Slavery in the Lower South

If you ask Americans about the origins of slavery in this country, most would doubtlessly tell you that it all began at Jamestown in 1619. Many United States history textbooks still say so, and efforts are underway to establish a museum recognizing that supposed first in concrete and mortar. 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. Conventional wisdom holds that the first blacks to arrive were slaves and that too is incorrect; the history of Africans in colonial North America is not synonymous with slavery.

In the Lower South, indigenous slavery predated the arrival of Africans; indeed, some of the first Africans to reach the shores of what would later become the United States were free. 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. Africans, free and slave, were also present in all of the major Spanish expeditions through the Lower South. Wherever these Africans traveled, they encountered Native Americans held in slavery.

During the early years of Spanish settlement, most slaves were not Africans. At first, Spain’s Queen Isabella forbade the enslavement of her 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 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 six hundred Spanish men, women, and children at a site believed to be near present-day Sapelo Sound in Georgia. Disease and malnutrition undermined the settlement, which was pushed to the brink with Ayllón’s death. Mutiny ensued, and disaffected elements took control of the failing colony. African slaves set fire to the compound of the mutineers and the Guale Indians attacked the colony. 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 fugitive Africans took up residence among the Guale and became the region’s first maroons (from the Spanish word cimarrón). Other maroons, or fugitive slaves, already inhabited the remote mountains and swamps of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Cuba, and Mexico.

Despite the slave rebellion at Gualdape, all subsequent Spanish expeditions to the Lower South included black slaves. Africans continued to desert, taking their chances among the indigenous nations. During the three centuries that followed the Spanish arrival in mainland North America, the Indian nations of the vast territory of La Florida—which the Spanish understood to stretch 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. 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 (2).

In 1565, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés established St. Augustine, transforming La Florida into an outpost of the Spanish empire. Menéndez probably brought fewer than fifty slaves to the new settlement. He later sent some of these to plant his second settlement of Santa Elena, in present-day South Carolina. The colonization of La Florida was not easy. Earlier Spanish expeditions into the Lower South had introduced diseases which took 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 number of slaves in the region remained relatively small, as Peter Wood’s demographic study of the South has shown (4). Spain 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 multi-tiered system of African slavery developed in the Lower South, distinguishing between unacculturated Africans called bozales and Spanish-speaking Catholic slaves known as ladinos. The bozales labored on cattle ranches, government fortifications, and other public works, while the ladinos filled a wide range of urban domestic, artisanal, and menial jobs. In general, urban slaves received better treatment than their rural counterparts, based on older metropolitan slave relations, their access to legal and religious protection, and their integration into a cash economy. In St. Augustine, as in Havana and other circum-Caribbean cities, slaves were allowed to earn money working for themselves on Sundays and feast days. They also hired themselves 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 Florida, as 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” (5).

In 1670, the nature of black life in the Lower South changed. After more than a century of Spanish settlement in the region, English planters from the island of Barbados established an English colony at Charles Town, “but ten days journey” from St. Augustine. The newcomers were intent on establishing plantations such as they had known in Barbados. Such plantations rested upon the massive importation and exploitation of African slaves. Slavery in the Spanish empire was based on Roman law which considered slavery a mutable legal condition. Slaves, then, were entitled to not only legal protection and church membership, like all men and women, but also freedom through testament, self-purchase, and state or private manumission. English planters in the Caribbean developed slave codes that considered slaves as chattel or “moveable property,” not unlike their cattle or furniture. The English slave system featured harsh regulatory codes and minimal protection; it discouraged manumission.

Slaves quickly learned the differences in these slave regimes and fled southward from English South Carolina 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 neither diplomatic negotiations nor military action stanched the flow of runaways. Spanish governors armed the men and encouraged them to return and raid the plantations of their former owners. The freedmen made an effective guerrilla force against the English in Carolina and later Georgia. As more slaves sought sanctuary, Florida’s governor followed a model that had been used to pacify maroon populations in Panama, Mexico, Hispaniola, and Colombia. In 1738, he placed the runaway slaves and other black men and women in a town of their own, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, two miles north of St. Augustine (7).

Meanwhile, South Carolina’s colonists attempted 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. But with the beginnings of rice cultivation, that changed dramatically. Rice required intensive labor under the grimmest of conditions. Before long, British traders were importing thousands of slaves, mostly from the Congo-Angola region and lesser numbers from Sierra Leone. No other mainland colony imported more slaves, and Sullivan’s Island in Charleston’s harbor became the Africans’ Ellis Island. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, Carolina was said to be “like a Negro country,” and the vastly outnumbered white colonists lived in dread of slave uprisings. Their fears were not without reason. Slaves revolted in 1711 and 1714, and in 1715, they joined with Yamasee Indians in a war that almost succeeded in destroying white settlement in Carolina (8).

As the English created a slave society in the Carolinas, the French attempted the same in the Lower Mississippi Valley. During the second decade of the eighteenth century, French planters began importing “Bambara” slaves from the Senegambia region of Africa to establish a plantation regime in Louisiana. This “chatter generation” of slaves was unlike that in Florida or Carolina. Louisiana’s slaves derived almost exclusively from one African nation and they came in large numbers over a brief period of intense importation. Senegambian labor enabled Louisianans 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. French slave law, drawn from the Code Noir, was—like the Spanish—based on Roman law, but its implementation had none of the humanity of the Spanish system. Unlike planters in Spanish America, French planters had no long history of milder urban slavery on which to draw. They focused on developing profitable colonial plantations. Slaves were brutalized in the process (9).

Louisiana’s African slaves faced the grueling task of creating a plantation economy. As a result, their owners confronted all of the dangers of life in a slave society. Like their counterparts in Florida and Carolina, they also faced the hazards of frontier life. Spanish, English, and French colonizers all exploited Native Americans, intruding
upon their lands and appropriating their labor. They cheated them, abused their women, and interfered in their religious and social practices. Inevitably, the Indians in all these regions rose against their oppressors. The history of the Lower South was scarred by warfare. The Guale, Timucuan, and Apalachee Indian wars in Florida, the Yamasee war in Carolina, and the Natchez war in Louisiana were just the most prominent. The latter was particularly deadly, for Africans and Indians joined forces to destroy the nascent French plantation system and all but pushed the French from the lower Mississippi Valley (10).

When Spain acquired Louisiana in 1769, French planters remained. The new rulers of Louisiana needed friends and they turned to the slaves, offering them freedom in exchange for service in the Spanish militia. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Kimberly S. Hanger have shown that Spain introduced the multi-tiered system of race relations already operating in other Spanish colonies, thus stoking the growth of a free black population. The free 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).

Such free persons of color were not the only people of African descent to win their freedom in the Lower South. Plantation slaves took advantage of the frequent periods of chaos that wrecked the region to escape into the still unsettled hinterlands. The Lower South developed a rich tradition of maroonage. The Savannah River area, the swamps and bayous surrounding New Orleans, the Apalachicola River region, and the interior of central Florida all became home to large maroon communities, which local authorities and planters usually struggled in vain to eradicate (12).

The maroons of the Savannah River were runaways from Carolina and from the new colony of Georgia established by James Oglethorpe in 1732. Oglethorpe envisioned Georgia as a buffer state between South Carolina and Florida, where the debilitating system of slavery would not enter. Despite Oglethorpe’s early moralizing, however, Georgian colonists soon legalized slavery, 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. So African life along the Atlantic coast of the Lower South developed from a homogenous cultural base, with most slaves drawn from the Congo-Angola region of Africa (13).

At the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War in 1763, Florida became a British colony and remained so until 1784. Daniel L. Schafer and David Hancock have shown that Anglo-American planters and 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 one thousand African slaves were imported into Florida in 1771 alone, a peak year of the trade between Africa and Florida. 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, they evacuated over nine thousand slaves southward to the region’s last remaining British colony—Florida. However, Loyalist hopes for reestablishing their plantations in Florida were dashed a few short years later when the war ended and Spain regained Florida. Hundreds of slaves belonging to the outgoing Loyalists rushed to claim the religious sanctuary Spain had established in 1693 and reestablished in 1783. They remained in Florida as free Spanish subjects. Like their predecessors who lived at Mose, these Africans became loyal defenders of the Spanish Crown that had freed them.

By the time the British evacuated Florida, 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 a sufficient labor force. Like the English and the French, the Spanish Crown turned to slaves. The Spanish 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, and pirates disguised as Latin American revolutionaries who seized Florida’s most important port, Fernandina on Amelia Island. The United States, which followed Spanish official described “as industrious as it is ambitious,” had already acquired Louisiana by purchase in 1803 and was determined to have Florida as well. In 1819, the Adams-Onís Treaty gave the Americas legal title to Florida. Florida, the longest-lived colony in what is today the United States, 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
