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“NO DISTEMPERS
EITHER EPIDEMICAL OR MORTAL”

The colony of Carolina was founded in 1670, when about two hundred colonists from Barbados relocated to the banks of a river that empties into Charleston Harbor (it was initially called Charles Town, after the reigning king). Like Virginia, Carolina was a commercial enterprise, founded by eight powerful English nobles who hoped to take advantage of the now-established traffic to Virginia by redirecting some of it to the south. The proprietors intended to lease pieces of the colony to would-be planters, realizing a profit without actually having to expend much effort or money. Barbados, full of sugar plantations, was crowded. Some of its English inhabitants, looking to acquire land, decided to take a flyer on Carolina. Knowing of Virginia’s labor problem, the proprietors promised extra land to anyone who imported indentured servants, as well as the servants themselves.

Whereas Jamestown had confronted a single Indian empire under a strong leader, Carolina began amid a chaotic swirl of native groups. Beginning in about 1000 A.D., hundreds of densely

packed towns—“Mississippian” societies, as archaeologists call them—arose in the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast. Ruled by powerful theocrats who lived atop great earthen mounds, they were the most technologically sophisticated cultures north of Mexico. For reasons that are not well understood, these societies fell apart in the fifteenth century. The disintegration was accelerated by the onset of European diseases. By the time Carolina came into existence, the fragments of Mississippian societies were coalescing into confederacies of allied communities—Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Catawba—that were jostling for power across the Southeast.

Slavery occurred in most Indian societies, but the institution differed from place to place. Among Algonkian-language societies like the Powhatan, for instance, slavery was usually a temporary state. Slaves were prisoners of war who were treated as servants until they were either tortured and slain, ransomed back to their original groups, or inducted into Powhatan society as full members. Occasionally, Jamestown’s *tassantassas* were able to buy Indian captives for their fields, but they were not generally a source of labor either for the Powhatan or the English. South of Chesapeake Bay was a cultural border where Algonkian societies ran into the nascent confederacies, many of which spoke Muskogean languages. War captives also became slaves in the confederacies, but there slavery was both more common and longer-lasting—traditions dating back to the Mississippians, whose leaders viewed captives as symbols of power and vengeance. Slaves worked in fields, performed menial tasks, and could be given away as gifts; female slaves provided sexual services to honored male visitors (a gesture frequently misunderstood by Europeans, who thought that the Indians were offering their wives). When foreigners appeared in Carolina, the confederacies were endlessly willing to trade surplus captives for axes, knives, metal pots, and, above all, guns.

In the late seventeenth century, the new flintlock rifle was

becoming available—the first European firearm that native people regarded as superior to their bows. The matchlocks John Smith brought to Virginia used a lever to lower a burning match onto a small pan of gunpowder; the resultant flash pushed the projectile down the barrel. Heavy and unrifled, matchlocks had to be braced on tripods; because soldiers had to carry around burning fuses to fire them, the weapons were unsuitable for beaver wetlands and almost useless in rain. In optimal conditions, matchlocks could shoot a deadly projectile farther than a bow. But in warfare, conditions are never optimal. Colonial records are replete with descriptions of *tassantassas* unhappily discovering that as a practical matter their weapons were outmatched by native bows—weapons with no moving parts, weapons that could get wet, weapons that could be fired in an instant. Flintlocks, by contrast, ignited the gunpowder by snapping a chunk of flint against a piece of steel, creating a spark. The spark ignited a small charge that in turn set off a bigger charge in the barrel. Smaller, lighter, and more accurate than matchlocks, they could be fired quickly and used in wet weather.

The southeastern confederacies, quickly understanding the new weapons' superiority, determined not to be outgunned, either by the English or their native rivals. An arms race ensued across the Southeast. To build up their stores of flintlocks, native people raided their enemies for slaves to sell—an action that required more firearms. Needing guns to defend themselves, they in turn staged their own slaving raids, selling the captives to Europeans in return for guns. Demand fed demand in a vicious cycle.

Despite the fears of the Virginia Company, Jamestown never was directly threatened by Spain or France. Carolina, closer to Spanish Florida and French Louisiana, had much more reason to worry; indeed, Spain tried to extinguish the colony within months of its founding. Carolina's leaders came up with an elegant scheme; they asked nearby native groups to provide them with slaves by raiding the Indians who were allied with Spain

and France, destabilizing their enemies and reducing their labor shortage at the same time.

Economically speaking, indigenous slavery was a good deal for both natives and newcomers. In the Charleston market Indians sometimes could sell a single slave for the same price as 160 deerskins. "One slave brings a Gun, ammunition, horse, hatchet, and a suit of Cloathes, which would not be procured without much tedious toil a hunting," a Carolina slave buyer noted, perhaps with some exaggeration, in 1708. "The good prices The English traders give them for slaves Encourages them to this trade Extreemly."

"Good prices" from the Indian point of view, but cheap to the English. Indian captives cost £5–10, as little as half the price of indentured servants, according to the Ohio State University historian Alan Galloway, author of *The Indian Slave Trade* (2002), a widely lauded account of its rise and fall. More important, the annual cost of ownership was much lower, because slaves did not have to be released after a few years—the purchase price could be amortized over decades. Unsurprisingly, the colonists chose Indian slaves over European servants. A 1708 census, Carolina's first, found four thousand English colonists, almost 1,500 Indian slaves, and just 160 servants, the majority presumably indentured.

In time Carolina grew famous as a slave importer, a place where the slave ships arrived from Africa and the captives, dazed and sick, were hustled to auction. But for its first four decades the colony was mainly a slave *exporter*—the place from where captive Indians were sent to the Caribbean, Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts. Data on Indian shipments are scarce, because colonists, wanting to avoid taxes and regulations, shipped them on small vessels and kept few records. (The big slaving companies in Europe didn't have this choice.) From the fragmentary evidence, Galloway has estimated that Carolina merchants bought between thirty and fifty thousand captive Indians between 1670 and 1720. Most of these must have been exported, given the much lower

number found by the Carolina census. In the same period, ships in Charleston unloaded only 2,450 Africans (some came overland from Virginia, though).*

Here notice a striking geographical coincidence. By 1700, English colonies were studded along the Atlantic shore from what would become Maine to what would become South Carolina. Northern colonies coexisted with Algonkian-speaking Indian societies that had few slaves and little interest in buying and selling captives; southern colonies coexisted with former Mississippian societies with many slaves and considerable experience in trading them. Roughly speaking, the boundary between these two types of society was Chesapeake Bay, not far from what would become the boundary between slave and non-slave states in the United States. Did the proximity of Indian societies with slaves to sell help grease the skids for what would become African slavery in the South? Was the terrible conflict of the U.S. Civil War a partial reflection of a centuries-old native cultural divide? The implication is speculative, but not, it seems to me, unreasonable.

In any case, the Indian slave trade was immensely profitable—and very short-lived. By 1715 it had almost vanished, a victim in part of its own success. As Carolina's elite requested more and more slave raids, the Southeast became engulfed in warfare, destabilizing all sides. Victimized Indian groups acquired guns and attacked Carolina in a series of wars that the colony barely survived. Working in groups, Indian slaves proved to be unreliable, even dangerous employees who used their knowledge of the terrain against their owners. Rhode Island denounced the "conspiracies, insurrections, rapes, thefts and other execrable

* These figures do not include Indians seized in other colonies. During a vicious Indian war in 1675–76, for instance, Massachusetts sent hundreds of native captives to Spain, Portugal, Hispaniola, Bermuda, and Virginia. And the French in New Orleans seized thousands more. Carolina was a bigger slaver than others, but every English colony in North America was in the same business, with or without the cooperation of local Indians.

crimes" committed by captive Indian laborers, and banned their import. So did Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. The Massachusetts law went out of its way to excoriate the "malicious, surly and revengeful" Indian slaves.

The worst problem, though, was something else. As in Virginia, malaria came to Carolina. At first the English had extolled the colony's salubrious climate. Carolina, one visitor wrote, has "no Distempers either Epidemical or Mortal"; colonists' children had "Sound Constitutions, and fresh ruddy Complexions." The colonists decided to use the warm climate to grow rice, then scarce in England. Soon after came reports of "fevar and ague"—rice paddies are notorious mosquito havens. *Falciparum* had entered the scene, accompanied a few years later by yellow fever. Cemeteries quickly filled. In some parishes, more than three out of four colonists' children perished before the age of twenty. As in Virginia, almost half of the deaths occurred in the fall. (One German visitor's summary: "in the spring a paradise, in the summer a hell, and in the autumn a hospital.")

Unfortunately, Indians were just as prone to malaria as English indentured servants—and more vulnerable to other diseases. Native people died in ghastly numbers across the entire Southeast. Struck doubly by disease and slave raids, the Chickasaw lost almost half their population between 1685 and 1715. The Quapaw (Arkansas) fell from thousands to fewer than two hundred in about the same period. Other groups vanished completely—the last few dozen Chakchiuma were absorbed by the Choctaw. The Creek grew to power by becoming, in the phrase of one writer, "the receptacle for all distressed tribes." It was God's will, Carolina's former governor observed in 1707, "to send unusual Sicknesses" to the Westo Indians, "to lessen their numbers; so that the English, in comparison to the Spaniard, have but little Indian Blood to answer for."

Naturally, the colonists looked for a different solution to their labor needs—one less vulnerable to disease than European servants or Indian slaves.