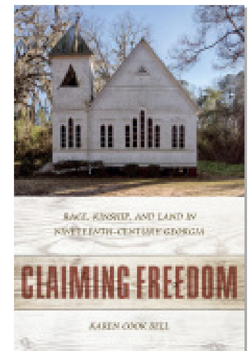
Introduction Claiming Freedom in the Lowcountry



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INTRODUCTION

Claiming Freedom in the Lowcountry

Absented from her master, a negro wench, supposed to be about 14 years old, named Lucia. She has a black stroke over each of her cheeks as a mark of her country; she has a very particular flesh mark on her upper lip right under the middle of her nose, it consists of a small round hollow spot, in the middle whereof is a smaller protuberance quite round and fastened underneath by a small shank. Whoever takes up said wench, and brings her to the subscriber, shall have ten shillings reward paid by John Reinier.

Savannah Georgia Gazette, November 19, 1766

Lucia, a young girl transported to the Georgia lowcountry during the 1760s, brought with her a deft understanding of her provenance. Prior to her forced migration, her father established her identity by placing "a black stroke over each of her cheeks" as a mark of her ethnicity.[1] Her family's conception of their historical reality no doubt included reverence for naming ceremonies, secret societies and the rituals associated with such societies, gendered roles, warrior traditions, and untrammeled freedom. It is likely that Lucia was a Mande speaking Malinke (Mandingo), as similar descriptions of country markings appear in advertisements for runaways identified as Mandingo.[2] For Lucia, running away was the final act of resistance to enslavement. It was a Pyrrhic victory against a system that sought to subsume her traditions and knowledge of herself. Within this system of inhuman bondage, however, enslaved Africans such as Lucia remained free. They retained a sense of themselves and relied on an informal network of both enslaved and free Africans for support, including the quasi-maroon communities developed by Africans who escaped enslavement.

The eighteenth century was foundational for the establishment of slavery in Georgia and represented the formation of oppositional communities in the lowcountry. Oppositional communities were communities of resistance that were

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based on shared transatlantic pasts; these communities were linked by regional origins, American destinations, and New World cultural developments.[3] *Claiming Freedom* investigates the ways in which African Americans created oppositional communities by delving into the complex networks of relations and tensions that were the products of contradictory and competing visions of freedom. The geographic region examined in this study is lowcountry Georgia, a five-county region that extends from Savannah to St. Mary's and served as the territorial nexus for African American social, political, and economic activism and resistance after the Civil War.

In lowcountry Georgia, as well as in other parts of the New World, enslaved Africans perceived themselves as part of a community that had distinct ethnic and national roots. Randomization was not a function of the Middle Passage. Although slave ships traversed the coast of Africa to secure Africans, in some instances slave ships drew their cargo from only one principal port. These included Gorée, Bonny, Calabar, Elmina, and the Biafra ports.[4] Slave ships bound for Georgia carried captive Africans who shared a similar linguistic heritage, for example, Mande speakers such as the Malinke and Serer. At the time Lucia absconded from her master in 1768, Georgia had imported 24 percent of its 2,325 Africans from Senegal, Gambia, and Sierra Leone. The ethnic and cultural makeup of the African supply zones for the Georgia lowcountry in the late eighteenth century included the Fula, Igbo, and Gola people, and Mande speakers such as the Malinke, Bambara, and Serer.[5]

The demand for African slave labor increased with the establishment of coastal rice and Sea Island cotton plantations during the late eighteenth century. As rice became a profitable export crop in coastal Georgia, merchants in Savannah imported Africans like Lucia from the Rice and Grain Coast of West Africa, which extended from the Senegambian region to Sierra Leone.[6] From 1755 to 1767, 53 percent of slaves imported into Savannah originated from the Caribbean, while 35 percent came directly from the Rice and Grain Coast.[7] Comparatively, during the intermediate period from 1768 to 1780, 68 percent of slaves imported into Savannah originated from the Rice and Grain Coast.[8] From 1784 to 1798, West African captives from rice growing regions accounted for 45 percent of slaves imported to Savannah (see Appendix).[9]

Runaway slave advertisements and oral narratives like that of Lucia provide a window for examining the aspirations of enslaved Africans. In this context, the act of running away marked the establishment of a dialectical relationship with the environment in which captive Africans lived. An examination of 270 advertisements for runaway slaves reveals that 126 advertisers designated fugitive Africans by nationality and included detailed descriptions of country markings.[10] Sydney, a young woman whose country marks were evident on her breast and arms, and who spoke "no English," took flight from the home of Elizabeth Anderson, well dressed with a cloth gown and coat.[11] Like many other new Africans, Sydney was unfamiliar with

the environment in which she lived. She perceived potential for a successful flight from the oppression of bondage in the city and deftly concealed her country marks and her identity as a fugitive as she moved through the city of Savannah. Captive Africans such as Lempster, James, Peter, Fanny, and Silvia, who may have arrived on the same slave vessel, survived the Middle Passage and labored on the Ogeechee rice plantation of James Read. Identified as Gola slaves, they maintained ethnic and kinship ties through their forced migration and settlement and their collective escape from slavery.

Within lowcountry communities, the oral narratives of escaped Africans, which reveal acts of strategic resistance, represented human agency.[12] Illustrative of this is Ben and Nancy, who escaped their enslavement on James Read's rice plantation in early December 1789 by crossing the Ogeechee River with several other captives. Prior to their escape, Ben and Nancy had married. Their marriage and their plans to escape slavery by making their way to Spanish settlements in Florida underscored the determination of enslaved Africans to subvert slavery and the structures and powers that perpetuated the system.[13] Like Ben and Nancy, Patty and Daniel (of William Stephens Bewlie's rice plantation) planned to escape slavery by running away to Spanish Florida. Nine months earlier Patty had given birth to a son, Abram. Wearing a green wrapper and coat, and carrying additional clothing with which to change, Patty carried her son through the swamps of the Ogeechee Neck in route to Florida and freedom.[14] From the 1730s to 1805, 18 percent of runaways were women.[15]

The nineteenth century represented a watershed period for oppositional communities. The arrival of over 13,000 Africans in lowcountry Georgia led to the development of the distinct Gullah/Geechee language, an English-based creole dialect with West African origins. This shared language made possible the establishment of a sense of community in the new territory. The cultural identity of these oppositional communities emanated from shared African traditions and experiences and intersecting social relations and linguistic connections. Building on both their African background and their American experience, Africans in lowcountry Georgia retained much of their African culture and used it to mount physical and cultural resistance to their enslavement.[16] Cultural resistance represented a salient form of opposition.

As a system of physical and ideological bondage, slavery represented a daily assault on the humanity and dignity of bondmen and bondwomen. The ability of local, state, and national governments to violently suppress slave revolts with impunity led to the development of a dissident subculture within the slave community in lowcountry Georgia and other parts of the South. Accordingly the context and function of resistance retained an ambiguous meaning, a "private transcript," defined as an autonomous social space for the assertion of dignity, which existed on the opposite end of a continuum of resistance.[17] Slavery in the United States, as

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well as in the Caribbean and Latin America, rested on a basic contradiction that recognized captive Africans as property while simultaneously encouraging and recognizing their humanity. Both masters and enslaved Africans were caught up in a "complex web of compromise, adjustment, inconsistency, ambiguity, and deception."[18] Within slavery's broad spectrum existed a middle ground as bondmen and bondwomen struck a balance between resignation, rebellion, and accommodation to the realities of their enslavement and resistance to the dominance of their masters. They achieved this balance by seeking to assert a measure of autonomy in a situation where their lives could never be their own.[19]

In 1861 the largest freedom war in American history transformed the lives of African Americans in the Georgia lowcountry. This freedom war brought men and women into spaces where they challenged the slave system through individual and collective acts of resistance. They helped refugees escape to federal lines, and they served as spies, guides, and informants to Union forces. Lowcountry blacks "staged work slow-downs, refused instruction, resisted punishment, demanded pay for their work, gathered freely, traveled at will, and took freedom for themselves long before the Union Army arrived."[20] The emancipation of over 400,000 African Americans in Georgia produced a countervailing movement that was characterized by an ideological program conceived on ethnocentrism and native southern solidarity. Facing a combination of exceptional forces from federal, state, and local systems, which rendered economic subordination inevitable, African Americans maintained an expansive vision of freedom, which they defined as the right to resist authority, the right to political participation, and the right to secure and maintain economic independence.[21]

In the aftermath of the Civil War, oppositional communities resisted neodependency and neopaternalism by securing land, space, and the exclusive freedom to assert and agitate for political and economic rights. The first half-decade following the end of the Civil War witnessed the fermentation of resistance strategies as African American struggles for land redistribution, self-protection, the vote, and a fair settlement for wages stimulated group consciousness and unity. The formulation of overt collective acts designed to secure land and fair wages, and to undermine adverse federal, state, and local policies provide the context for examining what John David Smith refers to as change and discontinuity in "inherited geographies of race, space, and place."[22] Change and discontinuity were most evident in the triad counties of Chatham, Liberty, and McIntosh, where failed federal land policy sharpened the perceptions of African Americans, who developed myriad oppositional strategies to counter adverse federal, state, and local policies.

Throughout lowcountry Georgia, African Americans took action against native southern power, as well as federal policies that did not serve their interests. African American opposition included individual and community resistance, formalized organizational protest, and armed resistance. Through organizations such

as the Union League and the Farmers' Alliance, African Americans developed a deft understanding of their political and social identity. The pursuit of self-governance, kinship, labor, and networks of communication transformed the political and social consciousness of African Americans during this period.[23] Concomitantly the development of "private transcripts" of resistance shaped the myriad ways they reappropriated ideas to define their lived experiences. Manifestations of this form of strategic resistance occurred in Chatham County, where African Americans in the Ogeechee rice district formed the first incorporated African American town in 1898, and on Sapelo Island in McIntosh County, where African Americans established an island within an island by purchasing over a thousand acres of land from the heirs of slave owner Thomas Spalding and establishing five thriving communities.

In many parts of lowcountry Georgia, rice remained a salient symbol of the postwar lowcountry landscape. Rice production and rice culture structured both the natural environment and the socioeconomic environment of freed men and women and thus became an integral part of their emancipatory ideology and cultural ethos. Obtaining proprietary interest in land suitable for cultivating rice for the market, as well as for home consumption, was a significant expression of their freedom during the first decade following emancipation.

Historians have debated several issues that have remained central to delineating the failure of federal land policy in the South and the concomitant economic marginalization of former slaves. In addition to excluding land in the public domain and preventing clear title of abandoned and confiscated lands, federal land policy ultimately failed in the South because Radical Republicans were not fully committed to the ideals of freedom and equality. The dream of "forty acres and a mule" died slowly for former slaves and became embedded in the historical memory of their descendants. The initiatives undertaken by African Americans to secure land through disciplined economic choices is central to understanding how African Americans claimed freedom for themselves. The extent to which African Americans were successful depended on regional demographic factors, the degree of economic elasticity, and the constancy of Republican political advantage. The spaces and terrain of the lowcountry landscape constitute an integral part of delineating African American agency in the New South. The environment provided the subtext for the ideas African Americans developed to secure autonomy and control of land.

A unique body of records that is vital to this study is the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau). Through the use of local materials in the Bureau's records for Georgia, lowcountry African Americans' concerns for civil rights, economic independence, and autonomy are illuminated. Although many of the conceptions are filtered through white perspectives, the beliefs and behavior of former slaves is apparent at every stage of the Reconstruction era. In conjunction with other supporting evidence, the Bureau

records underscore the fact that African Americans actively participated in Reconstruction and endeavored to define the boundaries of race, space, and place.

The most incisive insights about the African American experience are found in the records of local agents and the Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Georgia. The latter provide salient insights into failed federal land policy and the initiatives undertaken by African Americans to negotiate favorable terms to lease rice plantations. Specifically the Register of Land Titles, the Register of Complaints, the collection of Letters Received, the Records relating to Labor Contracts, and the Registers of Labor Contracts provide a composite picture of how former slaves began their adjustment to freedom and what some of their conceptions were about the society in which they lived.[24]

This analysis of the postwar period is culled from a variety of local records, such as Superior Court land records, tax records, probate records, and newspapers. These records help detail the meaning and significance of the postwar political economy of the region, which allowed the acquisition of land and the continuation of African American participation in the political process during the era of southern disfranchisement. These materials also illustrate the capacity of former slaves to rely on community and kinship networks to carve out and define their own spaces, as reflected in the political incorporation of the all black town of Burroughs in 1898. While recent scholarship on the lowcountry has emphasized tensions and an economic accumulationist strategy, which made for kinship and social ties,[25] this study departs from that paradigm by demonstrating, through deed records and probate records, that communities were committed to advancement and racial uplift irrespective of ties to property.

This study makes an important intervention in the historiography by providing a regional analysis of the contested terrain of slavery and freedom in the rice-producing region of lowcountry Georgia during the antebellum and postbellum period, with a clear sense of the importance of local institutions and the local political economy to understanding broader political and economic developments. An analysis of slavery and the wartime and Reconstruction experiences of former slaves in lowcountry Georgia provide invaluable insights into how they claimed freedom. As Jacqueline Jones's *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (2008) and Clarence Mohr's *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (1986) have demonstrated, the escape of many black Georgians underscores the importance of freedom and family ties and simultaneously casts doubt on the depth of black commitment to the paternalistic ethos as they claimed freedom for themselves. The pages that follow demonstrate that the quest for freedom in lowcountry Georgia has also been a quest for community. The complex, fluid, and dynamic factors that constituted the lived social reality of enslaved and freed African Americans formed the core of the ways in which they claimed freedom.