

**Transcript: DANIEL LITTLEFIELD, Carolina Professor of History, University of South Carolina**

**Interviewers: BETSY NEWMAN, PATRICK HAYES, KELLY HOGAN KINARD**

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Betsy Newman: I read somewhere that there's really no consensus still on how rice arrived in South Carolina. Do you have a theory about that?

Daniel Littlefield: Well, there are various theories, I mean rice did come-- Africans probably first used rice in South Carolina, but there were probably multiple introductions of rice into South Carolina from various places. One of the things that Judith Carney is trying to find is evidence of African rice in South Carolina which would not have been used as a crop, but it would have been used by Africans. There has been botanical evidence of African rice in other parts of the Americas that I'm not sure that it leads to being discovered in South Carolina. But the rice for which South Carolina was famous was Carolina gold rice. That evidently didn't come into the region until after the Revolution, but where precisely it came from and who brought it in is also disputed. I think there were probably multiple introductions of rice and from various sources.

BN: Interesting. Well the rice itself-- when you say African rice, the strain of rice that we know of is not African?

DL: No. It's Asian rice. So there is Asian rice, which probably most of the world uses, and then there's African rice, which was, has a different genus, which was used in Africa, probably developed independently there. The problem with African rice in terms of its transportation is that it's very fragile, it doesn't travel very well. So Africans did use

African rice in parts of Africa, and then there were several introductions of Asian rice into Africa, which proliferated in those regions where African rice was already being used, so Africans used two kinds of rice, but the African rice is relatively unusual outside of Africa.

BN: You have brought forward the theory that the cultivation of rice, that that was something that was learned by the English and by the Europeans from the Africans. Can you talk about that?

DL: Yeah. Actually the theory was first advanced by another historian, Peter Wood, making the suggestion that Africans may have taught Englishmen how to grow rice, because there was no English tradition of rice growing. The important thing about that theory is that, before Peter Wood made the suggestion people didn't consider that notion. And it's still disputed-- the idea that Africans taught Englishmen how to grow rice is somewhat disputed. When I wrote about it, my basic task or the reason I got into it was to see if Africans actually had the knowledge to do that. Of course they did, but you couldn't really prove it unless you found some kind of document that suggested that. Since Africans weren't leaving those kinds of records, you would have to find a planter that said I learned how to do this. But it is clear that rice planters valued Africans with rice growing knowledge, whether or not they initially taught Englishmen how to grow rice in South Carolina.

BN: Can you say a little more about that? Where were those Africans and how did they seek them out?

DL: Well, there were regions in the Upper Guinea Coast in Africa where rice is grown. In slave trade ads planters would specify that if you have slaves from this region of Africa they would be very welcome in South Carolina. It wasn't as simple as saying I want you to go to the Guinea Coast-- to the particular region of the Guinea Coast and get Africans, but if you had a ship going to that region you could say if you could find people who grew

rice and if you get them to the new world, this kind of knowledge and people with this kind of knowledge are desired in South Carolina. So they did, planters-- you can find ads in South Carolina newspapers saying - well, Henry Laurens - saying people from these rice growing regions are desirable, and you can see ads in eighteenth century South Carolina papers saying this group of slaves comes from a region where rice is grown, so there was emphasis on the knowledge of rice growing among people from Africa.

However, the majority of people who came to South Carolina didn't come from rice growing regions, and it wouldn't have been necessary. Once you got somebody here, you trained them at whatever task you wanted them to do. The most important time when rice growing knowledge from Africa would have been important would have been in the early years, when they were trying to get rice to grow.

There is this theory that Africans taught Englishmen how to grow rice, but we don't really have the documentary evidence. The significant thing about that is that in an earlier period people and scholars did not look to Africa for knowledge of anything. The stereotypical view was that Africans were backward, ignorant and all they were wanted for was that they were labor, and that view of the situation has changed.

BN: I know Peter Wood talks about that quite a bit.

DL: Right.

BN: What other skills were Africans also used for, so to speak?

DL: Well, again, they were actually used for every kind of skill on the plantation, but those skills could be taught. Again, you can see Henry Laurens saying that if you have ... I would have to look it up, but it could be found in the Henry Laurens papers, Henry Laurens saying specifically if you can find slaves who have skills in carpentry or in blacksmithing, I think are the particular ones that he mentioned, bring those, and he then added they can be improved by apprenticeship to a European craftsman. But, there was specific recognition

that Africans had skills that the planters could take advantage of. The notion that Africans had no skills or capabilities is a much later notion. It wasn't one that was held by people in the eighteenth century. Even in the nineteenth century, when white supremacy was a dominant ideology, anybody who worked with slaves on a plantation, who might be working with skilled slaves, knew that skills were capable.

BN: Would you mind repeating that Dan, about how the Africans had these skills, they were boating in rivers and swamps?

DL: Right. One contrast that is made between Englishmen and Africans in early South Carolina is the English experience in seafaring, which they were great at, in contrast to the African experience in boating and the use of canoes along narrow rivers and in swampy areas. Englishmen were not as skilled in that kind of water travel, so Africans did dominate water travel in early South Carolina.

BN: To the great advantage of the English I'm sure?

DL: Sure. Sure. Sure. Right. You see, that's one of the interesting things, is that ... I mean ideologically there's always this conflict between, or about the meaning of African skills and capabilities and so forth. They weren't necessarily doing these things for themselves. They didn't often benefit, sometimes they might, because if you had a boating skill you had more independence than somebody who didn't, who was just confined to the plantation, but ultimately that skill was nevertheless directed towards the benefit of the planter, so it was sort of a double-edged kind of sword in terms of looking at the meaning of some of these skills.

But, in terms, however, the attitude towards Africans that existed at a later time, the notion that they did have skills, the notion that they actually brought skills with them from Africa was a departure in the scholarship beginning in the 1960s, when the Civil Rights

Movement caused people to look at some of these things in a different way than they had previously.

Phillip Simmons in Charleston. But yea, of course this is by the nineteenth century, as part of the recognition that Africans were not just stupid savages, that they did learn, even those that did not come from Africa with particular skills were capable of learning them in America and did so. I mean only... Certainly perhaps the majority of slaves-- well not perhaps-- the majority of slaves labored in fields with basically, or often unskilled labor, but a percentage of them practiced very skilled labor and their labor was essential to the success of the plantation enterprise.

BN: Dan, would you talk about the process of tidal cultivation of rice? Can you describe how that works?

DL: Well, tidal rice was only possible on plantations that were along a lake-- along a river where the tide brought in fresh water. There are two kinds of rivers, so not all of them were capable of tidal rice cultivation. In one kind of river, when the tide comes in the salt water goes under the fresh water. The fresh water rides on top. When you'd build a plantation along the river and when the tide came in you would build dikes and you'd have sluice gates. You could open the gate and fresh water would come into the field. You'd close the gate and let the water stay there as long as it needed it to do so for the plant to sprout. Then you would let the water drain off the field when the tide was going out after a certain period of time, go in and hoe and do what you needed to do, and then let the water go back onto the field. There were several of these periods. But this made it easier-- well there were two things; the hard thing about tidal rice cultivation for the slaves was building these dikes that had to be maintained, and they were sometimes very massive dikes. But the advantage once you got the dikes and sluices built and kept them maintained was that you had less weeding to do. When you planted the seed, you let the water flow over the field until the seeds sprouted and then you would let the water off and then you'd go in and do some hoeing and then let the rice grow to a certain height and then you'd let the water back

in and let it grow to sufficient height and then let the water out, and let the fields dry a little bit until it was time to harvest. There were some advantages and disadvantages. But, you had these massive dikes, but it did keep you from having to do as much hoeing as you might have done otherwise.

BN: Can you kind of paint a picture for me what it must have been like to be a field laborer in those rice fields?

DL: Well it was pretty deadly. First of all, you're doing manual labor, so any kind of repetitive hoeing or cutting in terms of harvesting is just repetitive, mind numbing labor. The additional factors in terms of rice cultivation is you're dealing with, swampy areas or wet areas, so you can have snakes and other kinds of vermin that you've got to fight. And then there are mosquitoes which carry diseases, so under the best of conditions it was not a very pleasant task. Under the worst of conditions it could be just absolutely brutal. So then, there were some regions, some islands along the coast that were given over entirely to rice cultivation, where there wasn't much else done on those particular plantations. So, Peter Wood called these work camps, almost like concentration camps, because that's all that was on there. Other plantations were more diversified. In fact, some places you might not ever even-- Henry Laurens had a series of plantations on which different crops were produced. Some would produce corn and maybe some tobacco among other things, which was used to supply these what were essentially work camps where nothing was produced except rice. You might not even have a whole family there. You might have more men than women and so forth, and that could be sort of the worst aspects of slavery, whereas-- or enslavement, whereas... This again you get into this notion of slavery was slavery and enslavement was enslavement, but still if you were on a more diversified plantation you might not be subject to the most deadening type of labor as on these places that might be characterized as just work camps.

BN: That characterization is mind blowing I think when you first hear it. To me it was.

DL: That's one of the things that we mentioned earlier ... [Dusenberry 00:20:52], that's one of the things that he's good at describing, these places where nothing was done but labor and it was damp, it was muggy, it was mosquito ridden, vermin infested. Planters didn't stay there. They sent the slaves, but they didn't go there. You might send an overseer, but the planters didn't stay there. These were areas devoted strictly to the most deadening form of labor, whereas other plantations might be a little bit more varied in the things that were done and certainly in the habitat. Well, first of all, some plantations weren't surrounded by miasmatic water in certain periods when you had to have the fields covered in water and there's nothing happening. You just let it sit there until the rice grew and you had mosquitoes and snakes and rats and do forth.

BN: Nightmarish really.

DL: Yeah. It could be.

BN: It made people very, very rich.

DL: Yeah. Right. Yeah. Well that still happens. Not with rice necessarily that way, but you know when you talk about steelworkers in the nineteenth century, or the twentieth century, they labored under the same kind of conditions. They got paid a wage of a type, but they were-- it wasn't very pleasant.

BN: You're so right. That is an old, old --is probably a story as old as humanity, making a fortune off of other people's misfortune.

DL: Right.

BN: So what about building that infrastructure? Can you describe what in your mind that must have been like, to convert these swamps or cypress swamps into rice fields?

DL: That was very difficult work. Max Edelson talks about a change in the English perception of land value, because when they first got to South Carolina the swamps that were numerous along the coast were not considered to be very valuable. They wanted to find dry, higher fertile land consistent with their knowledge of English agriculture, where you would grow wheat or perhaps cotton or tobacco. Once they grew rice-- learned how to grow rice, and particularly once they learned that the swampy areas were important, or suitable for growing rice, their nature of the value of land changed, so they sought out these regions that they had formerly avoided. But to clear these regions, once again-- and that's when you get not only the snakes, but you get the alligators and all these reptiles, and cypress is a pretty hard wood, so it's not easily dug up. You've got men with saws and axes and so forth going in and you're in the mud, you're in the water, but it's pretty hard work clearing these fields.

Then you've got to build, you've got to dike them if you're going to use tidal. If you're going to use one part of the swamp a water source and the other part as a field, you still have to set up a system of dikes. In the inland regions where you didn't have plantations along the river or along river that was suitable to tidal rice cultivation, you used different kinds of water sources, which was often connected with swamps. You would use part of the region to hold the water and clear another part to establish a field to which water could be directed, but it was very hard, very taxing work, and it was continuous. Once you got the field, the first part, building a plantation was always, even in regions that were not swampy, was always a difficult task, but in swampy regions it was immeasurably complicated, first of all by the type of wood that was there, the type of animals that you had to contend with, and the tools you were using, which were not bulldozers and so forth that you use nowadays. It was all by hand. Of course building these dikes, using shovels and buckets, and later on by the time of the nineteenth century wheelbarrows and so forth, but it was all



hand work and hard work, and again, continuous because once the dikes were built, they had to be maintained. When you weren't in the fields, you were sort of on them and around them, making sure that you didn't get breaches in the dikes and so forth.

BN: What about the processing of rice? Initially that was all done by hand?

DL: Right. Right. Initially it was done with a mortar and pestle in the traditional African fashion. So in the harvest season, once the rice was grown in people were tasked to do a certain amount of pounding of rice every night until the rice was finished. So you'd be in the fields maybe in the morning, but in the evening you were pounding rice until the rice was pounded.

BN: What about threshing?

DL: That was after you got the outer hull separated, when the mortar with the pestle-- with the mortar with the pestle, then you'd put it on the ground and use baskets to separate the grain from the shaft, the outer hull of the rice.

BN: I know on Hobcaw at about 1850 or so there was-- a rice mill was built. How did the introduction of those mills ... Did that have a significant impact on the production of rice? The amount that could be produced or the labor, the task?

DL: Yeah. Once you got these machines, you certainly could pound more rice, you could clean more rice, and certainly it was easier on the slaves. You could devote more time to doing other tasks on the plantation. But also by the nineteenth century you had other labor saving devices which enabled you to cultivate more rice. It meant the slaves were relieved of doing one thing and they put that effort into doing something else. So instead of pounding rice with a mortar and pestle, which was pretty cumbersome as well as hard work, certainly these machines permitted more rice to be cleaned, and a little bit easier for

the slaves. The slaves were then put to other kinds of tasks. Also these mills meant that people from other plantations then would bring their rice to the mill, giving slaves other things to do.

BN: I think the Allstons-- the most profitable years were right before the Civil War, I think, the early 1860s. It seemed like the production of rice was just growing and growing.

DL: By that time Carolina gold rice had developed and gold rice had a good reputation, so it was in demand in other parts of the world, particularly in southern Europe, where they ate rice.

BN: Can you describe just a bit the kind of wealth that these rice planters accrued and what kind of lives they led? You said they didn't go down to those miasmic swamps and--

DL: Well they were wealthy people. The wealthiest person in the United States in about 1850 was among the rice producers of South Carolina. They had a very sumptuous lifestyle, several plantations, more than one house. They often spent summers up in New England, or if they were less wealthy in the upstate South Carolina residences along the coast. They would send their children to Europe for education. In the eighteenth century they would buy English goods. In the nineteenth century they might buy some English goods, although others would be brought in from other parts of the United States. They often sent their children to Europe not only for education, but just before .... I can't remember the term, but before settling down you'd take a tour of the continent. They tried to imitate English, the English aristocracy.

BN: A lot of those mansions in Charleston I think, they owned...

DL: Yeah. They would have a town house in Charleston and then they would have a house on the plantations that they wanted to visit. Then they might have a town house in Rhode Island or Philadelphia. I'm trying to think of Butler's, I think, wife. Pierce Butler's wife, Fanny Kemble, they had a house in Philadelphia. She was an English actress. They had a house in Philadelphia. Some people had houses in-- Particularly Rhode Island was a place where South Carolina planters... There was a connection between Rhode Island and South Carolina planters in terms of the circulation of these wealthy aristocratic rice producing families. But, the Butlers, Philadelphia was the place.

BN: You have thought about this a lot and written about it. For you, what is the greatest takeaway when we think about the rice kingdom of South Carolina?

DL: When people talk about or think about slavery in the United States, they seldom think-- unless they come from South Carolina or Georgia, and unless they come from the South Carolina or Georgia low country they seldom think about rice as being a crop. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rice produced more wealth than any other crop produced in the United States with the possible exception of sugar, but sugar wasn't grown all that much. Sugar was grown in Louisiana and it did make people rich, but in terms of South Carolina and Georgia, rice was the crop and it was more wealthy-- it did produce more wealth than cotton or tobacco.

BN: Why do you think that has faded from people's memories?

DL: I guess because most of us don't live along the South Carolina and Georgia coast. I mean you know most people-- well most people in the southern regions live in cotton producing regions with the exception of Louisiana. Even in Louisiana, it's southern Louisiana where sugar was produced. In northern Louisiana it was cotton, so that's the stereotypical view of the crop and the laborers who produced it during the era of slavery. Rice sort of gets overlooked. Even when you're teaching survey courses to students in

South Carolina, often when you ask about crops in the early period of the nation's history they don't think about rice. It has to be pointed out to them that rice was extremely important and one of the most lucrative crops into the nineteenth century.

BN: I guess then after the Emancipation the rice production, I mean it kind of just evaporated.

DL: Yeah, because you couldn't make people do that. It was hard work. Not only hard work, it was dangerous work. It was not very pleasant work and you couldn't compel people to do in freedom what they could be compelled to do when they were enslaved.

BN: It was really based on slavery.

DL: Right.

BN: I so appreciate you talking with me about this. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't-

DL: I'll think of something late tonight that would have been a brilliant ending.

PATRICK HAYES: Is there a question that people are afraid to ask or perhaps isn't... I don't know what I'm trying to say, something that's misunderstood? I think we just covered that a little bit about the history of rice?

DL: I think what's often missing, despite the scholarship that it's developed in terms of reinterpreting the role that Africans played in the development of rice cultivation and the plantation in general, is the notion that slavery was a relationship of human beings. Although it was based on force, planters always had to consider the response. The way in which-- I mean... one scholar made the analogy between enslavement and the

concentration camp. Where that analogy fails is that although large numbers of people died under slavery and the... often planters didn't care whether they lived or died, depending on their circumstances. Nevertheless, the aim of enslavement was to produce a crop, whereas the aim of the concentration camp was destruction of the people there. The Germans didn't care if they lived, that wasn't the purpose. They did use the labor of people in the camps, but the camps were designed to destroy. Under slavery, destruction was often an offshoot, but if you-- To have a successful plantation you had to come to some working relationship with the people there or you failed as a planter.

BN: I think it's Dusenberry writes about how at a point the conditions were so terrible that the population among enslaved people was not growing?

DL: Well especially in these regions in... called work camps. First of all, there was often not an equal sex ratio and children born in these deplorable conditions died. Often they didn't live, but North American slave population as a whole did reproduce.

BN: Thank you so much.

DL: Sure.

BN: It's been wonderful to talk with you.

KELLY KINARD: This is kind of unrelated, but I noticed in one of the arguments in your book, and I've seen this argument elsewhere, is this maybe kind of critique of historians and anthropologists and other scholars who just lump things like Africans into-- into cities of West Africa. You've kind of pointed out in your book that obviously the plantation owners sought out certain ethnicities, so there were several different ethnicities that came to the South and created this... I guess creolized culture. I guess, what would you

suggest to scholars... in researching, how would you approach this and even just begin to sort out the different ethnicities?

DL: Okay. There are two I guess aspects of that question. One has to do with the notion that was related to the nineteenth century view of Africans as ignorant and coming with nothing and wanted for nothing but their labor. To recognize distinctive African cultures would be to recognize a certain humanity that people weren't accustomed to or thinking about at the time, and weren't really concerned about really, this period of white supremacy in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

In the eighteenth century, when people were actually involved in the slave trade, people were aware of different regions of Africa and people had stereotypes about what people from different-- the character of people from different regions of Africa. by the nineteenth century, when you had a creolized-- native population, the origins weren't so important. In the twentieth century, however, now that we have these methods of discovering ancestry through genetic means, people are trying to trace their ancestry back to particular regions of Africa, and I guess you can do this fairly successfully.

This is one of the things that people who are involved in the movement for reparations are trying to use. Because one of the ways in which cases for reparations have been dismissed is on the grounds that you can't prove that your ancestors were in this particular region. If you can say we have this genetic evidence related to people who are here and so forth, you can establish this connection that wouldn't have been possible before. I don't know what effect it's actually going to have on reparations, but it is a way of tracing one's roots in a way that wasn't possible before.

**END OF INTERVIEW**