



Big Houses and African Villages: The Plantation Melting Pot

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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from the National Humanities Center



GOALS

- To provide fresh primary resources and instructional approaches for use with students
- Understanding:

From its very beginning, slavery in America was characterized by **conflict and negotiation** between enslaved people and owners. Through these interactions, Africans, African Americans, and Europeans also could not help but **influence one another in essentially every realm** of life, from the economic to the social to the cultural to the spiritual. We speak of **syncretism** in looking at these interactions: a process in which people from different backgrounds exchange and appropriate each other's practices. In this session we will consider the exchanges through examples taken from labor, religion, and language, but we could also consider it through foodways, architecture, and a host of other practices.



FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What was the daily life of the enslaved like?
- How did American slave communities reflect the global nature of the slave trade?
- How did the enslaved adjust and adapt to plantations, cities, and factories?
- Was the “melting pot” experience different for the enslaved who lived in cities?
- What lasting impacts has slavery had on the African American community?
- Are there regions of the US that still show lasting impacts more than others?



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Research Interests: African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with emphasis in the American South

Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom

2005, Lillian Smith Book Prize

Currently writing a book on separation of African American families during the antebellum period and efforts to reunify families following emancipation.



Big Houses and African Villages



Main house on the Chicora Wood Plantation,
Georgetown County, South Carolina



Slave cabin, Keithfield Plantation, Georgetown
County, South Carolina

Source: National Park Service, Teaching with Historic Places, <http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/index.htm>



Big Houses and African Villages

Contact

- Atlantic Slave Trade—between the late 1400s until it was abolished in 1807/1808 by the British and Americans. Continued for the Spanish.
- People captured in interior regions of West and Central Africa and marched to places such as Goree Island in Senegal and Elmina in Ghana. Kept in dungeons then packed into ships to make the Atlantic crossing.
- Approximately 12.5 million Africans left Africa in this trade. Approximately 10.8 million survived the Middle Passage transatlantic crossing.
- Where did they go? (These are approximations and do not add up to 100%)
 - South America (Mostly Brazil)—40%
 - Caribbean Islands (Jamaica, Barbados, Haiti, Dominican Republic, etc.)—42%
 - North America—4%
 - Europe—Fewer than 2 %



Big Houses and African Villages



Contact

- Africans had been in la Florida, a Spanish colony, before the English arrived in North America.
- 1607 the Jamestowne Colony settled by the English.
- 1619 John Rolfe recorded the arrival of 20 Africans, 17 men and 3 women, from Angola into the Jamestowne Colony.
- The first 11 African men arrived in the Dutch New Amsterdam Colony (later became New York City) in 1626.
- Existed in degrees of “unfreeness” for several decades. Examples: Indentured servitude, half-freedom.



Big Houses and African Villages

The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano (pp. 53-54)

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief.

Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.



Big Houses and African Villages



The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano

Discussion Questions

- How did Equiano feel when he was taken onto a slave ship on the African coast?
- What does he tell us about the existence of slavery within African societies?
- How did he perceive white people when he first encountered them?
- What was his biggest fear of whites?
- What does his description tell us about his spiritual beliefs and practices?
- What does he tell us about slavery within Africa?
- What does he tell us about who was involved in the slave trade in Africa?



Big Houses and African Villages

The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano (p.54)

When I recovered a little I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair.

Discussion Questions

- How did Equiano feel when he was taken onto a slave ship on the African coast?
- What does he tell us about the existence of slavery within African societies?
- How did he perceive white people when he first encountered them?
- What was his biggest fear of whites?
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Big Houses and African Villages

The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano (pp. 59-60)

The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss: and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me, I was still more affrighted, having never seen such things as these before. At one time I thought it was something relative to magic; and not seeing it move I thought it might be some way the whites had to keep their great men when they died, and offer them libation as we used to do to our friendly spirits. In this state of anxiety I remained till my master awoke, when I was dismissed out of the room, to my no small satisfaction and relief; for I thought that these people were all made up of wonders.

Discussion Questions

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- What does he tell us about the existence of slavery within African societies?
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Big Houses and African Villages



Labor—Rice Cultivation

- Slavery was first and foremost a system of forced labor. It was an economic arrangement intended to derive wealth for those who owned slaves, and for the colonies and later the country as a whole.
- Cash crops: Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina—tobacco
- Indians grew tobacco, but a new type introduced to Virginia by John Rolfe 1617. By 1620 it was the colony's profitable cash crop. Most work done by white indentured servants from England and other parts of Europe.
- South Carolina—rice and cotton
- Georgia—rice and cotton
- Louisiana—sugar cane
- Texas, Alabama, Mississippi—cotton



Big Houses and African Villages

A Description of South Carolina [including] a very particular account of their rice-trade for twenty-five years, James Glen, 1761

The following Extract is inserted to shew by what Means that profitable Commodity Rice came to be first planted in South Carolina; for as it was not done with any previous Prospect of great Gain, but owing to a lucky Accident and a private Experiment, many Persons will naturally be desirous of knowing the several Circumstances relating to an Affair so fortunate for this Kingdom; and it may serve as a new Instance of the great Share that Accident hath had in making Discoveries for the Benefit of Mankind.

THE Production of Rice in South Carolina, which is of such prodigious Advantage, was owing to the following Accident.

A Brigantine from the Island of *Madagascar* happened to put in to that Colony:— They had a little Seed-Rice left, not exceeding a Peck or Quarter of a Bushel, which the Captain offered, and gave to a Gentleman of the Name of *Woodward*:—from a Part of this he had a very good Crop, but was ignorant for some Years how to clean it:—It was soon dispersed over the Province; and by frequent Experiments and Observations they found out Ways

Province.

It is likewise reported, that Mr *Du Bois*, Treasurer of the *East India Company*, did send to that Country a small Bag of Seed-Rice, some short Time after; from whence it is reasonable enough to suppose there might come those Two Sorts of that Commodity, the one called *red-Rice*, in Contradistinction to the *white-Rice*, from the Redness of the inner Husk or Rind of this Sort, though they both clean, and become alike white.

The Writer of this Extract hath not mentioned the Time when Rice was first planted in South Carolina; but it appears, in Page 70 of this Description, that Rice was generally planted in that Colony in the Year 1710, and therefore the first Planting of it must have been about the Year 1700, if not sooner.





Big Houses and African Villages

A Description of South Carolina [including] a very particular account of their rice-trade for twenty-five years, James Glen, 1761

Discussion Questions

- What can we gather from this article by Glen regarding the origins of rice as a crop in South Carolina?
- According to Glen, what difficulties did the South Carolina colonists encounter when attempting to work with rice?
- Pay attention to how something Glen described as an “accident “ would become key to the economy of the colony and state and to the life and labor of African Americans.

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Big Houses and African Villages

Excerpt from Gentleman's Magazine, June 1766

Discussion Questions

- What does the author mean by “essaying?”
- Is this consistent with Glen’s report?
- What is the significance of the Assembly of South Carolina offering a bounty to the ship that brought in a cargo of rice?

My ingenious friend, Tho. Lambol, Esq; now living, informs me, that in the year 1704, being then a lad, going to school at some distance from Charles-Town, he took notice of some planters who were essaying to make rice grow.

In the year 1712, the same gentleman was an apprentice to a provincial merchant in Charles-Town, who was appointed public treasurer; and he well remembers that a bounty (granted by the Assembly) was then paid to a Captain, who brought in the first cargo of rice, after the bounty was offered: This Cargo came from the Straights, probably from Egypt or the Milanese.

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In the year 1713, another ship arri-

<http://books.google.com/books?id=6EsDAAAAMAAJ&dq=captain%20coram's%20reason%20for%20making%20tar&pg=PA279#v=onepage&q&f=false>



Big Houses and African Villages

Excerpt from Gentleman's Magazine, June 1766

Discussion Question

- Is this account consistent with Glen's report?
- What do you notice about the cargo of the ship described in this slide?
- How were the two elements of its cargo related?

From these particulars it appears, that the progress of raising rice, in any considerable quantity, was very slow; and I can find no account of any being exported for the first 15 years. But it is reasonable to conclude that after the arrival of these two cargoes of rice, for sowing, the planters were amply furnished, to extend its culture; and being a yearly production, it soon became a staple commodity; it is therefore very probable, that in the years 1715 or 1716, a quantity was raised sufficient for exportation, which continued to increase till the year 1726, and then it became a great article of commerce.

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Big Houses and African Villages

Excerpt from Gentleman's Magazine, June 1766

Discussion Question

- Is this account consistent with Glen's report?
- What do you notice about the cargo of the ship described in this slide?
- How were the two elements of its cargo related?

Milaneje.
In the year 1713, another ship arrived, and the Captain made the like demand, and received the bounty for bringing a cargo of rice and slaves from Madagascar.
From these particulars it appears.

In the year 1715, another ship arrived, and the Captain made the like demand, and received the bounty for bringing in a cargo of rice and slaves from Madagascar.

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Big Houses and African Villages

Newspaper advertisements for captives from Africa's
“grain coast.”

Discussion Questions

- What do these advertisements suggest about the relationship of rice to the slave trade in South Carolina?
- What is the significance of mentioning Sierra Leon and the Rice Coast?
- What do you notice about gender?

TO BE SOLD, on board the
Ship *Bance-Island*, on tuesday the 6th
of *May* next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice
cargo of about 250 fine healthy




NEGROES,
just arrived from the
Windward & Rice Coast.
—The utmost care has
already been taken, and
shall be continued, to keep them free from
the least danger of being infected with the
SMALL-POX, no boat having been on
board, and all other communication with
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

Auskin, Laurens, & Appleby.

N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the
SMALL-POX in their own Country.

Charlestown, July 24th, 1769.

TO BE SOLD,
On THURSDAY the third Day
of AUGUST next,
A CARGO
OF
NINETY-FOUR
PRIME, HEALTHY



NEGROES,
CONSISTING OF
Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,
Twenty-four WOMEN, and
Sixteen GIRLS.
JUST ARRIVED,
In the Brigantine *DEMBIA*, *Francis Bare*, Master, from SIERRA-
LEON, by
DAVID & JOHN DEAS.



Big Houses and African Villages

Women planting rice seeds





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Mortar and Pestle





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Big Houses and African Villages



Christianity—Music—Spirituals

- Islam in parts of Africa—Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage from the Kingdom of Mali to Mecca in Arabia in 1324.
- Some Muslims were brought to America during the slave trade.
- Indigenous African spiritual practices—animism
- Christianity—resistance at first, but some also seeing it as an opportunity to gain freedom.
- Major turning point for African American conversions—The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards major leaders. Evangelical Christianity. Emotion. Direct contact with God.
- African Americans adapting Christianity to meet their own needs.
- —Exodus—children of Israel—God’s chosen people—Moses to lead them out of bondage.
- Equality of all people.
- Secret churches. Praise Houses.
- Music as a significant carrier of religion. Spirituals and hymns. Enslaved people created spirituals and reinterpreted European hymns to meet their needs.



Big Houses and African Villages

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

“I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”

Discussion Questions

- Douglass calls the songs “apparently incoherent,” then he says, “every tone was a testimony.” What do these characterizations tell us about how the songs may have sounded?
- What is he claiming about a depth of feeling that would not have been obvious to everyone?
- Douglass says that slaves sing most when they were unhappy. Do you imagine that enslaved people were ever happy?



Big Houses and African Villages

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

“The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.”

Discussion Questions

- Douglass calls the songs “apparently incoherent,” then he says, “every tone was a testimony.” What do these characterizations tell us about how the songs may have sounded?
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Big Houses and African Villages

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

“I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.”

Discussion Questions

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Big Houses and African Villages

“Wade in the Water”

Discussion Questions

- What biblical images does this song evoke?
- With which biblical story did singers of this song identify?
- The song likely has multiple meanings and references. What meanings do you see?

Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water
God’s a-going to trouble the water
See that host all dressed in white
God’s a-going to trouble the water
The leader looks like the Israelite
God’s a-going to trouble the water
See that band all dressed in red
God’s a-going to trouble the water
Looks like the band that Moses led
God’s a-going to trouble the water
Look over yonder, what do you see?
God’s a-going to trouble the water
The Holy Ghost a-coming on me
God’s a-going to trouble the water
If you don’t believe I’ve been redeemed
God’s a-going to trouble the water
Just follow me down to the Jordan’s stream
God’s a-going to trouble the water



Big Houses and African Villages



“Wade in the Water”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fNjYPyPGIM&feature=grec_index

(Alvin Ailey Dancers)

Discussion Question

- How might we think about cultural continuity, reinterpretation and exchanges?



Big Houses and African Villages



Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*,
October 13, 1861

Mulberry Plantation, South Carolina: “We went in the afternoon to the Negro church on the plantation. Manning Brown, a Methodist minister, preached to a very large black congregation. Though glossy black, they were well dressed and were very stylishly gotten up. They were stout, comfortable looking Christians. The house women, in white aprons and white turbans, were the nicest looking. How snow white the turbans on their heads appeared! But the youthful sisters flaunted in pink and sky blue bonnets which tried their complexions. For the family, they had a cushioned seat near the pulpit, neatly covered with calico. Manning Brown preached Hell fire so hot, I felt singed, if not parboiled. I could not remember any of my many sins that were worthy of an eternity in torment; but , if all the world’s misery, sin, and suffering came from so small a sin as eating that apple, what mighty proportions mine take!

Discussion Questions

- How does Mary Chestnut think about black people?
- Who is present in this church service? What types of people?
- Based on her description of Manning Brown’s prayer would you say that there were differences in how this group of enslaved people approached prayer and how Chesnut’s white congregation worshipped?



Big Houses and African Villages

Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*,
October 13, 1861

Jim Nelson, the driver, the stateliest darky I ever saw, tall and straight as a pine tree, with a fine face, and not so very black but a full-blooded African, was asked to lead in prayer. He became wildly excited, on his knees, facing us with his eyes shut. He clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek, yet was strangely clear and musical, occasionally in a plaintive minor key that went to your heart. Sometimes it rang out like a trumpet. I wept bitterly. It was all sound, however, and emotional pathos. There was literally nothing in what he said. The words had no meaning at all. It was the devotional passion of voice and manner which was so magnetic. The Negroes sobbed and shouted and swayed backward and forward, some with aprons to their eyes, most of them clapping heir hands and responding in shrill tones: “Yes, God!” “Jesus!” “Savior!” “Bless the Lord, amen,” etc. It was a little too exciting for me I would very much have liked to shout, too.”

Discussion Questions

- Compare Chestnut’s statement, “It was all sound, however, and emotional pathos,” and Douglass’s statement, that the songs were “apparently incoherent.”
- Chesnut says, I wept bitterly,” and “It was a little too exciting for me I would very much have liked to shout, too.” Why did she weep? Why didn’t she shout?



Big Houses and African Villages

Ring Shout Descriptions, *Letters and Diaries of Laura M. Towne, Monday, April 28, 1862*

On St. Helena, one of the South Carolina Sea Islands—from Pennsylvania. Founded the Penn School—now the Penn Center.

“Last night I was at the ‘Praise House’ for a little time and saw Miss Nelly reading to the good women. Afterwards we went to the ‘shout,’ a savage, heathenish dance out in Rina’s house. Three men stood and sang, clapping and gesticulating. The others shuffled along on their heels, following one another in a circle and occasionally bending the knees in a kind of curtsy. They began slowly, a few going around and more gradually joining in, the song getting faster and faster, till at last only the most marked part of the refrain is sung and the shuffling, stamping, and clapping get furious. The floor shook so that it seemed dangerous. It swayed regularly to the time of the song. As they danced they, of course, got out of breath, and the singing was kept up principally by the three apart, but it was astonishing how long they continued and how soon after a rest they were ready to begin again. Miss Walker and I, Mrs. Whiting and her husband were there—a little white crowd at the door looking at this wild firelight scene; for there was no other light than that from the fire, which they kept replenishing. They kept up the ‘shout’ till very late.”

Discussion Questions

- Can you get a sense of the Praise House from Laura Towne’s description?
- Why do you think this white woman from Pennsylvania would first, attend the service, and second, write down her observations?
- What do you make of the white crowd at the door looking in on this group of black people worshipping?
- Do you see any similarities or differences in Laura Towne’s description of the black people and Mary Chesnut’s?



Big Houses and African Villages

The Journals of Charlotte Forten,
Journal 4, Sunday, May 3, 1863

“Too weary and ill to go to church, which I regretted for I always like to see the people, looking bright and cheerful in their Sunday attire, and to hear them sing. This eve. Mr Thorpe and a friend were here. The people after ‘Praise’ had one of their grandest shouts, and Lizzie and I, in a dark corner of the Praise House, amused ourselves with practicing a little. It is wonderful that perfect time the people keep with hands, feet, and indeed with every part of the body. I enjoy these ‘shouts’ very much.”

Discussion Question

Charlotte Forten was an upper class black woman from Philadelphia. What do you sense about her vis a vis these former slaves?



Big Houses and African Villages



Ring Shout

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmmTMg3e5Uo>

Praise House and Ring Shout

(Time — 2:45 - 5:47)



Big Houses and African Villages

Language

- Many languages spoken in Africa by people who became captives. How would they communicate with one another and with Europeans and white Americans?
- Learning new languages—fluency in Dutch, English, Spanish. (Estevanico with Spanish explorers in la Florida and across the continent in 1527 learned several Indian languages and served as a broker and interpreter.)
- Creating new language of Gullah in areas that were relatively isolated from whites, for example the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia.



Big Houses and African Villages

The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano (p. 50)

From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast. The languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English. They were therefore easily learned; and, while I was journeying thus through Africa, I acquired two or three different tongues.

Discussion Question

Equiano says that he did not have trouble understanding other Africans, but he also says that he learned “two or three different tongues.” Do you see any contradiction in these statements?



Big Houses and African Villages

Gullah—a creole language that resulted from the blending of several African languages with English.

- No distinction between male and female.
- “E” or “He” served as the masculine, feminine and neuter pronoun.
- Included a pronoun for the second person plural. “Yinnah” or “unna.”
- Similarities between Jamaican and Trinidadian Patois. Also similar to the language spoken in Sierra Leone.

Source: Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (University of Illinois Press, 1985)



Big Houses and African Villages



“The children of the planters, brought up on the plantations, and allowed to run in the woods with the little negroes, acquired the same dialect; and to-day many a gentleman’s son regrets that it is apparent in his speech.”

Source: Northern correspondent quoted in Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 208.



Big Houses and African Villages

Gullah Speakers

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvuWSJI87r8>

Gullah Geechie Language

(Time — 2:00 - 3:05)



Big Houses and African Villages



Final slide.

Thank you