help from Colonel William Reynolds, used the black islanders to harvest the 1861 crop, but Reynolds’s harsh methods engendered hard feelings among the islanders, and left Secretary Chase concerned about the next season’s crop. Desperate to resolve these problems, Chase turned to his close friends in the American Missionary Association.

The AMA emerged in 1846 from several older Christian organizations such as the American Missionary Society (1826), the American Peace Society (1828), and the American Anti-slavery Society (1833). These early cooperative efforts among the old-line Protestant churches appeared under the fiery influence of America’s Second Great Awakening when revivalists like Charles Finney emphasized justification by faith, personal sanctification, and social involvement. Two self-made millionaire brothers, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, were powerful supporters of Finney’s revivals and these early Christian social endeavors. In 1840, the brothers became deeply involved with the famous “Amistad” case, when a shipload of 53 captured Africans seared the issue of slavery into the American consciousness. By 1860, the AMA had one driving concern: the abolition of slavery.

In late 1861, Salmon Chase wired Edward Pierce, a Boston lawyer and abolitionist associated with the AMA, and asked him to travel to the Carolina coast in order to inspect the situation. Pierce quickly found on arrival that he disagreed with Colonel Reynolds’s methods, which hinted at graft. About a week later, Mansfield French, a Methodist minister, arrived from the AMA to discover how Northern Christians could assist the slaves. Like Pierce, French was also a close friend of the treasury secretary. French and Chase had long been involved in Christian missionary and educational work. In addition, French edited a monthly magazine entitled *The Beauty of Holiness*, proclaiming personal and social sanctification.⁴⁰

Pierce and French soon found much in common. They both distrusted Colonel Reynolds and other army officers, and they both had tremendous

faith in the ability of the black islanders to become productive, free citizens. By the time they parted company a few weeks later, they had arrived at a plan to bring missionaries to South Carolina.⁴¹

Thus began the Port Royal Experiment. Soon Northern missionaries sailed south filled with dreams of making the poor “savage” slaves into good Protestant Christians and productive United States citizens. Though freed from slavery, the Gullah islanders soon faced new challenges from those who wanted to “save” them and from those who wanted to take their island lands. From the swirl of these events emerged a unique culture and a religious tradition strong enough to withstand the challenges.