

“She Do a Heap of Work”: Female Slave Labor on Glynn County Rice and Cotton Plantations

BY DAINA L. RAMEY

“O h my Missis! my missis! me neber sleep till day for de pain,” exclaimed Mile, the former slave mother of fifteen to her mistress Frances Kemble.¹ Suffering from rheumatism, two miscarriages, and mourning the deaths of nine children, this female slave, like others, was forced to work in the fields daily. Slave women in Glynn County, Georgia, such as Mile, operated as central figures in the antebellum plantation work force. Their labor in the fields and the Big House functioned as an essential component to the maintenance of the plantation regime, especially during the decades preceding the Civil War. Masters and mistresses clearly articulated slave women’s value through their agricultural and personal journals. Yet traditional assumptions about male physical prowess and skill have caused scholars to overlook female slaves’ contributions. Labor su-

¹Frances Anne Kemble to “My dearest E[lizabeth],” March 4, 1830, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (1863; rpt., Athens, Ga., 1984), 240-41.

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pervisors on Glynn County plantations, by contrast, recognized the importance of female agricultural and non-agricultural labor.

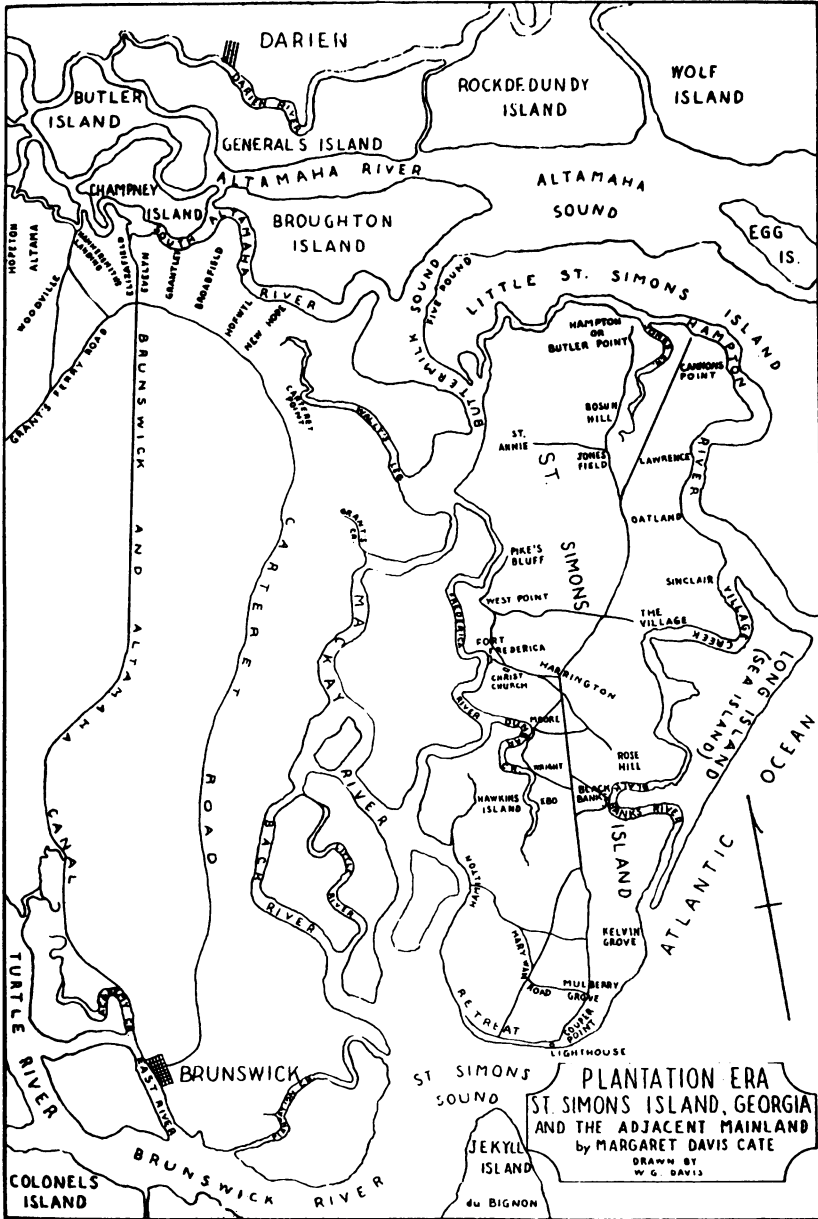
Glynn County lies about sixty miles south of Savannah in Georgia's tidewater region. In addition to the mainland, it encompassed St. Simons and Jekyll Islands, both part of a string of Sea Islands that stretch 120 miles along the coast of North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.² It was one of the seven original Georgia counties established in 1777, and the home of a large planter elite. Glynn County contained a black majority of nearly 80 percent of the county's population throughout the antebellum period.³

This essay considers the work lives of slave women in Glynn County rice and cotton fields, and in non-agricultural settings such as the homes and barnyards of their masters. Agricultural laborers consisted of field workers and is a term used interchangeably with "field hands." Non-agricultural workers included domestic slaves who labored in their masters' homes; male artisans who worked on the plantation or were hired out to other planters; male and female livestock minders who tended to poultry, sheep, cattle, and other animals; and female midwives, nurses, cooks, and seamstresses.⁴ Extant records confirm that slave women occupied key positions in the work force. Yet, most historians have systematically ignored planter dependence on black

²St. Simons Island lies eighteen miles east of Brunswick, Georgia, and is approximately thirteen miles long and two miles wide. Jekyll Island lies south of St. Simons and is approximately ten miles long, consisting of 11,000 acres. See Kenneth K. Krakow, *Georgia Place Names* (Macon, Ga., 1975), 120, 199, and 200; Ralph B. Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1933), 57-59; and Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia, 1750-1860* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1985), 15-22. Former Glynn County planter James P. Postell estimated the size of St. Simons Island in "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book 1853," Margaret Davis Cate Collection, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

³U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Census, Population and Slave Schedules, Glynn County, Georgia (microfilm). Those who migrated to Glynn County came from South Carolina and Virginia in order to capitalize on Georgia's lenient land policy and alluvial soil. See, for example, J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn., 1985), 11-14; Guion G. Johnson, *A Social History of the Sea Islands: With Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930; rpt., New York, 1969), 22-27; John Solomon Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation: Living Conditions and Status Patterns in the Old South* (New York, 1984), 21; and Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 23-29. For additional population demographics relating to Glynn County, see Daina L. Ramey, "'A Place of Our Own': Labor, Family, and Community Among Female Slaves in Piedmont and Tidewater Georgia, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998), and John Solomon Otto, "Slavery in a Coastal Community—Glynn County (1790-1860)," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (1979): 461-68.

⁴For a detailed list of both groups of workers, see Table 1.



This map of Glynn County indicates the plantations on St. Simons Island and on the mainland along the Altamaha River. Margaret Davis Cate map from the Georgia Historical Quarterly 44 (March 1960), p. 4.

women. Slave women worked alongside bondsmen at similar tasks and completed traditionally gender-specific jobs in the non-agricultural realm. Their work provided essential contributions to the southern economy and to individual slaveholders, yet the historiography of slave labor has overlooked these patterns.

Gender-specific tasks for women included cleaning, cooking, midwifery, nursing, sewing, and washing. Male non-agricultural workers often occupied the positions of bricklayer, carriage driver, carpenter, mechanic, waiting man, shoemaker, blacksmith, cooper, and sometimes cook. Men had greater access to artisan positions, which women rarely occupied. Therefore, gender-specific labor frequently surfaced in non-agricultural settings.⁵ By comparison, as field laborers, female slaves in Glynn County cultivated crops such as rice, Sea Island cotton, sugar, indigo, corn, peas, and potatoes.⁶ Regardless of the nature of their work, these women served as central figures of the work force because they represented the majority of agricultural workers and their skills provided substantial contributions to the plantation economy.⁷

⁵ See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), 137-91; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 327-98; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), 22-29; Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Chicago, 1984), 59-65; Brenda Stevenson, "Slavery," in Darlene Clark Hine, et al., eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), 1045-70, especially 1050-56; Marli Frances Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880* (Urbana, Ill., 1998); and Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985).

⁶ Slaves planted corn, peas, and potatoes on the "high lands" and used these items to supplement their diets as well as their owners. See, for example, James C. Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture, 1732-1860* (Athens, Ga., 1964), 51-58; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1933), 2: 673-78; Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 23; Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), 150-63; and Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time With Special Reference to the Sea-Island Cotton Plant* (Charleston, S.C., 1844). For a brief discussion of "high land" crops, see Albert V. House, "The Management of a Rice Plantation in Georgia, 1834-1861, As Revealed in the Journal of Hugh Fraser Grant," *Agricultural History* 13 (October 1939): 208-217, especially 213.

⁷ The work of Hilary McD. Beckles, Leigh A. Pruneau, and Leslie Schwalm indicates that slave women were also the backbone of the labor systems in certain parts of Barbados and South Carolina. See Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, 1989); Pruneau, "All the Time is Work Time: Gender and the Task System on Antebellum Lowcountry Rice Plantations" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1997); and Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, Ill., 1997).

Table 1

PLANTATION DIVISION OF LABOR

Non-Agricultural Labors		Agricultural Labors, Male and Female	
Female Dominated	Male Dominated	Rice Workers	Cotton Workers
chambermaids	blacksmiths	<i>a) planting</i>	<i>a) planting</i>
childcare providers	bricklayers	burners	ditch diggers
dairy workers	butlers	ditch diggers	sowers
housemaids	carpenters	mud workers	<i>b) cultivating</i>
laudresses	coachmen	sowers	plow workers
midwives, nurses	coopers	<i>b) cultivating</i>	hoe workers
poultry minders	livestock hearers	hoe workers	list workers
seamstresses	menservants	plow workers	thinner
spinners	shoemakers	weeders	choppers
waiting girls	wheelwrights	trunkminders	trash workers
weavers	Unisex	manurers	<i>c) harvesting</i>
wet nurses	butchers, cooks	trash workers	cotton pickers
	gardeners	<i>c) harvesting</i>	<i>d) processing</i>
		cutters	ginners
		bundlers	moters (cleaners)
		<i>d) processing</i>	packagers
		trashers	
		winnowers	
		millers	
		polishers	
		packgers	

Although most discussions of slave labor identify the role of “skilled” and “unskilled” workers in plantation regimes, few scholars provide a working definition of skill and its impact on slave labor practices. Those who differentiate between skilled and unskilled workers associate domestic slaves with skilled labor, and field hands with unskilled activities. They, along with employers, slave owners, and observers of all kinds assume that men occupied the majority of skilled positions.⁸ Contrary to such opinions, this article identifies a variety of “skilled” and/or specialized positions

⁸See, for example, Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 29; Ira Berlin and Phillip D. Morgan, eds., “Introduction,” *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), 1-45, particularly 19-20; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974; rpt., New York, 1989), 141-42; Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 383-99; Michael P. Johnson, “Work, Culture, and the Slave Community: Slave Occupations in the Cotton Belt in 1860,” *Labor History* 27 (Summer 1986): 325-55, particularly 331-32; Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 261-90; and Betty Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1995), 106.

in the fields *as well* as in the domestic realm, operated by male and female slaves alike. By defining skill as the ability to do something well, arising from talent, training, or practice, or the ability to master a craft with one's hands or body, it is safe to argue that both "agricultural" and "non-agricultural" slave women occupied skilled positions in the American South.⁹

With the exception of a small group of scholars, studies on slave labor from the 1950s through the 1980s overlooked female contributions.¹⁰ Until recently, the writings of nineteenth-century travelers failed to convince scholars that women's work in the fields consisted of strenuous activities. Such comments by visitors, however, serve as rich sources addressing the nature of women's work in Glynn County.¹¹ To his surprise, for example, Frederick Law Olmsted observed that "women struck their hoes as if they were strong, and well-abled to engage in muscular labour."¹² His statement clearly assumed that women were inherently weak, while from another perspective it also affirms their strength.

When Frances Kemble moved with her husband Pierce Butler to his Butler Island plantation in the late 1830s, she described female slaves as "human hoeing machines." Her journal contained

⁹For the purpose of this discussion, "skill" and "specialized" are used interchangeably. The plantation labor regime was more than a simple dichotomy between house-skilled and field-unskilled labor. Kenneth Stampp, for example, was one of the first scholars to postulate that "unskilled" was a relative term. He found that agricultural workers acquired skills crucial to the production of staple crops, therefore the connection between field and unskilled labor did not hold true. Likewise, Fogel and Engerman agreed that agricultural laborers "acquired a wide variety of farm skills throughout the slave era." See Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 43 (emphasis added) and Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956; rpt., New York, 1989), 59-60.

¹⁰For academics who incorporated female slave contributions to the work force in their writing, see Beckles, *Natural Rebels*; William DusiBerre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York, 1996); Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow and American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998); Stevenson, "Slavery"; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We*; Pruneau, "All the Time is Work Time"; and Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*.

¹¹Basil Hall, *Travels in North America, 1827-1828*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1829); Una Pope-Hennessy, ed., *The Aristocratic Journey, Being the Letters of Mrs. Basil Hall Written During a Fourteen Months' Sojourn in America, 1827-1828* (New York, 1831); Kemble, *Journal*; Mills Lane, ed., *The Rambler in Georgia* (Savannah, 1990); J.D. Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia in the Winter of 1832," *Southern Agriculturist* (April-June 1833); Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States, 1853-1861* (New York, 1996), and Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1849).

¹²Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 190 (emphasis added).

several references to enslaved women, work, and family. Although her work is highly cited, some scholars questioned the authenticity and accuracy of her observations. William Dusinger, however, supported Kemble's observations and contends that her descriptions of slave life in antebellum Georgia contain fewer biases than the observations of travelers such as Olmsted, Basil Hall, or Charles Lyell. He exonerated her account, stipulating that Kemble spent more time with slaves than the other nineteenth-century visitors. For these reasons and with caution, historians should take the comments of nineteenth-century travelers seriously.¹³

Whether due to gender conventions, false assumptions, or personal biases, historians marginalized slave women and their roles in nineteenth-century agricultural production. Scholars writing during the 1950s through the 1980s assumed that slave women did not have the physical capacity or skill to complete strenuous labor. Lewis Cecil Gray's work of the late 1950s serves as a good example of such assumptions. "Women were not employed in plowing," he explained, "but were assigned, together with the feeble men and children to the hoe gang." Likewise, in *Time on the Cross* (1974), Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman stated that women did not have the strength necessary for heavy work, thus had limitations unknown to men. At the same time Eugene D. Genovese provided contradictory comments about the nature of female slave labor. He found that female field hands had longer workdays than their male counterparts and cited Kemble's journal to support his assertion. In the same context, however, he discovered that "men, *not women*, plowed on large plantations [yet] women proved superior to men in picking cotton." He also stipulated that a woman sometimes represented "the most valuable field hand on the place or [was] the single most physically powerful individual." In his study of a Waccamaw, South Carolina slave community in 1982, Charles Joyner found that "women worked in the rice fields . . . planting, growing,

¹³Kemble, *Journal*, 156; Margaret Davis Cate, "Mistakes in Fanny Kemble's Georgia Journal" *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (March 1960): 1-17; and Dusinger, *Them Dark Days*, 229.



Observers of slave women at work in Glynn County included Frederick Law Olmsted, who wrote that they “struck their hoes as if they were strong and well-abled to engage in muscular labour,” and Fanny Kemble, who called them “human hoeing machines.” *Photograph of Glynn County women from Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Department of Archives and History.*

and harvesting; but *only men did the ditching.*” Such ambiguity contradicted the testimony of some ex-planters.¹⁴

David Doar, for example, found that during the spring months on a rice plantation in South Carolina, “women were busy digging land that the plows could not turn and doing other necessary work as required.”¹⁵ Duncan Heyward, another South Carolina rice

¹⁴Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*, 548; Joyner, *Down By the Riverside*, 45 (emphasis added); Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 219; and Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 495 (emphasis added).

¹⁵David Doar, *Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country* (Charleston, 1936), 33.

planter, noted that both men and women worked in the ditches.¹⁶ Plantation records further complicate these issues as some masters left ambiguous reports of daily work requirements. Descriptions of slave labor are replete with non-gender-specific comments such as “slaves in rice fields.” Based on various primary documents, women clearly performed *digging and cleaning tasks* on antebellum South Carolina and Georgia rice plantations. Duncan Heyward for example described the cleaning process as “men *and women* [using] implements [with] long-handled scoops, in which mud which had accumulated in the ditch was dragged out.” At times, however, he made reference to a sexual division of labor; “[e]very year,” he explained, “some of the ditches had to be sunk deeper. Only men could do this, walking in the ditches and throwing out the mud with shovels.”¹⁷

Notice the different observations of planters and historians, particularly Doar and Joyner’s comments. Doar found slave women “digging land that plows could not turn,” which is suggestive of their physical strength. The use of a plow required slaves to steer a wooden device through the field with assistance from cattle, mules, or other livestock. Plows consisted of a piece of timber, iron, and a drill that was attached to a mule or cow. The use of such instruments replaced the required work of four hands and approximately two mules.¹⁸ One interpretation suggests that slave women turned land with greater skill and dexterity than a machine pulled by an animal. However, historians might argue that the use of a plow *softened* the land in order to decrease female slaves’ work load. Yet they should examine *both* perspectives, rather than assume that women were feeble, weak, and unskilled.

¹⁶A debate at the annual conference of the Southern Association of Women’s Historians in June 1997 regarding the definition of “ditching” left some scholars uncertain of the nature of this work. Some argued that female slaves cleaned ditches after men dug the trenches, while others contended that both sexes participated in the digging and cleaning process.

¹⁷See Duncan C. Heyward, *Seed from Madagascar* (1937; rpt., Columbia, S.C., 1993), 30-31 (emphasis added). For a discussion of the sexual division of labor, see Michael L. Burton and Douglas R. White, “Sexual Division of Labor in Agriculture,” *American Anthropologist*, ser. 2, vol. 86 (Summer 1984): 568-83.

¹⁸See Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*, 701-702 and 794-96. Leslie Schwalm found that men did the majority of plowing on South Carolina rice plantations. See *A Hard Fight for We*, 21-25. Duncan Heyward discussed the benefits and limitations of plow work using animals or slaves. See *Seed from Madagascar*, 29-30.

More recent historians have discovered that gender lines were often blurred during field labor. Based on the records of Cannon's Point plantation on St. Simons, John Solomon Otto observed that "women usually picked more [cotton] than men." However, in the same context, he explained that when sorting cotton women worked with "invalid men."¹⁹ Jacqueline Jones, on the other hand, found that slave women often won "regional and inner-farm [cotton picking] competitions."²⁰ Travelers such as J. D. Legare who visited the South in 1833, found that some masters in Glynn County held weekly cotton picking competitions and awarded their slaves with molasses and rice.²¹ Charles Lyell, another nineteenth-century traveler, witnessed female workers on a Sea Island cotton plantation and asserted that he "saw many women employed in separating the cotton from the seeds with their fingers, a neat and clean occupation."²² Once again, the intellectual struggle over female physical strength reveals itself through these contradictory observations.

The testimonies of former slaves and advertisements in antebellum newspapers emphasize women's contributions. Julia Rush, for example, a field worker on a St. Simons cotton plantation, claimed that she could "outplow any man," while Nancy Boudry testified that she "had to work hard, plow and go and split wood jus' like a man."²³ A Glynn County newspaper advertisement in 1837 also provided telling information regarding female slave labor. The ad read in part, "Wanted to Hire . . . One Thousand Negroes, to work on the Brunswick Canal, of whom one third may be

¹⁹Cannon's Point was another Sea Island cotton plantation on St. Simons Island. See Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 35.

²⁰Note that Jacqueline Jones was one of the few historians of the 1980s who recognized the contributions of female slaves. She also found that the sexual division of labor on small farms was less pronounced than on large plantations. See *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 17.

²¹Legare, "Account of an Excursion Made in the South of Georgia," 160.

²²Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* 1: 255.

²³George P. Rawick, Jan Hillegas, and Ken Lawrence, eds., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vols. 12-13, *Georgia Narratives* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 12: 113, 13: pt. 3, 229. Although Rush and Boudry claimed that they completed more work than men did, Weiner cautioned scholars about the subjectivity of such statements. See Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, chap. 1, n2. For a detailed analysis regarding the use of slave narratives, see John Blasingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), xvii-lxv; and "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (November 1975): 473-92.

women.”²⁴ The substantial proportion of female workers requested indicates that owners respected and exploited women’s physical strength in this region. This ad also suggests that some women in Glynn County worked outside of the plantation boundaries. Additionally, several scholars have recently dispelled myths about the role of women in the work force by refuting previous assumptions about female “weakness,” arguing that in some cases women were more adept at harsh labor than men.²⁵ They also found that masters placed a greater emphasis on physical prowess rather than the gender of a worker.

Glynn County slave women cultivated rice and Sea Island cotton. Nineteenth-century rice cultivation was labor intensive and required slaves to work under strenuous conditions year round, which often kept them knee-deep in water. The process of planting, cultivating, harvesting, and preparing rice for the market included many tasks: clearing land, digging ditches, sowing seed, four floodings, five strenuous hoeings, threshing, and winnowing.²⁶ To complete this process, slaves worked under the task system in which a manager, overseer, or driver assigned

²⁴*Brunswick Advocate*, January 18, 1837, Georgia Newspaper Project (microfilm), Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.

²⁵See the work of Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*; Claire Robertson, “Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996): 3-40; Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*; Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*; Stevenson, “Slavery”; Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*; and White, *Ar’n’i I a Woman?*

²⁶The summer months were the most rigorous in that slaves worked barefoot in the fields under temperatures ranging from ninety and one hundred degrees. Men rolled up their pants to keep dry while slave women pulled their skirts above their knees using a cord around the waist or hips to hold up the slack. Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 45-57. Several scholars and ex-planters described this process, including Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture*, 17-18; Margaret Davis Cate, typescript on Georgia rice cultivation, Margaret Davis Cate Collection, Georgia Historical Society (hereinafter cited as GHS), Savannah; Joyce E. Chaplin, “Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 49 (January 1992): 29-61; James M. Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor on Argyle Island: Letters and Documents of a Savannah Rice Plantation, 1833-1867* (Savannah, Ga., 1978), 102-108; James C. Darby, “On Planting and Managing a Rice Crop,” *Southern Agriculturist* (June 1829): 247-54; Doar, *Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country*; Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States* 2: 726-31; Heyward, *Seed From Madagascar*; Albert V. House, ed., *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia: The Journal of Hugh Fraser Grant, Rice Grower* (New York, 1954), 24-37; and Thomas Spalding, “Brief Notes on the Cultivation of Cotton, Rice, Sugar Cane, and the Grape Vine,” *Southern Agriculturist* (February 1828): 60.

each individual slave to a daily work requirement. In short, the task system was designed to produce effective performance on various projects with a standard daily measurement of one-quarter of an acre—a square 105 feet on a side per full hand.²⁷ Although an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the task system are beyond the scope of this essay, former planters and scholars noted that this system provided slaves a modicum of free time.

The journal of Hugh Fraser Grant, a prominent Glynn County rice planter, reveals the importance of female slave labor and skill.²⁸ Grant inherited Elizafield plantation from his father, Dr. Robert Grant. Dr. Grant and his wife Sarah Foxworth migrated to St. Simons from Sand Pitts, South Carolina, after the American Revolution. They retired from rice cultivating in 1833, and divided the land between their sons, Hugh Fraser and Charles Grant. Each son received \$12,500 and part of the plantation. At age twenty-four, Hugh Fraser became the owner of Elizafield, which contained 105 slaves; his brother Charles received the adjoining property “Evelyn” (also called “Grantly”), and 113 slaves.²⁹ Located seven miles on the south bank of the Altamaha River,

²⁷Slaves working under the task system were classified according to their strength rather than gender. Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 45, 54. See also Thomas F. Armstrong, “From Task Labor to Free Labor: The Transition Along Georgia’s Rice Coast, 1820-1860,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (Winter 1988): 432-47; and especially the work by Phillip D. Morgan, “Task and Gang Systems: The Organization of Labor on New World Plantations” in Stephen Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988) and “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 39 (October 1982): 563-99. Nineteenth-century sources provided by planters and travelers include Roswell King, Jr., “On the Management of the Butler Estate,” *Southern Agriculturist* (December 1828): 223-29; W. W. Hazzard, “On the General Management of a Plantation,” *Southern Agriculturist* (July 1831): 350-54; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 192-93; and Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 55-56. See also Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 14-15, 37-42, and 71-72.

²⁸According to the editor of this journal, which covers the years between 1834-61, “the wealth of detail . . . could be used as the basis of a series of short studies on comparative practice and advantage.” House, “The Management of a Rice Plantation in Georgia,” 212.

²⁹See House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 7-9; and Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 35. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, contains a microfilmed copy of the original journal as part of the “Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations.”



Glynn County masters seem to have placed more priority on the skill and physical prowess of a slave than on gender. This meant that women were often assigned demanding tasks such as the cleaning and separating of rice, in which these Sapelo Island women were engaged. *Photograph from Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Department of Archives and History.*

Elizafield contained nearly 1,500 acres of cleared land, 300 of which were dedicated to rice cultivation.³⁰ Throughout the period from 1834-1861, the slave population at Elizafield ranged from

³⁰Scattered tax returns from 1845-1856 illustrate that the total average land contained 1,768 acres, of which 338 consisted of rice marches. This property consisted of sixteen different fields ranging five to twenty-five acres. See House, "Elizafield Plantation Record, 1834-1861," 128 and Smith, *Slavery and Rice Cultivation in Low Country Georgia*, 35. The specific dates of these returns are 1845, 1848-50, and 1854-56. House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 275-76 (calculations estimated by the author of this essay).

105 in 1834 to its peak of 130 slaves in 1854, making Grant the second largest planter in Glynn County during the 1850s and 1860s.³¹

In his 209-page journal, Grant revealed the importance of female agricultural labor. His records illustrate that women and men worked in gender-specific groups, which were also common on some South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi plantations.³² Although historians contend that men engaged in the most laborious and skilled work, Grant's journal suggests the contrary. Slave women at Elizafield worked in ditches, threshed straw, gleaned rice, and tied, bundled, stacked, and dried sheaves.³³ They worked in the fields with their male counterparts and completed tasks assigned to them by Grant and his overseer, Benjamin Talbot. During the month of November 1840, more women worked in the field than men. Grant sent seventeen women to work at the Point Fields "Large Ditch" along with thirteen men. For the eight days preceding November 26, a total of seventeen to eighteen women were listed as "chopping" while ten to fifteen men were listed as "ditching."³⁴

³¹*Ibid.* However, the 1850 slave population consisted of 126 (seventy-four females and fifty-two males), which is slightly different from House's estimate of "119 Negroes." These findings are the result of calculations drawn from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Seventh Census, 1850, Glynn County, Georgia, calculated by the author of this essay. House, "The Management of a Rice Plantation in Georgia," 211.

³²Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 19-28 and Virginia Meacham Gould, "If I Can't Have My Rights, I Can Have My Pleasures, and If They Won't Give Me Wages, I Can Take Them: Gender and Slave Labor in Antebellum New Orleans," in Patricia Morton, ed., *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens, Ga., 1996), 180. Other writers who note this trend include Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 189; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 16; Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*; and White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* 120-21.

³³"Elizafield Journal" in House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 99, 120, 123, and passim. For a discussion of rice sheaves, see Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 55.

³⁴This fact is not surprising considering the work of Leslie Schwalm who found that female slaves occupied 60 percent of the "prime hands" on South Carolina rice plantations. See Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*. Pruneau estimates that in some South Carolina rice growing areas, women constituted 80 percent of field laborers. See Pruneau, "All the Time is Work Time." Despite such discoveries, agricultural historian Lewis Gray found that "in ditching, 'none but the primmest males were employed,'" *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1880*, 551. Regarding his discussion of the gradations of strength with respect to nearby Hopeton plantation, Gray found that Thomas Couper made this comment about his slaves. For information pertaining to South Carolina slave women's work in ditches, see Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 22-23. For work descriptions see "Elizafield Journal," in House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 159. However, on the 16th and 17th of that month, Grant indicated that a total of eighteen women worked at Point Fields "chopping."

Other evidence of female labor at Elizafield is ascertained through the list of tools given to the slaves. According to the journal, more women received axes, hoes, and rice hooks than men. Of the forty-five slaves provided with these tools during 1839, 1842, and 1853, twenty-four of them were women. Female slaves received axes in November 1839 and November 1853, hoes in November 1853, and "New Rice Hooks" in August 1842.³⁵ The preponderance of tools assigned to women suggests their important role in the tidewater work force, particularly on rice plantations.

Masters valued enslaved female labor on coastal cotton plantations as well. Although it is well known that cotton cultivation is generally less labor intensive than rice and sugar, Sea Island cotton, like rice, required a yearly work-cycle.³⁶ Planters from the Bahamas first introduced this unique strain of cotton to St. Simons Island in the 1780s because they found the environment suitable for the long-staple variety. Georgia first exported the crop in 1788.³⁷ Cotton cultivation is comparable to rice in that slaves worked under similar task requirements and completed an average of four and sometimes as many as eight hoeings throughout the course of a year.³⁸ One South Carolina planter noted that "ditching [Sea Island cotton] in many cases was almost as elaborate as in the rice industry."³⁹

³⁵"Plantation Supplies Issued," House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 286.

³⁶Berlin and Morgan, "Introduction," *Cultivation and Culture*, 18; Legare, "Account of An Agricultural Excursion," 160-61; and Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 25, and 34-35.

³⁷See literature by South Carolina and Georgia planters: John Couper, "On the Origin of Sea-Island Cotton," *Southern Agriculturist* (May 1831): 242-45; Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 18; Spalding, "Brief Notes on the Cultivation of Cotton," 132; and J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual: Being a Compilation of Facts From the Best Authorities on the Culture of Cotton* (1857; rpt., New York, 1969), 96, 128-36, 278-83. See also the secondary work of Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture*, 51-52, E. Merton Coulter, *Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia: Their Rise and Decline* (1965; rpt., Milledgeville, Ga., 1994), 109; Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia*, 55-57, and Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1880*, 679, 689, 731-32.

³⁸Smith contends that rice and Sea Island cotton plantations operated under the task system. See *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia*, 45. For information regarding the number of hoeings, see Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 23; Gray, *History of Agriculture* 2, 734; and Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 25, 35. Legare, quoting Roswell King, found that slaves at Hampton plantation hoed five to seven times during the course of a year. Yet, he observed that slaves at Hamilton plantation commenced to hoeing six to eight times per year. See Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion," 168-69, 243.

³⁹Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 734.

Enslaved females in this region planted Sea Island cotton, which yielded a finer quality and a higher price than the short-staple variety cultivated in the piedmont or upland plantations of the Cotton Belt. The two varieties of cotton were essentially different in length and quality and served different needs. Those interested in the Sea Island industry focused their energy on the quality rather than the quantity of the fiber. Sea Island cotton "surpassed all other types in strength, fineness and silkiness," explained Gray. It was "suitable for delicate laces and for cloth of silky lustre."⁴⁰ Harvesting represented the most arduous task as slaves completed ten to twelve pickings with daily averages of approximately 100 pounds.⁴¹ The final process of preparing cotton for the market included drying, ginning, moting, and packing.⁴²

On St. Simons Island, nearly twenty miles southeast of Elizafield, James P. Postell planted Sea Island cotton at Kelvin Grove.⁴³ Similar to Grant, Postell gained possession through an inheritance from his father-in-law, Benjamin Franklin Cater, and acquired the 1,600-acre tract of which 500 acres were used to cultivate Sea Island cotton and corn. Postell became the owner of this estate in the 1850s.⁴⁴ In 1825, an observer noted that Benjamin Cater had ten people engaged in agriculture, two house servants,

⁴⁰Historian Kenneth M. Stampp found that South Carolina and Georgia slaves on Sea Island cotton plantations exercised greater care in picking, ginning, and packing this variety. Sea Island cotton is often referred to as the black seed variety while short-staple cotton contains green seeds. See Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture*, 52, and Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 14, 23. See also Gray, *History of Agriculture* 2, 731-34; Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 25, 35; and Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 46.

⁴¹Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 35. Seabrook, on the other hand, found that slaves averaged twenty-five pounds per day; *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 735. Johnson also confirmed that a "full hand" picked from ninety to one hundred pounds of cotton per day; see *A Social History of the Sea Islands*, 83. Gray explained that "the most skillful and intelligent hands" had to complete the task of "thinning" the plant. He also found that "harvesting . . . sea-island cotton was arduous." Gray, *History of Agriculture* 2, 735.

⁴²For vivid descriptions of this process see Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia," 160-69; Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 35; and Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 735-37.

⁴³Postell, "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book 1853."

⁴⁴Charles Spaulding Wylly, *Annals and Statistics of Glynn County, Georgia* (Brunswick, Ga., 1897), 57. For scattered references to William Page's guardianship of Benjamin Franklin Carter, see William Page Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (microfilm).

thirty-five acres of cotton, ten acres of corn, five acres of potatoes, and ten acres of peas.⁴⁵ According to statements made by Postell in 1857, the land yielded 150 pounds of cotton per acre and fifteen to twenty bushels of corn.⁴⁶

Although little is known about the Cate or Postell families, an extant plantation daybook from 1853 supports the importance of female labor and skill on this estate. The slave population at Kelvin Grove in 1853 consisted of eighty-one slaves of which forty-five (56 percent) were women. Postell noted that thirty-four of his slaves worked in the fields, thirty-seven were children, and ten occupied non-agricultural positions.⁴⁷ He paid careful attention to the rates of his workers by listing each individual slave's value based on their physical capability for a given day. According to Albert House, "Field hands (both men and women) were rated at prime when they could perform the expected task in the usual working day of nine to ten hours. Boys aged ten to fourteen and women with little physical vigor were rated as one-quarter or one-half or a prime hand."⁴⁸ As at Elizafield, more women worked in the fields at Kelvin Grove, further emphasizing the importance of their labor. Twenty-three (62 percent) field hands, for example, were female. However, these women yielded seventeen taskable hands. They cultivated Sea Island cotton and corn, worked in the Big House, and gave birth to seven children during 1853.⁴⁹

Throughout Kelvin Grove's eighty-five-page journal, five women—Jane, Sarah, Nanny, Hamit, and Hester—completed the task of ginning cotton. This process required slaves to feed cotton

⁴⁵W. W. Hazzard, *St. Simons Island Georgia, Brunswick, and Vicinity* (c1825; rpt., Belmont, Mass., 1974), 15.

⁴⁶Postell to Mr. Benton (sometime in 1857), "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book." Finally, Cate noted that the Armstrongs were prominent planters from the Bahamas in "Plantations of St. Simons Island," Cate Collection, GHS.

⁴⁷Masters rated their hands as full, 3/4, 1/2, or 1/4 in terms of the amount of labor they could perform in a given day. Postell, "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book." In 1857, Postell attempted to sell the plantation along with seventy slaves (thirty-nine women and thirty-one men).

⁴⁸House, *Planter Management and Capitalism in Antebellum Georgia*, 53. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 191; and Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 35.

⁴⁹The property consisted of the following nine fields: Home, Devil's Elbo, Sullivan's Hill, Demere, Gaskin, Five Acre, Clark, Dembo, and Ned. Eleven men worked in the fields consisting of 7.25 hands. See "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book," 4. Similar to Elizafield, only four of the seven children born survived.



According to the records of many St. Simons plantations, more female slaves than males worked in both rice and cotton fields and performed all tasks involved in sowing, cultivation, and harvesting crops. *Sketch from Harper's New Monthly Magazine 19 (November 1859).*

through a roller-gin, which removed the “oily black seed from the lint without injuring the fiber.”⁵⁰ According to James Hamilton Couper of nearby Hopeton plantation, “The essential points are to gin from six hundred to eight hundred revolutions of the rollers per minute, one hundred and twenty-five strokes of the feeding arm, and from twenty-five to thirty revolutions of the fan in the same time.”⁵¹ This task was so important on his plantation that he and his brother often assisted three girls and three boys—a total of one and one half hands—to expedite this process. Moreover, employing the Eve’s (Eave) gin, commonly used in this region,

⁵⁰Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 25.

⁵¹Legare, “Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia,” 246.

slaves ginned an average of fifty pounds of cotton per day. However, Kelvin Grove ginners produced well above sixty pounds per day.⁵²

During a twenty-eight-day work period, for example, Jane averaged seventy pounds while Sarah and Nanny processed sixty-six pounds each. Legare found that most plantations averaged 400 pounds of ginned cotton per day. A close examination of the records from January 10-February 15, 1853, indicates that Hamit and Hester only ginned four and eight days, respectively, replacing Sarah, Jane, or Nanny. The estimated time it took slaves to gin approximately 400 pounds of cotton per day was at least nine hours.⁵³ Of the five women listed, all but Nanny were full hands. These women were all in their late teens and early twenties, which coincides with the common age patterns of "prime hands."⁵⁴ In addition to ginning, Jane, Sarah, and Nanny moted (removed dirt particles from) cotton lint on February 8, 1853. Significantly, except for these women, only five other slaves were mentioned by name in the journal.⁵⁵

Adjacent to Kelvin Grove on the southwest tip of St. Simons Island, Retreat plantation marked the home of the Page and King descendants. Like Postell, in 1824 Thomas Butler King gained possession of Retreat from his father-in-law, William Page. Page

⁵²Average provided by Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 34-35. For descriptions of Eve's gin see Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia," 161, 169, and 244-46; Otto, *Cannon's Point Plantation*, 23, 25, and 135-36; and Mart A. Stewart, *"What Nature Suffers to Groe": Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens, Ga., 1996), 126. Jane ginned the highest amount; eighty pounds for seven consecutive days. See "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book."

⁵³Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia," 169, 247-48. This figure includes the total amount of cotton ginned by each laborer.

⁵⁴Nanny, age forty-five, appeared on the list as a 3/4 hand. See "List of Field hands at Kelvin Grove, January 1st, 1853." Jane and Sarah were in their twenties, Hester was 19, and Hamit's age was unknown but most likely around the same age as the others." Ginning, according to Ralph Flanders, was more challenging than fieldwork, or picking cotton, because it exposed slaves to dust and lint for several hours. See Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia*, 85. Yet Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan note that "ginning cotton . . . was a relatively simple operation that demanded no special abilities." This assertion related to a comparison of cotton and sugar processing where Berlin and Morgan found that cotton processing "required few skilled workers," in "Introduction," *Cultivation and Culture*, 18.

⁵⁵The estimated average for moting cotton on a given day was twenty-five pounds. Seabrook, *A Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, 32. Both Jane and Nanny ginned forty-five pounds and moted twenty, while Sarah completed forty and fifteen, respectively. See "Kelvin Grove Plantation Book." Outside of the 1853 and 1857 slave lists, the names of these women are the only ones mentioned in the field journal.

and his wife Hannah Timmons migrated to St. Simons from South Carolina in the late 1790s. Their daughter, Anna Matilda, married Thomas Butler King and they had ten children, all of whom were raised at Retreat.⁵⁶

Sea Island cotton served as the primary crop on this 3,000-acre property, although slaves planted provisions of corn, potatoes, and peas as well. The records indicate that Retreat supplied the highest priced cotton in the region because of its fine quality.⁵⁷ Little is known about the planting, cultivating, or harvesting cycles on this estate. However, the value of female slave labor is clearly articulated through prices, the variety of skilled positions, and comments made by the plantation mistress. Anna King kept meticulous records of the plantation while her husband tended to political obligations in the North. Despite his absences during the 1830s through the 1850s, the young mistress managed a plantation consisting of well over a hundred slaves, three horses, eight mules, a dozen hogs, thirty-three cattle, an ox, and several chickens.⁵⁸ In addition to family matters concerning their ten children, she managed the plantation's financial records, food rations, clothing, equipment, crop exports, and the daily activities of the house slaves.

⁵⁶Margaret Davis Cate, "Retreat Plantation Notes," Cate Collection, GHS; Cate, *Our Today and Yesterdays: A Story of Brunswick and the Coastal Islands* (Brunswick, 1930); 127; Will of William Page, February 6, 1827, Cate Collection, GHS; and Will of Mrs. King, March 7, 1859, Court of Ordinary, Glynn County Ordinary Estate Records, Inventories and Appraisals, Book E, Georgia Department of Archives and History (hereinafter cited as GDAH), Atlanta. Other relevant sources relating to the King family include Stephen Berry, "More Alluring at a Distance': Absentee Patriarchy and the Thomas Butler King Family," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81 (Winter 1997): 863-96; Malcolm Bell, Jr., *Major Butler's Legacy: Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family* (Athens, Ga., 1987); Edward M. Steel, *T. Butler King of Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1964); and Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987).

⁵⁷Retreat cotton sold for fifty cents per pound while most sold for forty cents. Thomas Butler King, "Plantation Day Book, 1842-1864," GDAH. See also Margaret Davis Cate, "Retreat Plantation," in *Flags of Five Nations: A Collection of Sketches and Stories of the Golden Isles of Guale* (Brunswick, Ga., n.d.), 53-62; George Alexander Heard, "St. Simons Island During the War Between the States," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 22 (September 1938): 249-72, especially 251; "Inventory of the Personal Property & Estate of William Page, 1827," Glynn County Ordinary Estate Records, Inventories and Appraisals, Book D, GDAH; Bessie Lewis, *Patriarchal Plantations of St. Simons Island* (Atlanta, Ga., 1974) and *King's Retreat Plantation: Today and Yesterday* (Brunswick, Georgia, 1980).

⁵⁸However, as Berry indicated, Mrs. King longed for her husband's assistance. See Berry, "More Alluring at a Distance.'" See also "Inventory of the Personal Property & Estate of William Page, 1827"; Will of William Page; and Caroline Couper Lovell, *The Golden Isles of Georgia* (Atlanta, Ga., 1970), 248-49.

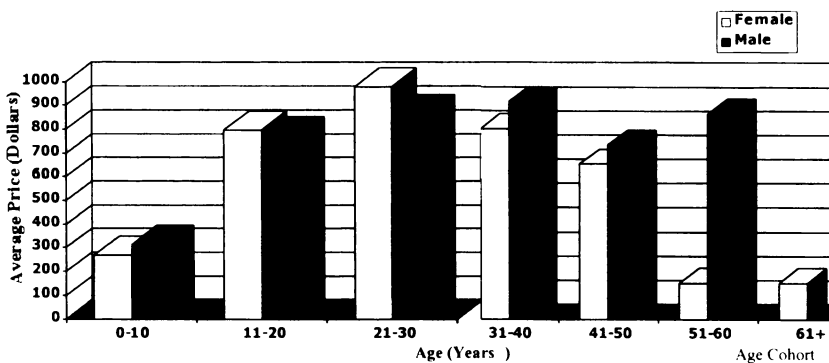
Women made up a substantial proportion, sometimes even a majority, of the slave population at Retreat. In his 1827 will, for example, William Page listed the names, ages, skills, and sometimes relatives of 140 slaves of which 66 (47 percent) were female. According to his records, 13 of the 140 slaves occupied non-agricultural positions, of which 5 were women. Men represented 74 of the slaves, comprising 53 percent of the population. Additionally, the 1850 census listed Thomas Butler King as the owner of 112 slaves, of which 59 (53 percent) were women. And, in her 1859 will, Anna Matilda Page King provided the names, ages, and prices of 131 slaves, of which 77 (51 percent) were female.⁵⁹ These ratios of women to men are similar to those of Elizafield and Kelvin Grove plantations. Not only did they outnumber men, Retreat slave women between the ages of eleven and thirty contained values priced slightly higher than their male counterparts.⁶⁰ A sample survey of 131 slave prices listed in the 1859 will indicates that while men from ages eleven to twenty cost an average of \$771, women cost approximately \$794. Furthermore, slave men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty averaged \$866, whereas women cost \$977. (Table 2) These prices suggest that the increased value of women occurred because these ages marked prime childbearing years, further suggesting that the Kings also recognized the importance of female reproductive labor. Slaves also understood the value of childbearing mothers as one recollected that "a good young breedin' 'oman brung two thousand dollars easy, 'cause all de marsters wanted to see plenty of strong healthy chillun comin' on."⁶¹

⁵⁹United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Census (Slave Schedules), Glynn County, Georgia, 1850. See also Will of Mrs. King.

⁶⁰Several scholars found price differentials for male and female slaves. See, for example, Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia*, 189-93; Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 73-78, especially 75. U.B. Phillips suggested that female slaves had lower prices than their male counterparts. See Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (New York, 1929), 74, 173-87 and "The Economic Cost of Slaveholding in the Cotton Belt," *Social Science Quarterly* 20 (June 1905): 265.

⁶¹Sample survey conducted by author based on the 1859 slave list; see Daina L. Ramey, "Slave Family and Community at Retreat," unpublished study. Note that slave prices are only provided for 1859; therefore, this study could not verify the findings for the entire antebellum period. See Table 3 for price listings of slaves above thirty-years old. Will of Mrs. King. According to Jacqueline Jones and Brenda Stevenson, slave women occupied fewer skilled positions than men, therefore, outside of childbearing years, female prices were lower than males. "Although women were capable of learning these skills," Jones explained, "their work lives were frequently interrupted by childbearing and nursing." Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 18 and Stevenson, "Slavery," 1050. Quote in text taken from James Melton, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* (New York, 1988), 287.

Table 2
RETREAT PLANTATION SLAVE PRICES, 1859



The prices for male slaves are much higher than females after age 30 because men occupied skilled positions that masters did not assign to women. These positions included that of the slave driver, boatman, blacksmith, cooper, carpenter, and gardener. Additionally, few women gave birth during these years, which also led to the overall decrease in their value. There were no male slaves above 61-years-old, as reflected by this graph.

Glynn County slaveholders included references to their non-agricultural laborers throughout plantation records as well. In addition to providing details about crop production, labor supervisors discussed the daily activities of their house servants. At Elizafield, for example, Grant, his wife, and their six children (five girls and one boy,) benefited from the services of six non-agricultural slaves. These slaves included “Maum Rebecca—the maid and head seamstress, Frederick Proudfoot—the coachman, his wife Maum Ann—the children’s nurse, Sukie—cook superlative, her assistant Martha, and Caesar—the butler.”⁶² Although extant documents provide no additional information about these slaves, it is significant that these non-agricultural laborers appeared on the slave list designated by their skills.⁶³

At Kelvin Grove, ten slaves filled non-agricultural (“jobber”) positions. Of the slaves listed, women occupied four positions consisting of a nurse, a cook, a seamstress, and a housemaid. Molly,

⁶²Burnette Vanstory provides information on the domestic slaves in *Georgia’s Land of the Golden Isles* (Athens, Ga., 1956), 75-76 and 97-98.

⁶³Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 34-37.

Table 3
List of Non-Agricultural Slaves at Retreat, 1827

<i>Name</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Age</i>
Old Sarah	Nurse	74
Jimmy	Driver	55
Neptune	Carpenter	31
March	Carpenter	21
Ruthy	House Servant	19
Big Peter	Carpenter	43
Polly	House Servant	26
Lady	House Servant	40
Quamina	Gardener	31
Cupid	Driver	50
Edward	Carpenter	28
Old Betty	House Servant	75
Same	House Servant	45

Source: Will of William Page, February 6, 1827, Cate Collection, Georgia Historical Society.

the sixty-year-old nurse, "minded the sick" on January 13 and 22, 1853, the latter date representing the day Alley's child was born. It appears that she assisted Alley again three days later on January 25. Chloe, the forty-five-year-old cook, spent September through December preparing meals as indicated by the journal, while one person, perhaps Pender, the thirty-eight-year-old housemaid, is listed as "washing" on November 2 and 3, 1853. The only notation for sewing fell on August 19, 1853, indicating forty-year-old Peggy's labor. Although not much else is known about the domestic labor of slave women at Kelvin Grove, neighboring Retreat plantation offers an abundance of information regarding specialized work in non-agricultural settings.⁶⁴

Similar to the slaves at Kelvin Grove and Elizafield, Retreat women occupied non-agricultural positions such as cooks, seamstresses, nurses, and housemaids (see Table 3). These females who appeared on the slave list as "housemaids" included: "Old Sarah,"

⁶⁴"Kelvin Grove Plantation Book: Statement of Negroes."

the 74-year-old nurse, and Ruthy (age 19), Polly (age 26), Lady (age 40.5), and Old Betty (age 75). Of the male data provided, two served as drivers, four specialized in carpentry work, one worked in the garden, and another waxed the house.⁶⁵ Their mistress, Anna King, articulated the value of these slaves through her personal letters dating from 1827 to 1857. Mrs. King maintained a voluminous correspondence with her husband and children during these years in which she discussed any and everything that concerned her, including the importance of Retreat non-agricultural laborers. Over the course of thirty-years, she mentioned by name approximately thirty-nine slaves, of whom twenty-six were women. Although the occupations of all thirty-nine are unknown, at least seven women and five men held traditionally defined "skilled" positions. Of the seven females listed, Rhina and Maria had more than one skill.

Mrs. King spoke favorably about the cooking skills of Rhina, who also had superior sewing talents. Maria served as the washer-woman, but she also tended to the bees, birds, and chickens. The five men mentioned in these letters worked primarily as boatmen and house servants.⁶⁶ Reflecting on her mother's various skills, former Georgia slave Hannah Austin informed her interviewer that "Mother nursed Mrs. Hall [her mistress] from a baby, consequently the Hall family was very fond of her and often made the statement that they would not part with her for anything in the world, besides working as the cook for the Hall family, my mother was also a fine seamstress and made clothing for the master's family and for our family."⁶⁷

The King's non-agricultural laborers moved beyond the confines of the Big House as they traveled with the planter family on vacations, ran errands to other estates on the island, and temporarily worked in the homes of other whites. Their geographic mobility provided them with the opportunity to travel to Savannah and as far north as New Haven, Connecticut. Such extensive travel

⁶⁵Will of William Page.

⁶⁶Mrs. King to Mrs. William Audley Couper, April 27, 1857; Mrs. King to her "dearly beloved child & cousin Amanda," April 21, 1857, William Audley Couper Papers (microfilm), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

⁶⁷Rawick, *The American Slave* 12, pt. 1: 19.

was unusual considering the “isolation” policy of many Glynn County slave owners, which required that slaves maintain little or no contact with those residing on neighboring plantations.⁶⁸ Additionally, women in general rarely left their plantations, except for those with special skills.

On August 22, 1837, for example, cook Mom Jane traveled to Hamilton plantation, the home of Mrs. King’s eldest daughter Hannah and her husband William Audley Couper, where she helped prepare dinner for several guests. Mom Jane clearly had skills unique enough to earn her geographic mobility by traveling to other estates on the island. In a letter to her daughter Florence, Mrs. King said that Mom Jane “left them all well in the evening.” Remarking further on her services, the mistress stated, “What a perfect pattern of an old negro Old Mom Jane is. . . . I would [if] I could take thirty years off of her age.”⁶⁹ Mrs. King’s appreciation for Mom Jane did not always hold true for Lady, a fifty-year-old housemaid. On December 2, 1839, Mrs. King “sent by Lady the peaches” to her friend Miss Jane Johnson of Savannah. But on the last day of the month, Lady had not arrived. In a letter addressed to Miss Johnston, she explained that:

Your unfortunate peaches I gave charge of Lady who was to go from W to WL [sic] in a vessel hourly expected at the former place when she left here the first week in Dec—instead of which she was kept waiting there until two days before Christmas when she was sent down in a boat. I hope she will have the wit to send them to Cannon’s Point [plantation] and let your friends have the good of them if you are not to get them.⁷⁰

Clearly, Mrs. King seemed more concerned about the location of the peaches than the whereabouts or the absence of her slave.

Mrs. King expressed confidence in her slaves’ skills by instructing housemaid Rhina to take a short trip with her friend Ellen S. on April 12, 1857. Mrs. King recorded the incident in a letter: “I would not let her go alone so sent Rhina with her—telling her to

⁶⁸For a discussion of the impact of such policies see Ramey, “A Place of Our Own,” chap. 1.

⁶⁹Mrs. King to Florence Barclay King, August 22, 1837, Couper Papers.

⁷⁰Mrs. King to Jane Johnston, December 31, 1839, *ibid.*



Certain slave women were relegated to skilled non-agricultural tasks on Glynn County plantations. Several mistresses commented on the fine seamstresses they owned. This woman posed in front of a quilting frame at which she worked in her cabin. *Photograph from Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.*

get back in the Everglade [steamboat] if possible. She barely had time to go from one bed to the other.”⁷¹ A month later, the mistress complimented Rhina for being “a real triumph. . . . She is used to traveling you know & is not to be put out of her way by trifles.”⁷² Retreat women such as Mom Jane, Lady, and Rhina traveled throughout the island community by foot, steamboat, and carriage. They assisted their mistress’s children and ran errands for them as well. In addition, Retreat domestics showed great skill in cooking, making clothes, and caring for the sick.

Non-agricultural laborers on this estate developed close relationships with their supervisors. On April 21, 1857, when Thomas Butler King, Jr., contracted the measles, Mrs. King left Rhina “to wait on him until he is able to be removed.”⁷³ Six days later she assured his sister

⁷¹Apparently, Ellen was not feeling well, so Mrs. King sent Rhina to accompany her on the steamer. Mrs. King to her “Beloved children,” April 12, 1857, *ibid.*

⁷²Mrs. King to Mrs. William Audley Couper, April 27, 1857, *ibid.*

⁷³Mrs. King to her “dearly beloved child & cousin Amanda,” April 21, 1857, *ibid.*

Hannah that Rhina would “cook for & take care of him . . . she cooks up his little meals so nicely & attends to all of his comforts.”⁷⁴ Clearly, her son was in good hands. Former slaves also proudly testified about their cooking skills. Caroline Ates of Cochran, Georgia, explained that her slave mother “cooked for all the slaves . . . she had the nicest kitchen built ‘speshully for that purpose.”⁷⁵

Mrs. King was also satisfied with the services of Clementine, the plantation seamstress. “You will I hope be pleased,” she wrote to her daughter in 1851, “with the Swiss muslin dresses Clementine had braided for you.” Admittedly, she continued, “I think she does deserve some credit for doing them so nicely & so neatly.” She closed asking her daughter how she liked her “skirts hatched” so that she could “set Clementine to work at them as soon as the warm weather approaches.”⁷⁶ Equally praised was the plantation nurse. On September 28, 1851, for example, Mrs. King stated, “I do consider myself very much blessed in having so good & faithful a nurse. . . . I have often thought what would I have done in all this sickness had she been taken from me.”⁷⁷ The services of these women marked the importance of female non-agricultural labor at Retreat. However, despite her admiration and praise of her domestic servants, two years before her death in 1857, Mrs. King stated that she was “worn out from the care of negroes.”⁷⁸

Although masters and mistresses were “worn out from the care of negroes,” historians have overlooked the extent of white dependence on black women. Slaveholders’ reliance and often appraisal of female slaves, revealed in agricultural and personal journals, testifies to the importance of their labor and skills. Slave women often outnumbered men as prime field workers and excelled in the domestic realm, which positioned them as central figures in the work force. Their male counterparts confirmed their agricultural skills. Former Glynn County slave Jeffrey stated that Dorcas, his companion, could “do a heap of work in a day.” He declared that “she is one

⁷⁴Mrs. King to Mrs. William Audley Couper, April 27, 1857, *ibid.*

⁷⁵Rawick, *American Slave*, supplement series 1, vol. 3, 24. John Blassingame provided descriptive testimony of the typical day’s work for a female domestic slave through the narrative of James Curry in *Slave Testimony*, 133.

⁷⁶Mrs. King to Florence B. King, November 22, 1851, Couper Papers.

⁷⁷Mrs. King to her “dearly beloved child,” September 28, 1851, *ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, April 2, 1857.

of de best rice hands on de whole plantation worth \$1,200 easy."⁷⁹ Clearly, this male slave recognized the importance of female slaves' work potential *and* value. Reflecting on her experiences as a slave in Glynn County, Nancy remarked, "I have worked every day through dew and damp, and sand and heat, and done good work, oh . . . me old and broken now, no tongue can tell how much I suffer."⁸⁰

By presenting slave women as central figures in the plantation work force and developing a new definition for skill that incorporates the notion that a person has "the ability to do something well," clearly female rice cultivators and cotton pickers like those in Glynn County had special skills. Slaveholders assigned specific slave women to various aspects of field labor from thinning the stalks to ginning and moting the cotton because they operated as more efficient workers. For females conducting work outside of field labor, certain skills allowed them access to an elevated status within the slave community.⁸¹ Women agricultural workers such as Nelly, a slave who won the annual prize for cotton picking on her estate, had unique talents. She "was the best cotton-picker [on her plantation] because . . . she picked two rows at a time, going down the middle with both arms extended and grasping the cotton bolls with each hand."⁸² Because Nelly mastered a craft with her hands, it is safe to posit that she was a skilled laborer.⁸³

Recent work on African-American women is at last acknowledging the significance of their roles in the southern plantation work force. By developing more comprehensive definitions of skill, analyzing daily work patterns thoroughly, and labeling women's work as "skilled" when necessary, historians can provide an even fuller appreciation of the complex gendered dimensions of slave labor in nineteenth-century America.

⁷⁹"Great Auction Sale of Slaves, Savannah, Georgia, March 2d and 3d, 1859" (New York, 1859), 23.

⁸⁰Kemble, *Journal*, 268.

⁸¹Sharla Fett's work on slave midwifery, for example, suggests that "doctoring" among slave women represented another example of female skilled labor: "Skill and Servitude: Enslaved Women's Doctoring Work as Domestic Labor," paper presented at the Southern Association of Women Historians' annual conference, Charleston, South Carolina, June 13, 1997.

⁸²Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), 15.

⁸³Responding to misconceptions about the importance of enslaved women's labor, Leslie Schwalm recently addressed the connection (or lack thereof) between gender and skill in a South Carolina slave community. She found that although bondsmen occupied a variety of specialized positions (namely artisan work), bondswomen acquired skills but planters were reluctant to label women's work as "skilled." See *A Hard Fight for We*, 20-40, particularly 21 and 32.