



## Spring 2012 Newsletter

### **The Effects of the Civil War on Land Ownership and Agricultural Production for Freedmen in St. Helena Township, Beaufort County, South Carolina: Using the Agricultural Census to Evaluate and Interpret Material Culture**

By Christopher Baas\*

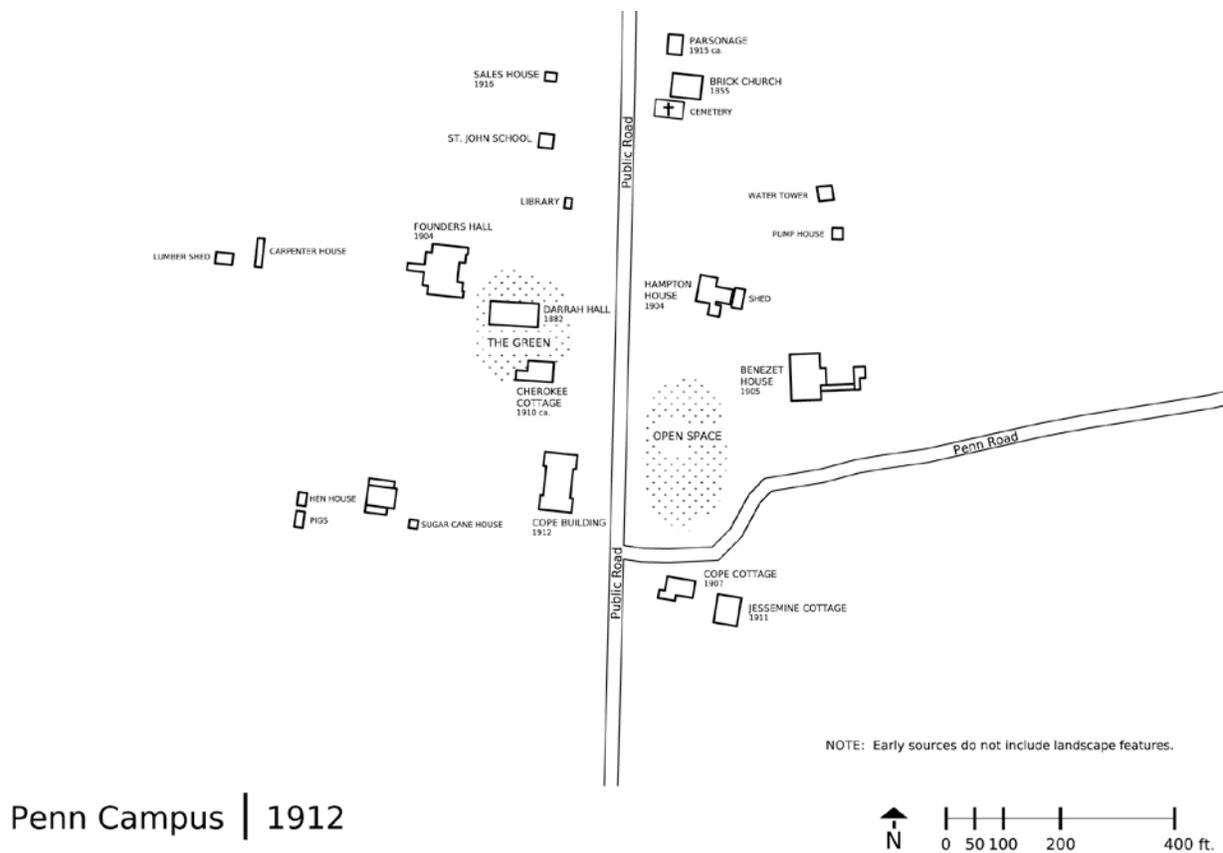
#### **Building Context with the Agricultural Census**

Following the 1861 Civil War Battle of Port Royal, Union forces occupied the Beaufort District coastline between the cities of Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. The occupied land included thousands of freedmen, the former slaves who had worked the Sea Island cotton and rice plantations. Two nearly simultaneous events that dramatically affected the low-country landscape followed. First, in an undertaking named the Port Royal Experiment, northern missionaries came to the region to work toward integrating freedmen into the general society. Arguably, the most successful result of the experiment was the 1862 creation of the Penn School on St. Helena Island. The school taught fundamental literacy to island children until 1900 when it expanded its charge to include the teaching of industry and agriculture, a change that resulted in the current campus layout. Second, the U.S. Government used tax laws to take possession of private land within Beaufort District's St. Helena Parish, and sold the property to fund the war. One group of buyers in these public sales were freedmen, who purchased small 10 to 20 acre farms using income accumulated from working on the Union-operated plantations. In an instant, the landscape transformed from large, white-owned cotton plantations of several hundred acres to mostly small, black-owned family farms. As a result, St. Helena Parish is the only example where southern land was confiscated during the war, but never returned to the original owners (Rosengarten 1986: 269).

In 2004 the National Parks Service's *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study*, a document that resulted in the federally designated *Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor*, identified the Penn School Campus as a location for a new interpretive center. The

potential addition of a non-historic structure within the Penn Center's historic campus prompted an evaluation of the school's historic setting through the assembly of a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR). One component of a CLR is a description of a landscape's culturally inspired evolution (Page 1998). Interpreting the material culture of the present campus relies on a comprehension of the historic freedmen landscape surrounding the historic school. The school served a unique population of former slaves and their descendants, where students spent the majority of their time at home and apart from the campus. Penn School administrators considered these home settings deficient in many ways, and responded by developing a campus that compensated for these shortages (Figure 1). Beginning in 1900 a new school building was erected (Founders Hall), a farm was purchased, barns and outbuildings added, and industrial and agriculture education classrooms constructed. To improve health and hygiene, dormitories, a cafeteria, and bathing facilities were made available to students. As part of the school's outreach program a Better Homes demonstration house was built.

One method for evaluating the Penn School's landscape setting is an examination of the 19th century federal agricultural census. Beginning in 1840, the United States government completed a comprehensive Census of Agriculture simultaneously with the Decennial Census of Population. The Census of Agriculture contains numeric data for the size and agricultural production of every farm in the country. It has traditionally been used by geographers to define cultural boundaries on the American landscape, and to identify and compare the agricultural preferences of native and immigrant groups (Jordan 1966; Ostergren 1988; Kamphoefner 1987). However, it has not been applied to the description of sudden landscape change such as that experienced on St. Helena Island during the Civil War. Since very little information describing the post-war landscape exists, an examination of the census sheds light on specific physical characteristics of the farms and agricultural preferences of Penn School families. This article illustrates how the 19th century federal agricultural census for the pre and post-war landscape – beyond the Penn School's boundary – contributes to evaluating and interpreting the material culture of the present-day campus (Figure 2).



Penn Campus | 1912

**Figure 1. Penn School Campus Layout 1912 (Christopher Baas, Stephanie Donovan).**

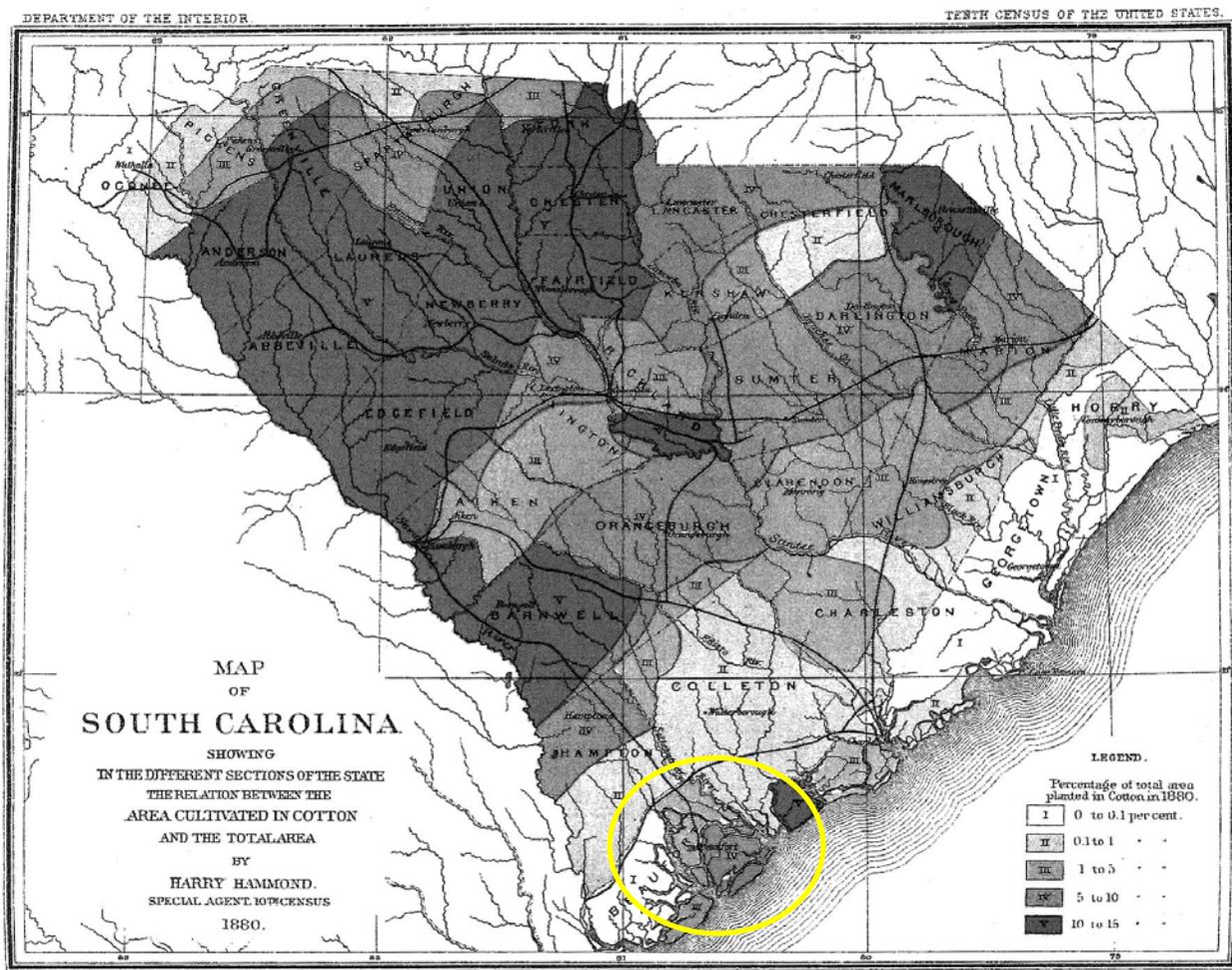
### Study Boundaries and Populations

For South Carolina, the agricultural census was arranged by district and parish governmental divisions until after the Civil War when it changed to county and township units. Therefore, the census dictates the pre-war study boundary as St. Helena Parish, Beaufort District, and the post-war study boundary as St. Helena Township, Beaufort County. Both geographic areas contain St. Helena Island where the Penn School is located.

Created in 1769, Beaufort District was located on South Carolina’s southernmost stretch of coast, just north of Savannah, Georgia. The district was initially 1,920 square miles in size and contained four parishes, including St. Helena Parish. The state’s post-war 1868 rewriting of its constitution established new political boundaries, exchanged the name county for district, and township for the traditional parish division (Long 1997: 33-35). Unfortunately, this mid-century boundary change prohibits an exact comparison of geographic units. While the historic parish

and current county boundaries overlap, the pre-war parish was larger in size than the post-war township. Therefore, meaningful comparisons come from averaging farm size and agricultural production.

The district's pre-war population was 84% African American (2% free black) and 16% white. The district lost about 4,000 people during the war's decade of 1860-1870, most likely due to the district-to-county shift. However, the division of race remained consistent for the study's thirty-year timeframe at 84% African American and 16% white (Table 1). The 1870 population census, which includes information for St. Helena Township, illustrates that the island's post-war inhabitants of more than 6,000 people was nearly entirely African American (99%).



**Figure 2. “Map of South Carolina: Showing in the Different Sections of the State the Relation Between the Area Cultivated in Cotton and the Total Area,” Harry Hammond, 1880 Agricultural Census. The map identifies the study area, located within the circle, as class IV: 5 to 10% of total area planted in cotton.**

## **Landscape Characteristics of Pre and Post-war Farms**

*Farm numbers and sizes:* The agricultural census recorded the number of farms, their sizes, and the number of acres “improved” for production. It also recorded quantities of produce for each farm. Data for the four census periods between 1850 and 1880, or thirty years, illustrates changes in land use and land division, and patterns of agricultural production.

In 1860, there were 132 pre-war parish farms, mostly cotton plantations averaging nearly 600 acres, with 339 acres (57%) of the farm “improved.” Union occupation transformed the landscape from a large-scale, slave-powered agricultural system to small, self-sufficient family farms (Table 2). Beginning in 1863, the United States government held two sales of confiscated properties. The first sale was large tracts, resulting in distant speculators buying much of the lot. Pressured by freedmen advocates, former slaves were allowed to purchase land in the second sale in small units for \$1.25 an acre (Hammond 1882: 61). In 1870, seven years following the land sale, 973 township farms were reported – seven times more than the pre-war parish. The average farm size was 26 acres, of which 22 acres (85%) was improved for production.

The reporting of these rudimentary averages is deceiving because they inflate property sizes. The post-war township had more than 900 farms that were twenty acres or less, and most freedmen purchases from the government appear to be in ten-acre increments – 557 (61%) are exactly 10 acres in size, and another 129 (14%) are exactly 20 acres (Table 3). Only 23 of the township’s farms were larger than 100 acres, and accounted for more than 13,000 of the township’s acres. Four of these larger farms were 1,000 acres or larger, and one farm exceeded 3,000 acres. When farms greater than 100 acres are removed from the data the average farm size drops to 12.6 acres for 1870, and 18.5 for 1880.

Boundary and ownership changes between the 1860 parish and 1870 township reduced the total number of reported acres by 50,000. However, agricultural practices might also have contributed to this drop. Growing Sea Island cotton and rice was lucrative, but labor intensive. Dikes constructed to extend productive acreage into tidal and marsh areas also required manpower to construct and maintain. A large workforce of slave labor made and expanded the farmers’ profits. In 1862 this labor system, and the pre-war’s division of land, was no longer in place. Small farmers did their best to concentrate their properties on uplands, and the practice of owning and farming tidal zones and marshes was eventually abandoned, resulting in fewer acres devoted to agriculture (Rosengarten 1986: 238).

*Land speculation:* Northern investors used the government land sales to speculate property. In 1870, 18 of the 23 farmers owning properties greater than 100 acres were successfully cross-referenced with the population census (13 of the farmers were white and 5 black). Using birthplace to define a northern speculator, 10 of the owners had northern origins. While the average farm size for this group of owners was 579 acres, these farmers owned all the thousand-acre and larger properties, with the largest being a 3,100 acre farm owned by Massachusetts-born John Alden. Since none of the farmers appear in the county's 1880 agricultural census, it is assumed their time in the township was limited and business-related. Blacks also owned substantial holdings. In 1870 Kit Green and R. R. Law each owned 400 acre farms. However, like the white farmers, neither reported farms greater than 100 acres in 1880, indicating they might have been speculating as well.

Speculators sought to profit from both the Sea Island cotton crop and the resale of land. However, in 1870, only 9 of the 23 farms over 100 acres reported producing more than ten 300-pound bales of Sea Island cotton. Only 4 of the farms reported more than 20 bales. By 1880, the yields continued to drop as only 6 of 24 farmers reported more than 10 bales, and only 3 reported more than 20 bales. These results point out that dealing land trumped operating large cotton farms. Also, it hints at the challenges of profitably operating a large cotton plantation without slave labor. Interestingly, in 1870, 13 of the large property owners continued growing rice, producing nearly 22,000 pounds of the grain. However, none of the 1880 farmers of large properties reported growing the product.

### **Agricultural Yields and Trends for Select Products: Sea Island cotton, Rice, Corn, and Sweet Potatoes**

*Sea Island cotton:* Sea Island cotton was the low-country's cash crop, and the islands had the ideal soil, humid temperatures, and rainfall for the plant to flourish (Figure 3). Cotton was so prevalent that it was reported by nearly every pre-war plantation and post-war farm. The plant produced a longer and finer fiber than traditional cotton, resulting in a silkier material. It was packaged in 300-pound bales (as opposed to the 400-pound bales of standard cotton), and nearly all of it was shipped to England. Cotton fields were fertilized by the pain staking process of cutting and hauling mud and grass cut from nearby swamps, and then working them into the island's sandy soils.

Cotton yields (bales per improved acre) remained steady at 21 pounds for the thirty year study period, demonstrating that the laborious fertilization process of the plantation system was still persistent and used by freedmen farmers (Table 4). Applying the war time cotton price of \$1.65 per pound to the 1860 *parish* production shows it was worth nearly \$1.5 million, and illustrates why the Union wanted to maintain its production. However, the post-war price dropped to \$0.50, for a *county* crop worth about \$200,000 in 1870. For the small individual post-war farms, cotton annually brought in about \$200 (National Park Service 2004: 29-30; Holland 1912: 172, 175).



**Figure 3. History of Sea Island Cotton: Sea Island Cotton Plant Engraving by James E. Taylor, *Harper's Weekly*, April 17, 1869 (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).**

*Rice:* South Carolina was the nation's leading producer of rice. In the 1880 census, Hammond (1882: 15) exclaimed how "Carolina rice heads the list in the quotations of that article in all the markets of the world. Not only have its yield and culture been brought to the highest perfection here, but mankind are indebted to the planters of this coast for the mechanical

inventions by which the preparation of this great food-stuff, instead of being the most costly and laborious, is made one of the easiest and cheapest.” While the state’s tidal coast was fitting for rice production, dikes and flood control structures were required to irrigate the crop. It is believed pre-emancipation rice plantation owners targeted slaves from Africa’s Rice Coast (the modern countries of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Liberia) for purchase (National Park Service: 20, 27).

The pattern of the parish’s rice production is intriguing, because it dropped nearly 35,000 pounds between the 1850 and 1860 census periods (Table 4). Then, following the war, it rebounded to more than 170,000 pounds in the smaller township unit. Curiously, as the nation’s most rice-producing state, South Carolina’s production dropped 40 million pounds over the same 1850 to 1860 period. Then, after the war, the state continued to drop another 87 million pounds while the township farmers produced more rice than at any time in the study period (171,000 pounds). Also, more post-war farmers, over 50%, reported growing the crop, where only 18% had been the pre-war peak in 1850. The role cultural disposition played into this jump in rice production for the small post-war farmers is unclear. Growing rice, at the expense of growing cotton, provided both a cash crop and food for the farmer’s table. Further research might uncover if a lingering cultural connection to Africa was displayed in the years following the war. However, by 1880 rice production had dropped and was likely replaced with the production of corn and sweet potatoes, produce that required less labor and whose yields increased between 1870 and 1880 (Figure 4).

*Corn and sweet potatoes:* Corn and sweet potatoes, like cotton, were reported by nearly every farm. Corn could be stored for later use, and provided seed, food, fertilizer, and silage. Hammond (1882: 14) attributes the drop in statewide corn production, by one million bushels between 1850 and 1860, to the farmer’s preference for growing the more lucrative cotton crop. Sweet potatoes were another food staple that nearly every farmer reported in 1860 and 1870. The crop was easy to store, and provided winter sustenance (Figure 5). In 1870, individual farms averaged 37 bushels each, even though it was the lowest per acre yield of the study period. By 1880, the number of bushels more than doubled (Table 5).



**Figure 4. *Hoing Rice.* Keystone View Company, c 1904 (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).**

### **St. Helena Island Data in the 1880 Census**

The 1880 Census of Agriculture gathered more data regarding land uses and crop yields than previous census periods. The 1880 data also enumerated St. Helena Island separately from the township's mainland, and shows that the farms within these two geographic areas of the township were notably different.

*Land use:* For the 1880 census "Improved" acreage was subdivided into "Tilled" or "Vine or Meadow." "Unimproved" acreage was described as either "Woodland" or "Other," a category that likely included the township's numerous wet areas. The census illustrates that less than half of a typical island farm property (44%) was in tillage, a sign that the properties contained an abundance of non-farmable wetlands (Table 6).



**Figure 5. Sweet Potato Planting, Hopkinson's Plantation. Henry P. Moore, 1862 (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).**

The percentage of acres reported for cotton, corn, rice, and sweet potatoes were nearly identical for both the island and the mainland farmers (Table 7). However, all 86 farms reporting rice were on the island, and these highly productive farms more than doubled South Carolina's per acre yield. Also, island farmers exceeded the South Carolina's per acre yield of corn by 3 bushels and sweet potatoes by nearly 15 bushels. Nearly 75% of the township's cotton was produced on the island, and was the township's only crop with a yield below the state's average. This low yield, in comparison to the rest of the state, is a result of the unique qualities of the Low Country's Sea Island cotton versus the common upland varieties typical of the South.

### **The Effectiveness of Using the Agricultural Census to Construct Historical Context**

Using the agricultural census for evaluating the campus is effective, but limited. The interpretation of agricultural census data allows a generalized description of typical freedman farms in the post-war township landscape. By 1880 farms were about 18 acres in size, half of the farm was in tillage, and the rest was woodland too wet to farm. However, this farm size could

only be established by removing the largest farms the data. Each farm produced cotton, corn, and sweet potatoes, and many island farms produced rice.

Agricultural census data has limitations. Like the reporting of most census records, the results are averages interpreted to represent a “typical” person, family, or farmstead at the expense of both the exceptional and underperforming. Data at the farmstead scale does not exist after 1880, and limits scholarship to a thirty year, 1840-1880 timeframe. The greatest limitation of using the census is its failure to account for a majority of the township’s population. The average family size for South Carolina in 1870 was about 5 persons. The 973 farms reported in the agricultural census, assuming one family per farm, accounts for 4,900 residents. Unfortunately the data fails to tell us anything about the remaining 30,000 township residents.

In 1882, Harry Hammond, a governmental agricultural agent, published a description of freedmen’s farms that supports the general conclusions extracted from the census data. In his report on the state’s cotton production, Hammond first underscored the “remarkable influence exerted on the three great crops, corn, cotton, and rice, by their culture on the South Carolina Coast.” He further described the township’s farms as from

1 to 20 acres, and nowhere are more than 15 acres of cotton cultivated under one management. Much of the land is uncultivated, and the remainder is planted in small patches, varying from 1/8 of an acre and less than 3 acres in size, consisting of corn, cotton, and sweet potatoes, curiously intermingled (1882: 14).

Hammond also reported that township farmers

usually own a cow, a mule, or a horse, and the work stock is sufficiently numerous, though inferior in quality. Farm fixtures are of the simplest and cheapest description. There is seldom a shelter for the stock, the cabin of the proprietor being generally the only house on the premises. The stock is fed on marsh-grass, with a little corn, and is in a large measure subsisted by being picketed out, when not at work, to graze on such weeds as the fallow spontaneously furnishes (1882: 14).

Also in 1880, agricultural yields equaled or surpassed the rest of the state. This success in productivity is significant to evaluating the material culture of the Penn School campus, because by 1900, a generation after the 1880 census, the Penn School found it necessary to begin teaching basic agricultural skills to the island’s inhabitants in an effort to help families escape

poverty, and the loss of township scale data for 1890 agricultural census prohibits the exploration of these changes.

A variety of economic hardships had affected farmers between the 1880 census and the Penn School's shift to agricultural education and outreach. By 1900 the school was already thirty-eight years old, but was still using a prefabricated schoolhouse donated in 1863. The school had only eight teachers for its 300 students, one horse, and no farm. National economic turmoil from the mid 1870's through the mid 1890's was certainly felt on the island in the form of down agricultural markets. Elizabeth Jacoway (1980: 48, 72), in *Yankee Missionaries in the South*, further explains the depressed island conditions. First, in the 1880's, the local phosphate industry had fallen apart leaving many islanders unemployed. Second, in 1893 a hurricane-driven tidal wave devastated island inhabitants, and many had left rather than rebuild. Third, by 1900, Island farming had evolved to a one-crop system of cotton, requiring farmers to purchase all other food supplies. Hammond (1882: 14) unknowingly described the beginning of this transition in 1882 when reporting South Carolinians preference for the cash crop of cotton over corn. Finally, the inhabitants of St. Helena Island were, for all intents, culturally isolated from outside influences. The rural seclusion of the island, and probably discrimination, resulted in the island freedmen being marginalized following the war. So, while the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were an era of applied agricultural science and advances in agricultural technology, on the island plowing and planting continued with poor animal stock and arcane tools. Ironically, this isolation likely resulted in maintaining the Gullah cultural traditions currently celebrated.

## Note

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## Appendix of Data Tables

	1850 Beaufort District	1860 Beaufort District	1870 Beaufort County	1870 St. Helena Township	1880 Beaufort County
Total Population	38,805	40,053	36,098	6,152	30,176
White	5,947 (15%)	6,714 (16%)	5,775 (16%)	87 (1%)	2,442 (8%)
Colored	--	--	30,323 (84%)	6,065 (99%)	27,732 (92%)
Free Black	579 (2%)	809 (2%)	--	--	--
Slave	32,279 (83%)	32,530 (82%)	--	--	--

**Table 1: Population of Beaufort District and County 1850-1880, Population of St. Helena Township 1870**

	1850 District	1860 District	1870 County	1880 County
Total Number of Farms Reported	142	132	973	939
Total Acres Reported	73,732	78,552	25,340	24,703
Improved Acres	48,183 (65%)	45,219 (57%)	21,720 (85%)	19,383 (78%)*
Unimproved Acres	25,549 (35%)	33,333 (43%)	3,620 (10%)	5,319 (22%)**
Average Farm Size (Acres)	519	595	26	26
Average Improved Acres Per Farm	338 (65%)	339 (57%)	22 (85%)	20 (77%)
Average Unimproved Acres Per Farm	181 (35%)	256 (43%)	4 (15%)	6 (23%)

**Table 2: Number of farms, size of farms, improved acres per farm, and unimproved acres per farm for St. Helena Parish, 1850-1860, and St. Helena Township, 1870-1880**

\*Improved acres reported as “tilled” or “meadow”

\*\*Unimproved acres reported as “woodland” or “other”

	1870	Acreage	1880	Acreage
<b>St. Helena Township</b>				
Total number of farms reported	973	25,340	939	24,703
Farms 20 acre or less in size	920 (95%)	10,709 (42%)	788 (84%)	12,737 (52%)
Farms 21 to 100 acres in size	30 (3%)	1,308 (5%)	127 (13%)	4,207 (17%)
Farms greater than 100 acres in size	23 (2%)	13,323 (53%)	24 (3%)	7,759 (31%)
<b>St. Helena Island</b>				
Total Farms	--	-	459	15,143
Farms less than 20 acres in size	--	--	374 (81%)	8,316 (55%)
Farms 20 to 100 acres in size	--	--	70 (15%)	2,167 (14%)
Farms greater than 100 acres in size	--	--	15 (3%)	4,660 (31%)

**Table 3: Farm sizes for St. Helena Township 1870 and 1880, and St. Helena Island 1880.**

Ginned Cotton					Rice			
	Total Bales Reported	Percent of Farmers Reporting	Average Number of Bales Per Farm Reporting	Average Bales Per Improved Acre	Total Pounds Reported	Percent of Farmers Reporting	Average Pounds Per Farm Reporting	Average Pounds Per Improved Acre
1850	2,961 (888,300 lbs.)	95%	22	0.06 (18 lbs.)	40,817	18%	1,570	0.84
1860	3,018 (905,400 lbs.)	100%	23	0.07 (21 lbs.)	3,800	3%	950	0.08
1870	1,483 (444,900 lbs.)	99%	1.5	0.07 (21 lbs.)	171,060	51%	348	7.9
1880	1,240 (372,000 lbs.)	99%	1.3	0.06 (18 lbs.)	112,222	23%	514	5.8

**Table 4: Cotton and Rice Production St. Helena Parish and St. Helena Township, 1850-1880**

Indian Corn					Sweet Potatoes			
	Total Bushels Reported	Percent of Farmers Reporting	Average Bushel Per Farm Reporting	Average Bushel Per Improved Acre	Total Bushels Reported	Percent of Farmers Reporting	Average Per Farm Reporting	Average Bushels Per Improved Acre
1850	79,651	94%	599	1.65	123,575	95%	908	2.5
1860	<b>65,595</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>98,300</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>2.2</b>
1870	<b>25,935</b>	<b>97%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>34,520</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1.6</b>
1880	30,746	97%	33	1.5	82,460	98%	89	4.3

**Table 5: Indian Corn and Sweet Potato Production St. Helena Parish and St. Helena Township, 1850-1880**

1880	Improved		Unimproved		Total
	Acres Tilled	Acres in Vine or Meadow	Acres in Woodland	Other	
St. Helena Island	6,670	4,607	3,139	727	15,143
Mainland (Non-Island)	44%	30%	21%	5%	100%
	8,106	0	363	1,090	9,559
	85%	0%	4%	11%	100%
Total for St. Helena Township	14,776	4,607	3,502	1,817	24,702
	60%	19%	14%	7%	100%

**Table 6: Amount and use of acres for farms in St. Helena Township, 1880**

1880		Acres Reported	Crop Reported	Township Yield Per Acre	State Yield Per Acre
Total for St. Helena Township	<b>Cotton</b>	4,718 (50%)	1,240 bales	0.26	0.4
	<b>Corn</b>	3,176 (34%)	30,746 bushels	9.7	8.9
	<b>Rice</b>	86 (1%)	112,222 pounds	1,305	659
	<b>Sweet Potato</b>	1,377 (15%)	82,460 bushels	60	55.8
	<b>Total</b>	9,357 (100%)			
Totals for St. Helena Island Only	<b>Cotton</b>	3,095 (55%)	927 bales	0.29	0.4
	<b>Corn</b>	1,769 (31%)	22,918 bushels	12.9	8.9
	<b>Rice</b>	86 (2%)	112,222 pounds	1,305	659
	<b>Sweet Potato</b>	704 (12%)	49,415 bushels	70.2	55.8
	<b>Total</b>	5,654 (100%)			

**Table 7: Agricultural produce and yield for farms in St. Helena Township, 1880**

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