**The Stono Rebellion and its Implications for South Carolina’s Slave Societies**

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The Stono rebellion had grave implications for South Carolina’s slave populations during the colonial period. The acts of rebellion by slaves in South Carolina gripped white settlers with fear primarily due to the realization that the white settlers were outnumbered three to one throughout the state by black slaves (Fea, 2015). The Stono rebellion’s impact had a massive effect on changing the scope of African American slave societies that existed within the state during this period. The nature of the rebellion and the fears of the white planter population caused changes in early South Carolinian society; laws governing the control of slave societies within the settlement of South Carolina forced new harsher hardships on the enslaved population of the state.

Prior to the Stono Rebellion the slave and master relationship in South Carolina was very different from the more commonly understood slavery based systems in the West Indies and later in Virginia. Slaves in South Carolina, prior to Stono, enjoyed certain liberties that other slaves throughout colonial North America were not entitled to. Many of these liberties directly related to the crops that were being cultivated in the state and the special skills needed to harvest the rice crop (Fea, 2015). Slaves were imported from Barbados based upon their specialized skills in rice cultivation (Taylor, 2001, p. 237) (Fea, 2015). Rice cultivation, unlike tobacco and sugar, required large groups of slaves working on specific tasks to accomplish the growth, cultivation, and harvest of the rice crop. The gang labor system allowed slaves in South Carolina to work closely with other slaves leading to the early development of a culture of camaraderie that ultimately frames the development of a unique African American culture in the state of South Carolina.

Slaves in South Carolina also had an unusual task based system for work allowing greater flexibility within the rice fields than existed with tobacco or sugar cultivation (Fea, 2015). A task-based system of employment allowed slaves the ability to complete their work and then go back to their quarters once their job was done. This was different from other settlements in colonial North America that used slave labor. In the tobacco fields in Virginia and sugar plantations of Barbados, slaves would perform backbreaking work until white overseers released them to their quarters (Taylor, 2001, pp. 134, 206). The system in South Carolina allowed slaves more time together to develop relationships with their fellow enslaved persons. This time as a group also led to the furtherance of a distinct African American culture within the state when contrasted against other colonial territories with a forced labor system.

While rice cultivation allowed the slaves greater flexibility to develop personal relationships the scope of the work, much like tobacco cultivation and harvesting, was difficult and dangerous. Rice, unlike tobacco or sugar, is cultivated in marshy conditions that often promoted disease among slaves and white settlers alike (Taylor, 2001, p. 239). Slaves were also disenfranchised in South Carolina due to the fears of the planter elites who used torture and public executions in an attempt to control growing slave populations. The fears of the planters ultimately led to a rolling back of liberties previously enjoyed by South Carolinian slave populations to a more West Indies inspired system using “strict surveillance and harsh punishment” to control the slaves who greatly outnumbered white planters living within the state (Taylor, 2001, p. 239).

The rebellion that occurred near the Stono River in September of 1739 ultimately resulted in a legal crackdown on slaves within the state. Slaves marching toward Spanish Florida “displayed flags, beat drums, and chanted ‘Liberty’” promoting the idea that the return to West Indies type regulation may have inspired the revolt (Taylor, 2001, p. 240). White planters came out as victors even though the rebellious slaves killed 20 whites as they marched toward a vision of freedom in Spanish Florida (Taylor, 2001, p. 240). Following quashing the rebels at Stono the planters implemented laws designed to quell the fears of white planters and control the majority slave populations within the state (Taylor, 2001, p. 240).

The wide reaching laws, known as the Negro Acts, were enacted to combat the white planter fears of rebellion while at the same time harshly restructuring the slavery system within the state. The act attempted to curtail the excesses of slavery while further limiting the previously reduced freedoms that slave populations enjoyed within the state. The act offers a lens into the fears of white settlers who were reeling following Stono, and the act literally enumerates the new laws in an almost chronological review of the failures of the slave based society as they related to the events of the rebellion.

The white settlers were put on notice, under the Negro Acts, that certain labor settings and punishments may have encouraged revolutionary tendencies amongst the slave populations. The acts forced white settlers to closely supervise slave labor; breaking up the gang-based system of work that rice cultivation had required. Under the act, slave owners and overseers were not allowed to punish slaves outside of the codified rules of the act or they would face mostly monetary penalties (McCord, 1840, pp. 397-419).

On the other hand, the act strictly limited previously allowed activities of slaves within the state. Whites deprived the slaves these minimal liberties by implementing regulations designed to further reduce the likelihood of rebellion amongst the majority black population in the state. Slaves were no longer permitted to work in large groups with limited supervision, own personal property (including plants and weapons used to hunt game), or to travel outside the confines of their plantations without the explicit approval of their white masters (McCord, 1840, pp. 398-410). Most severely, the law allowed white settlers the legal ability to put to death “rebellious” slaves without trial as a public service (McCord, 1840, p. 419).

The rebellion at Stono was explicitly cited in the Negro Act as a justification for the harsh punishments that were now codified in South Carolina’s legal system. The impact of the rebellion at Stono had a wide reaching implications that worked to solidify the race based distinctions within the state that led to conflict years later during debate on both the Declaration of Independence and the formation of the Constitution (Fea, 2015). The slave rebellion at Stono did not ultimately result in positive changes for blacks within the territory and instead worked to chip away at the minor liberties previously enjoyed by slaves within the state. As a direct result of the fears of the white settlers, which were only heightened following Stono, previous personal liberties were abandoned for the sake of the security of the outnumbered elites.

# Works Cited

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