What Was Stono?

Discovering a South Carolina Freedom Struggle

STONO: A QUICK INTRODUCTION

In the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, **September 9, 1739,** a band of enslaved men attacked a store near the Stono River, roughly 17 miles below Charles Town, South Carolina. They executed two men, seized a cache of arms, and headed southwest—apparently with Spanish St. Augustine on the Florida coast as their ultimate destination.

Along their route, the rebels murdered the families of slaveholders, burning their homes and gathering recruits as they marched. Within hours, scores of enslaved workers had joined their ranks, and they had killed nearly two dozen white colonists. By preventing anyone from escaping to spread the alarm, the band hoped to buy time as their numbers grew.

Successful at first, the insurgents pressed south along the Pon Pon Road, beating drums and raising chants of "Liberty!" But when South Carolina's lieutenant governor encountered them by chance, he avoided capture and rode to spread the alarm. By late afternoon mounted militia managed to overtake the freedom fighters, surrounding them in a field where they had paused to rest.

In the pitched battle that ensued, the well-armed militia gained the upper hand, killing scores of rebels and forcing others to surrender or flee. Though cut short before it grew to an unstoppable size, the scope and violence of the uprising was formidable. As word spread, the largest slave revolt in colonial North America provided a spark of hope for enslaved African-descended people, near and far.

South Carolina's white minority, on the other hand, reacted with fear and launched an immediate crackdown.

Site of the Stono Rebellion: Wallace Creek, close to Stono River (photo by Heather Gray)

Legislators imposed a prohibitive duty on importing Africans, and they worked to recruit European immigrants to expand the free white population. In 1740, the Assembly passed a sweeping "Negro Act" that tightened controls over the colony's unfree Black majority.

Within the region's African American community, family members passed down occasional stories of the uprising. But among later generations of white chroniclers, the event was belittled or forgotten. Then, when Black Studies took hold in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Stono Revolt gained renewed recognition among historians.

Yet even today—as Americans debate how deeply they dare to explore the country's troublesome past—most citizens remain unaware of this dramatic event and its significance. So it is exciting that Stono's pivotal importance is finally being researched and remembered in new ways.

This booklet offers a brief introduction to what we know and why it seems relevant today.

From the Beginning: Carolina's First 60 Years

By the 1730s, Black South Carolinians felt locked in a vast prison, with no hope that conditions would improve. Though innocent of any crimes, they found themselves enslaved for life, purely based on race. So attempts to break out, however violent or desperate, were inevitable. To understand their dire predicament fully, we must reach back to the colony's beginning.

In the mid-17th century, English radicals did away with monarchy and executed King Charles I. But in the "Restoration" of 1660, conservative forces "restored" royal rule and placed the late king's son on the throne. Charles II wished to reward loyal supporters, but civil wars had emptied the national treasury, so instead he offered them large land grants in America.

One group received "Carolina," a vast tract below Virginia that stretched (or so they hoped) from the Atlantic to the Pacific. To the south, the new domain encroached on "La Florida," territory claimed by Spain, creating poor relations between the rival empires. If Carolina leaders could seize and hold Indigenous land, they would feel free to profit from their new English holding.

The powerful "proprietors" drafted a constitution for Carolina that envisioned feudal baronies and permitted slavery. By offering land to potential settlers, they began to recruit colonists from Britain and from the crowded and wealthy sugar island of Barbados. In 1670, they established a foothold on the Ashley River. In 1680 they founded Charles Town, honoring the king. (It became "Charleston" in 1783.)

At first, the environment proved unfamiliar, and labor was scarce, so settlers subsisted by trading with Native Americans and allowing livestock to graze year-round in the marshlands. They could make money exporting deerskins and shipping pork and beef to the Caribbean. As they cut trees to clear swampland, they produced barrel staves to be sold in the West Indies.

The colony's proprietors, eager for profits, pushed for discovery of some valuable export, such as tobacco, but Virginia's history with that onerous crop raised doubts. In 1676, after years of worker unrest, unfree Black and white workers in Virginia had taken part in a massive uprising known as Bacon's Rebellion, prompting harsh reprisals and a dramatic shift toward enslaved labor.

Embracing slavery could lead to future dangers, so when Maurice Mathews appraised Carolina in 1680, he offered words of caution. Mathews noted that the new colony, given "the great and easie product of our Cattle, hogs, and other stock," may already have found a "happier life than all the tedious thousands of tobacco plants the slavery of our northern neighbor can afford."

In the next 20 years, three things combined to tip Carolina towards a slave-based economy. One was the arrival of colonists from Barbados. Many brought enslaved Africans with them, and all aspired to become wealthy planters. Then came the discovery that rice could be grown profitably in Carolina, and that Africans knew far more than Europeans about the crop.

A third factor puts these two local developments in a wider context. **The period between roughly 1660 and 1720 witnessed what historians now call the Terrible Transformation**. During this dark transition, the English plunged into the African slave trade, accepted hereditary enslavement based on race, and rationalized this devil's bargain with a noxious ideology of white supremacy.

By 1708, South Carolina had a Black majority. By 1719, when the proprietary system ended and the colony came under direct royal control, its identity as a province built upon the exploitation of Africans had become securely fixed. During the 1720s, as rice production increased, human trafficking directly from Africa accelerated, and the enslaved population soared to nearly 22,000.

As a result, Black Carolinians held in bondage faced tough choices on a daily basis. Again and again, individuals had to decide between compliance and resistance. As in any closely guarded system, obeying orders and avoiding trouble could lead to greater security and limited rewards. Defiance might foster hope and build self-respect, but it also carried the risk of punishment, even death.

One choice seemed clear—the need for mutual support. Harsh circumstances prompted early generations of Africans in Carolina to preserve beliefs, create families, share burdens, establish networks, and construct a language, known as Gullah, that combined English with African words and constructions.

Also, as Africans mixed with Native Americans and Europeans, they exchanged useful knowledge and skills. By 1730, South Carolina had roughly 33,400 inhabitants. An estimated 21,600 Black persons made up nearly two thirds of that population. Native American numbers in the colony had diminished to scarcely 2,000. The total of white Carolinians (some 9,800) remained small.

The expanding Black community (later called Gullah) was refreshed and challenged by new arrivals, so-called "saltwater slaves," who recalled freedom in Africa and retained vivid memories of the traumatic Middle Passage. As this distinctive enslaved society grew and diversified, its members built up an increased understanding of their strange surroundings and their shared predicament.

The 1730s: South Carolina's Atlantic World

During the 1720s, North Carolina became a separate colony, and South Carolina, with its larger enslaved population, soon had more in common with the British sugar islands than with northern mainland provinces. In the 1730s, another 20,000 African arrivals nearly doubled the total of persons in bondage. The colony, one observer stated, "looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people."

In Barbados, Jamaica, and other West Indian colonies, unpaid African workers were being forced to produce a lucrative staple crop for export. For them, the expanding European market in sugar meant increasingly long hours and harsh work conditions in the cane fields, with no end in sight. As planters exploited this system to its limits, unrest and desperate acts of resistance increased.

The 1730s saw a series of attempted rebellions by workers in the Caribbean. Late in 1733, for example, a massive revolt erupted on St. John, a Danish-controlled island that is now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Before French troops arrived to defeat the insurgents in May 1734, they had managed to gain control of most of the island and establish their own system of rule.

In 1736, 200 miles to the southeast, another revolt (however real or imagined) was brutally crushed. On the British island of Antigua, nearly 25,000 enslaved Africans made up 85 percent of the population, and a recent drought and earthquake had made conditions unbearable. A 42-year-old African, remembered as Prince Klass, was accused of designing an elaborate plot.

This detail from a map of the Southeast and the Caribbean, created by John Cary in London in 1783, illustrates the closeness of British South Carolina to the sugar colonies of the West Indies, where slave revolts were occurring in the 1730s. (Library of Congress)

Responding to rumors, authorities made arrests and used torture to extract confessions from several dozen people. Of 132 persons convicted of involvement, more than half (77) were burned at the stake. Six were "gibbeted"–hung in irons until they died of hunger. Klass and four others were broken on the wheel, a horrific and methodical punishment that was a form of crucifixion.

Trading vessels regularly passed back and forth between South Carolina and the sugar islands, so word of Caribbean unrest spread quickly. Charles Town gained its first newspaper in 1732, and whites read lurid published reports with increasing fear. Enslaved Carolinians heard different versions of the same events from Black seamen on city wharfs–and drew different conclusions.

In London, meanwhile, colonial entrepreneurs were also discussing the dangers of race slavery. James Oglethorpe, a military officer turned philanthropist, had been a deputy governor of the Royal African Company. But he left that slaving enterprise and became a trustee for Georgia. Named the new colony's first governor in 1733, he advocated effectively for banning all slavery.

In 1738, some Georgia settlers opposed the slavery ban, arguing they could not compete with Carolina, where labor was "so much cheaper." But the trustees replied that enslavement "has brought our Neighbour Colonies to the Brink of Ruin, by driving out" free white inhabitants "to make room for Black, who are now become the Terror of their unadvised Masters."

If not on the brink of ruin, white South Carolinians, like the white minorities in Antigua and elsewhere, were increasingly on edge. They feared that enemies–both external and internal–made their situation untenable. Governor James Glen of South Carolina recalled: "Sometime ago the People of this Province were Annually alarmed with accounts of intended Invasions."

According to Glen, during the late 1730s white South Carolinians harbored incessant fears that the Spanish were preparing to attack from St. Augustine and Havana, "or that the French were marching by Land from Louisiana…to drive us into the Sea. Sometimes the Negroes were to rise & cut their Masters Throats[;] at other times the Indians were confederating to destroy us."

South to Freedom: The Lure of St. Augustine
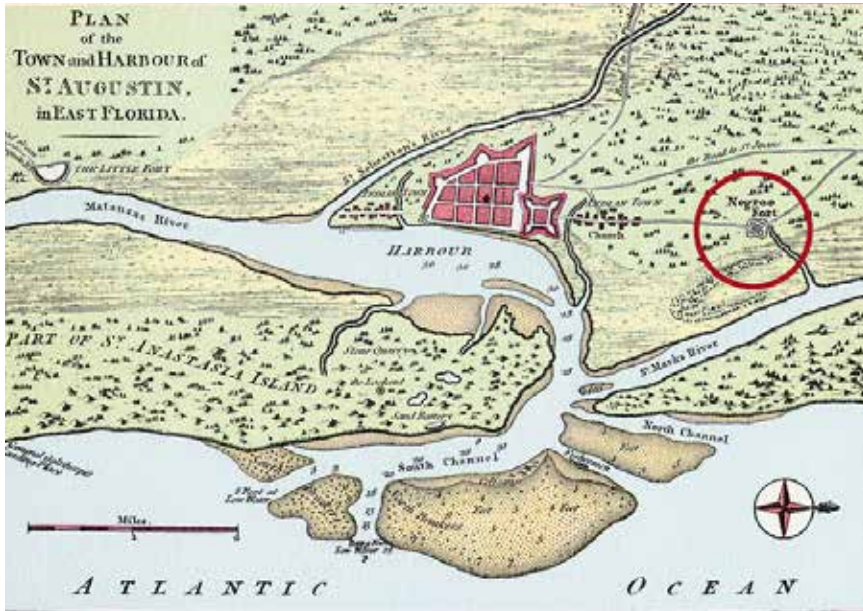
Fort Mose Historical Society board members Thomas Jackson, Dorothy Israel, and Charles Ellis stand on a boardwalk in Fort Mose Historic State Park north of St. Augustine, FL. In 2019, the UNESCO Slave Route Project recognized Fort Mose as a Site of Memory.

St. Augustine (founded in 1565 to guard the route of ships carrying Mexican and Peruvian silver to Spain) was more than a century old when England's Carolina colony began in 1670. Two years later, the town imported skilled slaves from Havana and used their African talents as stonecutters and metalworkers to begin work on a massive stone fortress to protect the outpost from attack.

In 1683, as work proceeded on the Castillo de San Marcos, the Spanish also established a militia company made up of free Black and mixed-race artisans. These men gained acceptance and advancement by embracing Catholicism and providing valuable service. Africans in Carolina soon learned of this contrasting situation in Florida from sailors aboard coastal trading vessels.

Historian Jane Landers points out that "the slave codes English planters developed in the Caribbean and transplanted to Carolina considered slaves as chattel or movable property, not unlike their cattle or furniture. These codes featured harsh regulation and minimal protections and strongly discouraged manumissions." In contrast, Florida appeared as an outpost of freedom.

For centuries, Native Americans had moved along the coast's protected inland waterways. Soon small groups of enslaved Carolinians were taking dugout canoes and escaping to Florida. In 1693, the Spanish monarch issued a royal proclamation that granted these men and women their liberty, "so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same."

South Carolina leaders warned frontier garrisons to watch for parties attempting to escape, and many African refugees never made it to Florida. After authorities foiled a slave uprising in 1720 and imposed brutal reprisals, some of the plotters sought Indian assistance in reaching St. Augustine. But searchers captured 14 and returned them to Charles Town for execution.

Still, a trickle of Black runaways continued to reach Florida, and Spain explicitly renewed its offer of freedom in 1733. St. Augustine officials proclaimed the new edict in the streets "by Beat of Drum." Numerous enslaved sailors from South Carolina, bringing provisions to the town aboard English vessels, heard the public announcement and took advantage of the invitation.

Not all Black escapees received immediate liberty, but most quickly agreed to pledge allegiance to the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown. In 1738, having petitioned for freedom, they created their own community two miles north of town, at a site the Indians called Mose. They erected a fort, formed a Black militia unit, and took part in occasional raids against the English.

And their numbers continued to grow. In November 1738, 23 people, including women, and children, clamored into a launch at Port Royal, Carolina, and made it safely to St. Augustine. Most of the escapees belonged to Caleb Davis, a merchant who often traded with the Spanish outpost, so several knew the route. Once free, they mocked Davis when he tried to reclaim them.

1739: The Pressure Builds, Month by Month

By 1739, South Carolina's Black majority numbered nearly 40,000 people, compared to fewer than 20,000 whites. On large Lowcountry rice plantations, enslaved persons often outnumbered free colonists by eight or ten to one. The Black population continued to grow rapidly, as British slave ships transported a steady flow of additional kidnapped persons from Africa.

Records for the year before March 1739 show over 2,500 Africans—including nearly 500 children under age ten—entering Charles Town harbor. The largest and most numerous ships arrived from Angola, delivering more than 1,600 shackled newcomers. Traders sold these survivors to slave labor camps spread across the Lowcountry.

For some time, rumors had circulated that the Spanish at St. Augustine hoped to disrupt South Carolina's economy by fostering unrest among the colony's enslaved workers. Word spread that Spain would grant freedom to anyone in bondage who could escape to Spanish Florida. In January 1739, planters petitioned lawmakers to address the "Desertion of their Slaves to the Castle of St. Augustine."

In response, legislators debated how to protect the colony's enormous property investment in human chattel. As the year began, officials also heard rumors of a large slave conspiracy, thought to originate in the Winyah region near the North Carolina border. The suspected uprising "was to be universal," and had already put white settlers across "the whole Province…upon their guard."

In February, Georgia officials received word that "a Conspiracy was formed by the Negroes in Carolina, to rise and forcibly make their Way out of the Province." According to rumor, the rebels would launch their revolt near Winyah Bay and then "bend their Course South," hoping to add recruits from "the other Parts of the Province." Days later, patrols caught a party of fugitives headed for Florida.

In March, four slaves and an Irish Catholic worker pulled off a violent escape, stealing horses and reaching St. Augustine, where they were welcomed. One "had a Commission given to him, and a Coat faced with Velvet." In April, Carolinians proposed a reward for any bounty hunter

> *"a Conspiracy was formed by the Negroes in Carolina, to rise and forcibly make their Way out of the Province."*

in Georgia who delivered Black refugees, or their scalps, back across the Savannah River.

On April 12, the *South Carolina Gazette* reported the fate of two enslaved men caught fleeing the province. Officials forced a large group of slaves to watch one man receive a public whipping. The other prisoner "was executed at the usual Place, and afterwards hung in Chains at Hangman's Point opposite to this Town, in sight of all Negroes passing and repassing by Water."

Rumors continued to fly. In August, Florida's governor heard from Apalachee allies that the British had forced 100 Blacks to construct a fort. Rather than complying, the workers had supposedly staged a revolt, killing white overseers, disabling horses, and seeking Native American aid to gain sanctuary in Florida.

As tensions mounted, a Spanish launch visited Charles Town, with several dozen men, including a Black man who spoke good English. They claimed to carry a letter for Oglethorpe, then in Georgia.

Heading south to deliver the note, the suspicious boat sailed into coastal inlets, but no one saw spies disembark. Weeks later, however, Georgia authorities seized a Catholic priest thought to be "employed by the Spaniards to procure a general Insurrection" in South Carolina.

Those trapped in bondage must have noticed three other factors making the colony vulnerable. For one thing, a yellow fever epidemic upended normal Lowcountry life. Having weathered a smallpox outbreak the previous year, colonists now confronted the first epidemic of yellow fever in seven years.

Soon the sickness was taking lives and curtailing commerce. The *Gazette* ceased publication, public lectures ceased, courts closed, and the assembly postponed its session. As if that were not disruption enough, word arrived in early September that warfare had erupted between Britain and Spain. The news fueled hopes among Black Carolinians for gaining freedom in Florida.

Finally, starting in late September, a strict new Security Act would take effect, requiring white men to carry arms to church. Sunday, when worship services occupied planters and overseers, marked a day of independence for the enslaved, so the Sabbath provided the best time to escape or rebel. The pending law would soon close that loophole.

African Ties and Extra Work: The Final Straw?

At Stono, who were the instigators? How well did they know one another, and what sparked their daring, even possibly fatal, undertaking? Exact answers to many such questions remain out of reach, but speculation continues. Two ideas about the core initiators deserve closer examination. One focuses on the word "Angola," the other on arduous public works in dangerous conditions.

The author of a contemporary document entitled "An Account of the Negroe Insurrection" reported that on a Sunday, "which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty." These instigators, the writer made clear, were from the thousands "brought from the Kingdom of Angola in Africa."

Africanist John K. Thornton, an expert on the history of the Kongo-Angola region, has pointed out that many of these arrivals spoke Portuguese, understood some Spanish, and had embraced Catholicism. Such people would be responsive to rumors of freedom in Spanish Florida. Presumably, they could communicate in Creole Portuguese, a widely used trade language. Equally important, young men who were captured and enslaved during that region's civil wars possessed military training, knowledge of firearms, and experience in combat. Thornton suggests that references to Stono rebels beating drums, waving banners, and dancing suggest clear echoes of familiar African military practices designed to build morale and foster unity.

Such an "Angola" link prompts further questions. Did militant newcomers unite with "country-born" dissidents, as suggested by the tradition that a Stono leader was named Jemmy, or perhaps Cato? Or, if newcomers used their shared African experiences to drive the revolt, does that explain why efforts at coercive recruitment amid sudden bloodshed often failed?

Another intriguing suggestion has arisen in the effort to explain what fed slave resistance. It involves onerous work details that added insult to injury. For decades, thousands of Black Carolinians had been forced to clear Lowcountry swamps for rice cultivation. Production soared, as the colony's knowledgeable workers grew a crop long familiar in West Africa.

As a result, *rice exports more than quadrupled in the 20 years before 1740*, leaping from 8.2 million pounds per year in 1720 to 35 million pounds annually two decades later. But one "supply chain issue" was central to this expansion. The entire system ground to a halt if heavy barrels of rice could not move easily to Charles Town from remote plantations. Given the wet landscape, raised roads with reliable bridges and ferry crossings were still secondary to waterways as the best method for moving goods to market. But coastal rivers varied with the tides, and they twisted in ways that made water travel circuitous. Planters bent on efficiency and profit demanded straighter, more reliable routes for reaching Charles Town.

Since planters controlled the colonial government, it was in their interest to improve transportation, even if it meant requisitioning some of their own labor force. Laws often forced slaves to toil on public works projects, building up roads and digging canals, or "cuts," to link adjoining rivers and deepen shallow creeks so heavily laden boats could pass even at low tide. For Black Carolinians these added tasks, lasting for days or weeks, meant facing grim work conditions and harsh supervision by strangers. The work details also cut into limited free time coveted for seeing family and tending gardens. For some, this excess drudgery in the late summer heat may have proved to be the final straw.

After all, in the spring of 1739 legislators had approved "a bill to cut and sink drains and passages on the North Branch of the Stono River" to control flooding and improve transportation across a vast stretch of marshland. Tellingly, the effort included Horseshoe Savannah, located along Wallace Creek–not far from where the Stono revolt originated.

For generations, Black Carolinians used long, narrow wooden shovels (known as kayendos *in West Africa) to dig and maintain rice ditches and canals still visible today. This 1916 image of a worker at Mulberry Plantation ditching a rice field captures the grim nature of this endless work. (Lowcountry Digital Library, Margaretta Childs Archives at Historic Charleston Foundation, 1916-11.)*

September 9, 1739: A Sudden Day of Reckoning

In 2022, Curtis Inabinett pointed out what some suspect may be the foundation for Hutchenson's store (or perhaps the Wallace tavern). This spot on the Savannah Highway was named a National Historic Landmark in 1974, and a marker was erected in 2006. The land is now being transformed into a public site. (Photos by Henry Taylor for the Post and Courier*)*

In Carolina, enslavers and enslaved knew that early fall, with crops ripening, was the best time for large numbers to risk an uprising or attempt an escape. Even those who fled with only the clothes on their backs, one observer explained, would be "able to keep the Field, with plenty of Corn and Potatoes every where." Still, the odds against escape or resistance were overwhelming.

Faced with such odds, violence intended to impose fear and rally support offered the only chance. Hence, the outburst at Stono proved deadly from its start near Stono Bridge. At Hutchenson's store, the band murdered Robert Bathurst and John Gibbs, leaving their severed heads on the stairs as a symbol that the all-or-nothing revolt had begun.

"Next they plundered and burnt Mr. Godfrey's house, and killed him, his daughter and son," before marching southward on the Pon Pon Road (now Rt. 17). Near where Wallace Creek meets the Stono, the liberators "passed Mr. Wallace's tavern towards day break," agreeing not to hurt him as he was deemed "kind to his slaves." Others would not be spared so readily.

As dawn broke, the rebels focused their violence on nearby plantations, murdering white families and hoping to attract those in the slave quarters to join their cause. "They broke open and plundered Mr. Lemy's house, … killed him, his wife and child."

Afterward, they burned the home of Thomas Rose (where a slave named Wells and an unnamed Black woman defended Rose). As rebel ranks swelled, the mood grew triumphant, with the waving of banners, the beating of drums, and reported shouts of "Liberty!"

A turning point came an hour before noon when William Bull spotted the noisy throng in the distance. The lieutenant governor had attended a session of the Granville district court and was riding north toward Charles Town with four others when he met the rebels and "discerned the approaching danger."

While the men rode off to arouse militia units, the rebel cohort was apparently being "increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above sixty, some say a hundred." Deadly attacks followed on the estates of James Bullock, Alexander Hext, Royal Sprye, Thomas Sacheverell, and other wealthy enslavers.

As smoke rose from the burning houses, more slaves–eagerly or fearfully–joined the cause. Tired, the group finally "halted in a field"and began dancing, singing, and beating drums "to draw more Negroes to them, thinking that they were now victorious over the whole province."

The pause was more calculated than carefree. It granted rest to weary marchers and gave others time to join. Hope grew that the determined crowd, however poorly armed and provisioned, would soon reach overwhelming numbers, too large for any force to attack. But mounted militia appeared before that tipping point could be reached.

In the ensuing battle, an opening volley killed 14 rebels. Militiamen surrounded those who remained standing, shooting many of them after only brief questioning. An account dated October 2 boasted that planters "did not torture one Negroe, but only put them to an easy death." Several prisoners forced to join the rebellion were released to return home.

Others, attempting to escape, were captured and killed. Militiamen, it was claimed in one report, "Cutt off their heads and set them up at every Mile Post they came to" along the road. The next day, one militia company submitted a sizable bill of £90 for "Liquors &c" which participants had consumed, either to fortify their courage or to celebrate their victory.

Suppression: "Some Hang'd, & Some Gibbeted Alive"

A desperate manhunt ensued. Guards sealed off key ferry passages, and militia captains paid Native American allies to become slave-catchers. Some taken up in the dragnet were immediately "shot, some hang'd, and some Gibbeted alive. A number came in and were seized and discharged." But not all the freedom fighters died, surrendered, or returned home undetected.

According to one account, about 30 insurgents "escaped from the fight, of which 10 marched about 30 miles Southward, and being overtaken by the Planters on horseback, fought stoutly for some time." Despite their stiff resistance, the ten "were all killed," but the others remained at liberty. A few may even have reached Florida.

In late September, one merchant wrote that most of the rebels were "already taken or cut to pieces." Georgians, however, still heard reports that insurgents "not yet pacified…are roaming around in gangs in the Carolina forests." (Oglethorpe blamed the rebellion on Lowcountry masters who had compelled enslaved Africans to desecrate the sabbath with extra work.)

White fears continued into the Christmas season, always a tense time within slavery regimes. During the last weeks of the year, officials in Charles Town claimed to have foiled a fresh slave conspiracy "before it came to maturity." In the spring, authorities captured and executed several additional Stono participants. Another managed to remain at large for three more years.

Such resistance nurtured ongoing hopes among the enslaved and fostered continuing fears within the colony's white minority. In June 1740, clandestine meetings north of Charles Town led to a new design. For the town's white residents, it had "the Appearance of greater Danger than any of the former" ones, since more than 150 defiant Black persons were planning an attack on the city.

Defeat of the Stono rebels had shown the plotters that they "had no prospect of

HONORING THE ANCESTORS

Somewhere during this journey into the past, it is important to stop and take time to honor the ancestors, to say their names, and recall their sacrifices. One African American way of remembering to remember is to pour a libation. Think of it as a sincere offering, made using any cup, or perhaps a dipper gourd—a powerful symbol of Black freedom.

Put drops of water or wine (or whatever is at hand) into a hollow gourd or container, and gather around, inside or outdoors. Say a prayer, silently or out loud, thanking some of those who came before us, and using their names where possible. Then pour the libation on the earth that contains all our ancestors. Let them know we have not forgotten them.

escaping through the Province of Georgia," so they intended to march on Charles Town "to break open a store-house, and supply themselves, and those who would join them, with arms." But their large numbers proved their undoing when an enslaved man named Peter tipped off authorities.

Alerted to the scheme "two Days before it was to be put in Execution," whites prepared an ambush for the rebels. By one account, "when they appeared the next day fifty of them were seized, and these were hanged, ten in a day, to intimidate the other slaves." Some 67 persons were brought to trial. The legislature thanked Peter with new clothes and a £20 reward.

"Such dreadful Work" seemed likely to continue, one man observed, with embittered Black workers "breaking open Stores to find Arms, as they did in the last Year." White inhabitants "cannot live without perpetually guarding their own Safety, now become so precarious," he wrote in his journal, given "how vastly disproportionate the Number of white Men is to theirs."

Countermeasures in the Lowcountry and Beyond

No sooner had Carolina's well-armed white minority regained the upper hand than influential colonists began contemplating their next moves. Some retreated to the walled city of Charles Town. Others considered leaving the colony altogether rather than risk renewed danger. So many people appeared anxious "to remove themselves" that the entire colony's survival "seemed to be at Stake."

Facing such dire straits, officials set aside factional disputes to enact drastic new measures. One imposed a prohibitive duty on importing Africans, a measure that lasted nearly a decade. Assemblymen hoped, unrealistically, that this temporary disruption to business as usual could spur more European immigration and shift South Carolina's racial balance.

For decades, Carolina elites had debated the pros and cons of exposing Africans to a censored version of Protestant Christianity that might impart greater obedience, especially if preached by enslaved converts. Now they allowed the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to open a short-lived grammar school to train several dozen carefully chosen Black youths for the task.

Officials also made a show of rewarding those who had refused to join the rebellion. Tony, Primus, and Pompey had protected planter Frederick Grimke and his family. Men claimed by Thomas Elliott (Joe, Larush, Pompey, Prince, and Ralph) also resisted the calls of the rebels and received cash and clothing as a reward for their loyalty.

July, another Black man on Elliott's plantation, armed his friends and resisted the rebels. He killed one attacker, and during the aftermath he tracked down fugitives. To encourage "other slaves to follow his example," authorities granted July his freedom, plus shoes and a new suit of clothes. They compensated Mr. Elliott £1,000 for the loss of his valued human "property."

Meanwhile, Spanish Florida remained a danger to Carolina's deeply entrenched system. "We shall Live very Uneasie with our Negroes," merchant Robert Pringle predicted, so long as "the Spaniards continue to keep Possession of St. Augustine." He bemoaned the fact that British naval forces had not yet dislodged them.

In October 1739, with England and Spain at war, Georgia's Oglethorpe received approval to attack St. Augustine and eliminate Britain's rival for control of the region. After cajoling South Carolina to contribute men and supplies, General Oglethorpe landed troops at Florida's St. John's River in May 1740 and laid siege to St. Augustine in June.

But the enterprise soon crumbled, in part because of stiff opposition from Black militia. Armed by the Spanish, these units included former Carolina slaves determined to defend their freedom. When Oglethorpe gave up and returned north in July, his failure prompted bickering between Georgia and South Carolina over who was to blame.

In 1742, Spain launched a counteroffensive, sending a large force from Havana to invade the Georgia coast and destabilize the South Carolina colony. Oglethorpe's troops foiled the attack at the Battle of Bloody Marsh, near Fort Frederica. Before the decade's end, white Carolinians felt secure enough to resume the large-scale importation of Africans.

In all-white Georgia, a pro-slavery faction lobbied to remove that colony's ban on enslaved Africans. Georgia's trustees, once holdouts against the inhumane practice of hereditary race-based slavery, finally agreed to reverse course at mid-century, leading to a rapid expansion of Britain's hugely profitable southeastern rice kingdom.

Fort Mose Historic State Park lies just north of St. Augustine. The museum and visitor center sit near the site of the original fort, first excavated in the 1970s by archaeologist Kathleen Deagan. See the park website for dates when reenactors in the Fort Mose Militia stage an 18th-century muster. (Photo courtesy of the Fort Mose Historical Society)

Tightening the Screws: "The Negro Act of 1740"

The largest, most enduring countermeasure in the wake of the Stono Uprising was the General Assembly's "Negro Act of 1740," passed in May after six months of discussion. This "Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves," greatly expanded and tightened South Carolina's slave code; its provisions held sway until the end of the Civil War.

Some elements of the act took aim at dangerous offenses committed by planters and overseers that could provoke another massive uprising. Section 22, for example, warned that persons who, on Sunday, "employ any slave in any work or labour, (works of absolute necessity …excepted)" shall pay £5 current money "for every slave they shall so work."

To "restrain and prevent barbarity being exercised towards slaves," section 37 laid out severe penalties for anyone who "shall, on sudden heat or passion, or by undue correction, kill his own slave, or the slave of any other person." The statute imposed a stiff fine if anyone "shall willfully cut out the tongue, put out the eye, castrate, or cruelly scald, burn, or deprive any slave of any limb or member, or shall inflict any other cruel punishment."

Such overbearing use of arbitrary power could endanger the status quo. Its opposite, a lack of oversight within slave labor camps, represented a different challenge. Section 46 asserted that "plantations settled with slaves without any white person thereon" often harbored "fugitive slaves." From now on, planters would pay £10 current money for every month they kept "slaves on any plantation or settlement, without a white person" present.

While parts of the 1740 Negro Act addressed the disruptive abuses of many planters, most portions tightened the screws on the colony's enslaved majority. The statute codified their lack of access to the rights of English common law. Reduced to property and legal nonentities, these people were prohibited from raising food, earning money, or assembling in groups.

The law's many-sided crackdown included section 16, which declared any act of arson or poisoning committed by a "slave, free Negro, mulattoe, Indian or mustizoe" to be a felony punishable by execution. Also, death would come to anyone who "shall feloniously steal…any slave…with intent to carry such slave out of this Province."

Section 26 stated that any slave who might "presume to strike any white person" with even the mildest defensive slap "shall, for the first and second offence, suffer such punishment as the said justice and freeholders…think fit, not extending to life or limb." A third conviction meant execution, but with this added caveat: "in case any such slave shall grievously wound, maim or bruise any white person, though it be only the first offence, such slave shall suffer death."

The 1740 Act reveals heightened white fears over communication among the enslaved. Section 36 deemed it crucial to prevent slaves from possessing and using any "drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes." Likewise, Black access to literacy became a vital and lasting concern.

Section 45 of the new law emphasized that having "slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences." The statute made clear that anyone teaching an enslaved person to write or employing "any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever," shall pay £100 current money for each offense.

Writing seemed even more dangerous than reading, as seen in section 3, aimed at "the better keeping slaves in due order and subjection." An enslaved individual traveling about, without a white person present, must always carry a signed and dated ticket permitting them to be abroad from a specific plantation for a fixed number of hours or days. This precaution lost its power if persons with even limited literacy skills could forge passes for themselves and others.

Finally, section 56 acknowledged that in suppressing the Stono rebels, many "were killed and others taken alive and executed" without "the formality of a legal trial." So the act explicitly exonerated all who had participated in vigilante killings, laws to the contrary notwithstanding.

> *The 1740 Act reveals heightened white fears over communication among the enslaved.*

The full title of the 58-part law approved by South Carolina's Assembly in May 1740 was

"An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing [of] Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province."

Roads Not Taken: Consequences of the Stono Revolt

This chart makes clear that key British colonies were developing differently by 1750. The oldest pair, Virginia and Massachusetts, had grown the most, so the circles showing their overall population are the largest. Regional differences had become stark. In the North, race slavery existed, but it did not dominate economic and political life. Blacks were a small portion of the population, and many were free persons of color, more fully integrated into the dominant culture.

In contrast, nine out of ten Blacks were entrapped in the South, where forced enslavement, the dominant institution, shaped all aspects of life. By 1750, Virginia held more African Americans (107,000) than any other mainland colony, and free persons of color were scarce. In smaller South Carolina, 60 percent of all inhabitants were Blacks held in bondage. This repressive and volatile situation persisted because it was making South Carolina into the richest North American colony.

The Lowcountry's Black majority was unique and significant. It fostered the deep fears and repressive laws of local enslavers, but the African concentration also prompted the distinctive Gullah language and culture. The more we learn about Stono, the more it becomes clear that Carolina's repressive colonial regime was nearly upended entirely. And that raises serious questions about how the event altered, or failed to alter, early American history more broadly.

In pivotal moments of flux and uncertainty, "what ifs" abound. Small changes surrounding the Stono story could have had enormous long-term consequences, altering the path of later American history in ways we can only imagine. What if the Stono rebels had eluded discovery by William Bull's party, or had taken them hostage? Buying more time, could this vanguard have mustered greater numbers and managed to reach Florida, with or without Spanish support?

Would such a mass exodus have encouraged Spain to expand its foothold in the Southeast, strengthen alliances with the region's Native Americans, and improve the status of Africans (if only to antagonize Britain and its Caribbean colonies)? Might Carolina planters, to preserve their rice kingdom, have conceded an end to slavery and offered wages, however minimal, to freed workers? Could the powerful Anglican Church have found the spine to support such changes?
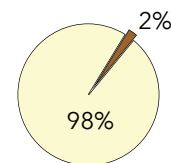
As for adjacent colonies, what if upheaval in South Carolina prompted Georgia to affirm its no-slavery policy, for reasons of both humanity and security?
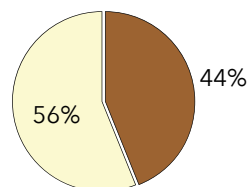
White and Black Populations in 1750

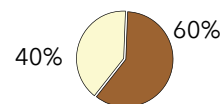Color Key: White [ ] Black ■

New York — 86% / 14%
Massachusetts — 98% / 2%
Virginia — 56% / 44%
South Carolina — 40% / 60%
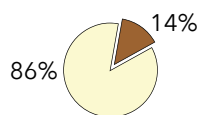
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source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*

Would North Carolina, long doubtful about slavery, have followed suit? And what of the Chesapeake, with its large Black population? Might white Virginians have considered abolishing slavery–a prospect they would be forced to debate after Nat Turner's Revolt in 1831, when slavery had become far more deeply ensconced?

Could an even wider and bloodier Stono upheaval, plus mounting white fear of race slavery's dangers, have changed the thinking of America's founding generation? And if so, how might that shift have altered the Revolutionary War and the shape of the U.S. Constitution? Such speculations may seem far-fetched to anyone familiar with the actual events that unfolded in the decades after 1739. But recall that the Haitian Revolution changed 18th-century Atlantic history.

Could Stono have done the same? We shall never know. But many Black Carolinians felt galvanized, not chastened, by the brutal repression of Stono rebels. They continued to look for people and strategies to bring drastic change to their existence as lifelong prisoners. So in closing, consider the unlikely saga of Christian Gottlieb Priber, an idealistic German who arrived in Charles Town in the mid-1730s, hoping to establish a utopian republic in southern Appalachia.

Priber laid the groundwork for a refuge that would put Cherokees, Europeans, and Africans all on an equal footing. But hostile Creeks captured him in 1743, killed his Black companion, and turned the radical foreigner over to English authorities. Fearful officials destroyed his papers, and the idealist died in prison without a trial. One can only imagine how the success of Priber's Enlightenment design might have changed later African American and southern history.

The Caw Caw Interpretive Center in Ravenel, SC, southwest of Charleston off Route 17, lies close to the starting point of the *Stono Uprising*. It sits on land where generations of enslaved South Carolinians cultivated rice in huge fields that are still visible. Caw Caw is a low-impact wildlife preserve with six miles of trails and an excellent museum. The Center is part of the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. (Photo courtesy of Charleston County Parks)

Books to Read

Edda L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora*.

Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739*.

Norrece T. Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina*.

Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*.

Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*.

Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the 18th-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*.

J. Brent Morris, *Yes, Lord, I Know the Road: A Documentary History of African Americans in South Carolina, 1526-2008*.

Jack Schuler, *Calling Out Liberty: The Stono Slave Rebellion and the Universal Struggle for Human Rights*.

Mark M. Smith, editor, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*.

Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*.

Articles to Find

Eric E. Bowne and Crystal A. Bowne, "Natives, Women, Debtors, and Slaves: Christian Priber's American Utopia," *Native South* 11 (2018): 56-80.

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Edward A. Pearson, "'A Countryside Full of Flames': A Reconsideration of the Stono Rebellion and Slave Rebelliousness in the Early Eighteenth-Century South Carolina Lowcountry," *Slavery and Abolition* 17, no. 2 (1996): 22-50.

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John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1101-13.

Peter H. Wood, "'A Thin Neck in the Hourglass': Looking Back at Charles Town Harbor from Colorado…and Looking Forward," in Leah Worthington, et al, editors, *Challenging History: Race, Equity, and the Practice of Public History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021): 127-40, 166-70.