A Historical Monograph

Built from the Earth, Woven by Hand

SWEETGRASS AND TABBY AS CREOLIZED MATERIAL CULTURES OF THE CAROLINA LOWCOUNTRY

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Contents

Dedicated to the intelligence, creativity,
and cultural dignity of the Gullah Geechee
people and all those African Americans
whose knowledge and labor shaped the
material and cultural landscape of the Carolina
Lowcountry.

Preface and Acknowledgments

This monograph emerged from a conviction that the seemingly humble crafts of sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction contain within them the most profound stories of American history. When one encounters a coiled sweetgrass basket adorning a Mount Pleasant roadside stand, or traces a hand along the weathered oyster-shell walls of a coastal plantation structure, one touches the physical manifestation of centuries of cultural negotiation, technical innovation, and human persistence. These are not relics of a static past but rather living testimonies to the creative synthesis of African, European, and Indigenous knowledge systems that took root in the distinctive ecological and social landscape of the Carolina Lowcountry.

The genesis of this work lies in recognition that American architectural and material history have too long compartmentalized the study of building traditions and craft practices, treating them as separate phenomena rather than as interconnected expressions of the same fundamental human impulse to transform environment into culture. The dominant historiographical tradition, following the methodologies established by earlier scholars, too often presented African contributions to colonial American material life as either archaeological traces or nostalgic cultural survivals rather than as ongoing technologies of resistance and community formation. Similarly, the study of indigenous shell middens and European architectural innovations proceeded largely independently, obscuring the dynamic intercultural exchanges that actually characterized colonial coastal settlement.

We are grateful to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, which has worked tirelessly to ensure that these traditions receive the scholarly and public attention they deserve. The National Park Service's preservation initiatives at Fort Frederica, Kingsley Plantation, and other sites have provided invaluable opportunities to examine tabby structures firsthand and to understand their engineering principles through the work of dedicated conservators and archaeologists. The College of Charleston's stellar community of historians and archaeologists has provided generous intellectual

engagement at every stage of this project. We owe particular debts to scholars who have pioneered rigorous study of African technological transfers and creolization processes, whose work fundamentally shaped the interpretive framework adopted throughout this monograph.

The archival work supporting this study draws upon materials held at the South Carolina Historical Society, the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, estate inventories from the Charleston District, and the extensive documentary collections that illuminate the daily lives and technical knowledge of enslaved and free African Americans who created these enduring material forms. Oral histories collected through community-engaged projects have enriched immeasurably the understanding of continuities and innovations in these craft traditions into the present day.

Introduction: The Problem of Creolized Material Culture

The Hook: A Material Encounter

In the early years of the eighteenth century, along the rivers and coastal marshes of what would become South Carolina and Georgia, two distinctive material technologies emerged from the convergence of three continents and their knowledge systems. When British colonists stormed the Spanish-held Fort San Antón de Carlos in Florida in 1702, they encountered structures constructed from a remarkable composite material: lime derived from burning oyster shells, mixed with sand, water, and whole shell fragments, creating a substance that hardened to stone-like durability. This material, which Spanish colonists had adopted from African precedents and Indigenous shell supplies, would come to be known as tabby—a coastal technology that would transform the built landscape of the American Southeast from Florida through coastal Georgia and South Carolina for the next century and a half.[1]

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Simultaneously, women working in the rice fields and settlements of these same coastal regions were engaged in the production of sweetgrass baskets, fashioning coiled containers from native coastal plants interwoven with palmetto fronds and bulrush. These baskets, which would come to embody the cultural identity of the Gullah Geechee people for generations to come, represented not an African transplantation wholesale but rather a sophisticated adaptation of West African coiling techniques to the distinct materials and ecological contexts of the American coastal lowlands.[2] The two technologies—one addressing the fundamental human need for shelter, the other serving both practical function and artistic expression—emerged from distinct but parallel processes of cultural and environmental adaptation. Yet they shared a common genesis in the dynamic intercultural spaces of colonial settlement, where enslaved and free African Americans, European colonists, and Indigenous peoples negotiated the creation of new material worlds.

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This monograph argues that sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction, far from representing either African cultural survival or

European colonial imposition, must be understood as **creolized technologies**—that is, as genuinely novel forms that emerged from the interaction of multiple knowledge systems, each transformed through contact with the others in ways that created something irreducibly new.[3] The creolization process, as understood through recent scholarship on African diaspora cultures and linguistic theory, operates not merely at the level of language but also through the material and technical domains. In the specific contexts of the Carolina Lowcountry, where African slaves constituted a demographic majority from the early eighteenth century onward, and where ecological conditions radically differed from any European precedent, these material forms became technologies through which people of African descent exercised agency, maintained cultural continuity, and established autonomous claims to place and community identity even within the brutal constraints of slavery.[4]

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The Historiographical Moment

Until quite recently, the scholarly study of these material cultures proceeded along separate and inadequate tracks. Sweetgrass basketry, when it received scholarly attention at all, was often consigned to the domain of folklore studies or relegated to brief mentions in larger histories of African American craft traditions.[5] Scholars frequently portrayed the baskets as essentially "African" in character, surviving unchanged across the Middle Passage and emerging from the hands of enslaved women much as they had been created in Senegambia or the Windward Coast centuries earlier.[6] This essentializing approach, while well-intentioned in its effort to recognize African cultural agency, ironically obscured the very dynamism and innovation that characterized sweetgrass basket production in the American lowlands. Similarly, the historiography of tabby construction long remained the province of architectural historians and preservation specialists who, while often meticulous in their technical analysis, frequently neglected the broader cultural contexts in which tabby structures were conceived, constructed, and inhabited.[7]

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The dominant interpretive paradigm, particularly as established in the mid-twentieth century, emphasized the European origins and agency in both domains. Colonial planters were credited with developing the rice economy and directing the creation of the built environment, while the specific roles and innovations of enslaved and free African Americans appeared primarily as labor inputs rather than as creative participants.[8] This historiographical erasure was particularly consequential in the case of rice cultivation, where the long scholarly debate over whether African slaves brought knowledge of wetland

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rice cultivation to the Carolinas or whether European planters developed these techniques independently has only recently begun to move beyond this binary framework.[9] Contemporary scholarship, drawing upon careful attention to West African agricultural systems, creole linguistics, and archaeological evidence, has demonstrated that the development of the Lowcountry rice economy involved genuine knowledge transfer and collaborative innovation rather than simple imposition of European forms.[10]

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Building upon these advances in rice historiography, recent work in material culture studies and African diaspora studies has begun to illuminate the creolized nature of architectural and craft traditions. Scholars working in the wake of the theoretical interventions by Mintz and Price regarding creolization as a process affecting culture more broadly have recognized that material forms offer distinctive evidence of cultural interaction and adaptation.[11] The physical object—whether a coiled sweetgrass basket or a tabby wall—carries within it traces of the multiple knowledge systems and historical processes that shaped its creation. A sweetgrass basket, examined carefully, reveals African coiling techniques married to American plant materials and marketing practices adapted to tourism and commercial exchange. A tabby structure embodies Spanish architectural knowledge, Native American shell resources, and African construction labor and innovation, all conditioned by the specific hydrology and ecology of the Carolina coast.[12]

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This monograph builds upon these historiographical advances while attempting to push the analysis further toward an genuinely integrated understanding of how multiple material technologies operated as interconnected expressions of a single creolized culture. Rather than treating sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction as separate phenomena that happen to have emerged in the same region at roughly the same historical moment, this study argues that they must be understood as parallel responses to the fundamental challenges of colonial settlement and enslaved labor in the Lowcountry. Both represent instances in which people of African descent—and indeed, all residents of the coastal Southeast—engaged in sophisticated processes of technical adaptation, ecological knowledge integration, and material innovation that allowed them to transform their circumstances and establish enduring claims to place and community.

Methodological Foundations

The evidence supporting this interpretation draws from multiple archival and material sources, reflecting the necessarily interdisciplinary character of any adequate study of material culture. The

work draws upon traditional historical sources, including plantation records, estate inventories from the Charleston District dating from 1732 onward, shipping records documenting the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and published colonial documents.[13] These textual sources provide evidence of the contexts within which these material technologies emerged: the demographic composition of the Lowcountry, the economic incentives driving particular forms of production, and the practical constraints shaping both sweetgrass basket-making and tabby construction.

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Beyond these traditional sources, the study engages with archaeological evidence and oral histories that have been increasingly systematized through community-engaged projects and digital humanities initiatives. The Lowcountry Digital History Initiative has brought together documentary materials with archaeological findings and contemporary community narratives, creating spaces where multiple forms of evidence can be brought into conversation.[14] Excavations at plantation sites, including the careful work of conservators studying the composition and durability of tabby in structures like the Barnwell Tabby on Hilton Head Island, provide tangible evidence of construction techniques and material properties that cannot be gleaned from written documents alone.[15]

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The methodology also engages with recent scholarship on West African technologies and knowledge systems, drawing particularly upon the work of scholars like Judith Carney, who have documented the agricultural expertise that enslaved Africans brought to the New World and the deliberate targeting of enslaved people with particular regional and technical specializations by colonial slave traders.[16] This approach recognizes that understanding the African dimensions of creolized material cultures requires sustained attention to African precedents and to the specific regional origins of enslaved peoples brought to the Lowcountry.

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The Argument: Creolization as Technological Innovation

At its core, this monograph argues that **creolization, understood as a process of cultural synthesis and innovation occurring in specific historical contexts, operated as a mode of technological adaptation rather than as simple cultural survival or cultural loss**. Drawing upon recent theoretical work emphasizing creolization as an active, creative process rather than a passive erosion of African cultures, the study demonstrates how the particular demographic, ecological, and economic conditions of the Carolina Lowcountry created circumstances in which enslaved and free African Americans could exercise significant agency in shaping the material technologies through

which colonial society reproduced itself.[17]

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The argument proceeds through several interconnected claims. First, that the rice economy of the Lowcountry depended fundamentally upon African knowledge and labor, with enslaved people from rice-growing regions of West Africa deliberately targeted for purchase by planters and given crucial roles in developing the specific techniques through which swamp rice cultivation became profitable.[18] Second, that the knowledge systems underlying both sweetgrass basket production and tabby construction reflect sophisticated integration of African techniques with American ecological conditions and European materials, creating genuinely new technologies rather than mere reproductions of African or European forms. Third, that these material forms served not merely practical functions but also crucial roles in the formation and maintenance of Gullah Geechee culture and identity, particularly in allowing enslaved and free African Americans to maintain spatial autonomy and cultural continuity within plantation landscapes.[19]

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Chapter Overview

The body of this monograph proceeds through five interconnected chapters that trace the historical development and cultural significance of these two material technologies. Chapter One, "Foundations: West African Technologies and the Carolina Encounter," establishes the African, European, and Indigenous knowledge systems that met on the Carolina coast in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The chapter demonstrates that both African sweetgrass basket construction and the Moorish/African-influenced tabby building tradition had deep historical roots in their respective regions of origin, and that the encounter between these traditions and American ecological and social conditions did not produce simple transplantation but rather required significant adaptation and innovation.

Chapter Two, "Rice Plantations and the Material Revolution, 1690–1760," examines the crucial period in which the rice economy emerged as the dominant force shaping Lowcountry society, arguing that this economic transformation required not only enslaved labor but also the active incorporation of African technological knowledge regarding wetland agriculture. The chapter analyzes how the creation of the massive hydrological systems that made rice plantations possible—the dikes, canals, "trunks," and reservoirs that enslaved people constructed—represented an achievement of technical knowledge and labor that fundamentally depended upon West African precedents. Simultaneously, this chapter traces the emergence of sweetgrass basket production as a complementary technology sup-

porting the rice economy, with baskets serving crucial roles in rice winnowing and storage.

Chapter Three, "Building the Lowcountry: Tabby Construction as Colonial and Creolized Architecture, 1700–1860," traces the adoption and spread of tabby construction techniques throughout the Carolina Lowcountry and coastal Georgia, arguing that tabby structures represent the most visible physical embodiment of creolized colonial building practices. The chapter demonstrates how tabby moved from Spanish military installations through British colonial outposts and into plantation architecture, examining how enslaved African Americans and other workers learned and innovated within tabby construction while subjected to the constraints of forced labor. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which tabby's durability, adaptability, and accessibility made it the preferred building material for plantation economies dependent upon enslaved labor.

Chapter Four, "Sweetgrass Basketry: Craft, Commerce, and Community in the Lowcountry Landscape, 1700–1930," examines the transformation of sweetgrass basket production from a utilitarian technology embedded within plantation labor systems into a distinctive craft tradition and eventually into a commercial and cultural commodity. The chapter traces how basket-making allowed enslaved and free African American women to maintain skill autonomy and to generate income through informal market economies, all while creating material expressions of cultural identity. The analysis extends into the twentieth century, tracing how roadside basket stands along Highway 17 in Mount Pleasant emerged as spaces where Gullah Geechee culture could be maintained and expressed even as urbanization and development transformed the surrounding landscape.

Chapter Five, "Material Culture and the Formation of Gullah Geechee Identity, 1760–Present," argues that sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction functioned as interconnected technologies through which the Gullah Geechee people fashioned a distinctive creolized culture that synthesized African, European, and Indigenous elements. The chapter examines how material practices encoded and transmitted cultural knowledge, values, and historical memory, particularly within the context of slavery's profound ruptures and the subsequent marginalization of African American communities following emancipation. The analysis concludes by considering how these material traditions have been repurposed in contemporary contexts, including through heritage preservation initiatives and cultural tourism, examining both the possibilities and complications that arise when living traditions become heritage commodities.

Foundations—West African Technologies and the Carolina Encounter

African Precedents: Basketry and Building in West African Contexts

The history of sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction in the Carolina Lowcountry cannot be adequately understood without sustained attention to the African precedents and knowledge systems that shaped these material technologies. West African basketry traditions, particularly those associated with the Senegambia region and the Gold Coast, had evolved over centuries to serve multiple functions within societies that depended heavily upon storage technologies for both agricultural surplus management and trade.[20] The coiling technique that characterizes sweetgrass basket construction—in which long ropes of plant material are wrapped in spiraling patterns and held together through careful stitching—appears in African basketry traditions where grasses, palm fronds, and other plant materials created containers for grain storage, liquids, and trade goods.[21] These baskets were not merely utilitarian vessels but represented significant investments of time and skill, with certain types of baskets serving ceremonial functions and carrying cultural meanings that extended far beyond their practical applications.

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The specific regional origins of enslaved people brought to the Carolina Lowcountry matter significantly for understanding the trajectories of sweetgrass basket production. Scholars including Judith Carney and Daniel Littlefield have documented that colonial planters in South Carolina deliberately sought out enslaved people from particular West African regions, recognizing that expertise in rice cultivation, cattle herding, and other specialized skills could be targeted through the mechanisms of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[22] The Gullah Geechee people who would come to be the primary producers of sweetgrass baskets were disproportionately drawn from regions including Senegambia (the area around the Gambia River), Sierra Leone, and other portions of the West African coast where basketry

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and textile traditions were highly developed.[23] The Gullah language itself, the only English-based creole to survive into the present day in North America, preserves extensive African linguistic elements, with vocabulary, grammar, and phonological features reflecting the specific regional African origins of Gullah speakers.[24]

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The evidence suggests that the particular coiling techniques employed in sweetgrass basket production reflect direct transmission of African technical knowledge rather than independent innovation. Comparative analysis of West African basketry and contemporary Gullah sweetgrass baskets reveals striking technical parallels, including the use of long continuous coils held together through careful stitching, the creation of tightly woven containers that could hold both dry and liquid materials, and the aesthetic principles governing the arrangement of natural colors and textures.[25] Yet significantly, African basketry traditions that employed coiling used different plant materials suited to West African ecological contexts. The transition from West African plant materials to the specific materials available in the Carolina Lowcountry—sweetgrass, palmetto fronds, longleaf pine needles, and bulrush—represented a crucial adaptation that required both technical innovation and intimate knowledge of American plant ecology.

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European Architectural Traditions and the Spanish Introduction of Tabby

The history of tabby construction extends back further in time and encompasses a wider geographical range than the initial English colonization of the Carolinas. The term "tabby" itself derives from the Spanish *tapia* (literally "adobe wall") and possibly from Arabic *tabbi* (meaning "a mixture of mortar and lime"), though the precise etymological origins remain disputed among scholars.[26] Rammed earth construction techniques, of which tabby represents a distinctive variant, have roots in Roman engineering and appeared in medieval European contexts, though the specific technique of incorporating oyster shells into the cement mixture appears to be either a North African or a Spanish-Moorish innovation that entered the Iberian Peninsula during the medieval period.[27]

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Spanish colonists brought tabby construction techniques to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century, with the oldest known example of tabby concrete in North America found at the Spanish Fort San Antón de Carlos on Mound Key in Florida, dating to the 1580s.[28] The Spanish recognized that tabby construction offered significant advantages in tropical and subtropical environments where wood deteriorated rapidly and where locally-available materials

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could be assembled into durable structures without requiring skilled masons trained in European masonry techniques. The availability of oyster shell middens in coastal Florida and Georgia—massive accumulations of shells deposited over millennia by indigenous peoples—provided an abundant supply of raw material that could be transformed through burning into the lime essential to the tabby mixture.[29]

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When the British colonist James Oglethorpe arrived in Georgia in the 1730s, having observed Spanish tabby fortifications near Port Royal in South Carolina, he recognized the potential of this building material for establishing British colonial presence in a region that was simultaneously geographically remote, economically marginal, and militarily vulnerable to Spanish attack.[30] Oglethorpe deliberately promoted the adoption of tabby construction on St. Simons Island, where he could draw upon the extensive shell middens that dotted the coastal landscape. He even built himself a tabby house near Fort Frederica, modeling the adoption of this Spanish-derived technology for other colonists and demonstrating its feasibility for residential as well as military architecture.[31]

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Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Shell Middens

The archaeological record makes unambiguously clear that the availability of the oyster shell middens that made tabby construction possible derived from millennia of indigenous presence on the Carolina coast. Archaeological investigations of these shell middens, which contain not only oyster shells but also remains of other shellfish, fish, and animal bones interspersed with artifacts of indigenous manufacture, reveal that they represent the accumulated refuse from countless meals prepared by indigenous peoples over thousands of years.[32] The shell rings and middens of the Carolina coast date back approximately four thousand years, representing evidence of complex social organization, sophisticated ecological knowledge, and sustained occupation of coastal environments.[33] When European colonists and enslaved Africans arrived on the Carolina coast, they inherited an ecological landscape that had been fundamentally shaped by millennia of indigenous land use and resource management.

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The indigenous peoples of the Carolina coast—the Cusabo, Timucua, and other groups that constituted the first peoples of the region—possessed sophisticated knowledge of coastal ecology, seasonal resource availability, and sustainable harvesting practices.[34] While European diseases and colonial violence devastated indigenous populations and displaced survivors, the material knowledge embedded in the landscape remained. The massive shell middens were literally

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the inheritance that indigenous peoples left behind—an inheritance that European colonists and enslaved Africans would appropriate and repurpose for their own material and architectural needs.[35]

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The Carolina Encounter: Convergence and Collision

The actual settlement of the Carolina coast by European colonists beginning in 1670 set in motion a complex process of environmental, social, and cultural encounter that would generate the specific conditions under which sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction emerged as dominant material technologies. The first English settlers arrived to a landscape that had been decimated by disease and warfare but that still bore the marks of millennia of indigenous occupation and land use. They encountered a climate radically different from that of England, with subtropical summers of intense heat and humidity, devastating hurricanes and storms, and disease environments that killed settlers with appalling regularity.[36]

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These early colonists also immediately became slave traders and slave owners. By the early eighteenth century, enslaved Africans constituted an ever-larger proportion of the colonial population, and by 1708, enslaved African Americans outnumbered European colonists in South Carolina.[37] This demographic reality—unique among English North American colonies—created a distinctive social context in which African cultural practices, languages, and technologies could be maintained and elaborated across generations in ways that became impossible in colonies where European immigration continuously overwhelmed the enslaved population.[38]

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The Carolina encounter, then, was not an encounter between unified European colonists and a unified African enslaved population, but rather a complex negotiation involving multiple European power centers (Spanish, French, and English), multiple African ethnic and linguistic groups with their own distinct knowledge systems and social hierarchies, and surviving indigenous peoples who maintained crucial roles as guides, intermediaries, and occasional allies despite their catastrophic population losses.[39] The material technologies that emerged from this convergence—sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction—bear the marks of this complex history, synthesizing knowledge from all the populations involved while remaining understood and controlled primarily by those with the least formal power: the enslaved and free African Americans who would come to identify themselves as Gullah Geechee.

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Rice Plantations and the Material Revolution, 1690–1760

The Emergence of Rice as Colonial Commodity

The transformation of the Carolina Lowcountry from a marginally profitable colony of settlement into one of the wealthiest regions of British North America occurred through the development of rice cultivation as a major export commodity. In the late seventeenth century, rice remained a specialty crop in England, imported at great expense from Mediterranean and Middle Eastern sources and accessible primarily to elite consumers.[40] As English colonists in Carolina experimented with various crops—indigo, sugar, forest products, cattle—rice cultivation appeared initially as simply another possibility among many.[41] Early attempts at rice cultivation in the Carolina interior, following English agricultural precedents and broadcast seeding methods, produced disappointing results, yielding crops so choked with weeds as to scarcely justify the labor invested in their production.[42]

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Yet by the first decades of the eighteenth century, rice had emerged as the dominant export crop driving the colonial economy, with production levels rising dramatically as planters accumulated the capital, enslaved labor, and technical knowledge required for large-scale cultivation.[43] By 1712, rice farming had displaced cattle ranching as the primary agricultural enterprise of the Lowcountry, and by the 1740s and 1750s, rice wealth had transformed Charleston into one of the wealthiest cities in the Atlantic world.[44] The rapidity of this transformation cannot be explained by reference to European agricultural knowledge alone, nor can it be adequately understood as simply the imposition of European colonial authority over enslaved African labor. Rather, the development of the rice economy depended fundamentally upon the integration of West African technological knowledge regarding wetland rice cultivation with European capital, colonial political authority, and the brutal mobilization of enslaved labor.

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African Knowledge and the Rice Economy

The historiographical debate regarding the origins of rice cultivation in the Carolinas has historically centered on the question of whether European planters independently developed the techniques necessary for successful rice cultivation or whether enslaved Africans brought essential knowledge from West Africa. This binary framing, while focusing scholarly attention on the question of technological origins, has obscured the more fundamental reality that the rice economy emerged through a complex process of knowledge integration and adaptation in which both European and African systems of understanding and practice proved essential.[45]

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The evidence suggests strongly that West Africa possessed long-established rice cultivation traditions extending back at least two thousand years, with sophisticated knowledge of wetland rice agriculture developed in regions including the Gambia River valley, the Guinea coast, and other portions of coastal West Africa.[46] This West African expertise was not limited to basic rice sowing and harvesting but extended to the complex engineering knowledge necessary for constructing and maintaining the water control systems upon which successful rice cultivation depended: dikes, reservoirs, floodgates, and canals that allowed farmers to manage the seasonal variations in water availability that characterized African and American wetland environments.[47]

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Colonial planters in the Carolinas deliberately sought to acquire enslaved people with rice cultivation expertise, recognizing that skills in this crucial area could be reliably associated with people from particular West African regions. Scholars including Daniel Littlefield and Judith Carney have documented that enslaved people marketed as coming from the "Rice Coast"—a designation referring to West African regions with established rice cultivation traditions—commanded premium prices in colonial slave markets.[48] Slave trader Henry Laurens, whose business records survive in archival collections, explicitly marketed enslaved Africans by reference to their regional origins and associated expertise, with those from rice-growing regions noted as particularly valuable for Carolina rice planters.[49]

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The transfer of African agricultural knowledge to the Carolinas did not occur through some transparent process of African teachers instructing European students. Rather, it emerged through the complex dynamics of enslaved labor relations, in which African knowledge holders possessed crucial expertise that colonists needed while being denied any formal authority or compensation for that expertise. Some scholars have argued that enslaved Africans may have recommended particular technologies or methods to planters, with

these recommendations being subsequently claimed by planters as their own innovations.[50] Others have emphasized that the sheer scale of African immigration into the Lowcountry—with the slave trade dramatically accelerating in the early eighteenth century and creating a continuous influx of newly-arrived Africans—meant that African practices and knowledge were continuously being reasserted and elaborated rather than passively receiving European direction.[51]

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The evidence from the historical record supports these complex understandings. An advertisement in the *South Carolina Gazette* from 1769 notes that a shipment of enslaved people arriving in Charleston comes from "the center of rice country," indicating that regional origin remained a significant marketing category in slave sales and that planters continued to seek enslaved people from regions associated with rice expertise well into the eighteenth century.[52] Runaway slave advertisements from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicate that enslaved people from African rice-growing regions were disproportionately represented among skilled workers on Lowcountry plantations, including as drivers, carpenters, and supervisory figures responsible for directing plantation operations.[53]

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The Hydrological Revolution: Building the Hydraulic Machine

The most direct evidence of African technological contribution to the development of the Lowcountry rice economy appears in the massive hydrological systems that made rice cultivation possible. The construction of dikes, canals, reservoirs, and most crucially, the water-control devices known as "trunks," represents one of the most significant achievements of colonial plantation development, yet this accomplishment has too often been attributed primarily to European engineering ingenuity or treated simply as an undifferentiated output of slave labor without adequate attention to the specific knowledge systems underlying the construction process.

The creation of functional rice plantations required the construction of what one contemporary observer described as "a huge hydraulic machine"—a system of earthen embankments, dikes, and canals that allowed water from rivers and freshwater creeks to be captured in reservoirs during high water, stored, and then released through carefully managed gates to flood rice fields according to the seasonal patterns required for successful cultivation.[54] The scale of this enterprise was staggering. On Turkey Creek in the Lowcountry, eighteenth-century enslaved workers constructed a series of rice fields covering several linear miles of swampland, with each field bounded by carefully constructed embankments and served by a network of flanking canals that allowed water to flow downhill to

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irrigate newly-constructed fields.[55] The volume of earth moved in the construction of these hydrological systems—equivalent by contemporary estimates to the combined volume of the great pyramids of Egypt—was accomplished through the labor of enslaved people working with rough tools and intimate knowledge of soil mechanics and water behavior.[56]

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The specific water-control devices known as "trunks"—wooden gates that could be raised or lowered to regulate water flow—reveal particularly clearly the role of African technological knowledge in the development of the rice economy. In West Africa, rice farmers had constructed similar water-control systems using hollowed-out palm trunks embedded in impoundments, which could be plugged or unplugged to stop or release water flow according to farmers' needs.[57] In the Carolinas, enslaved Africans created functionally equivalent devices from hollowed-out domestic palmettos and cypress wood, adapting the African technological principle to American materials and ecological contexts.[58] Significantly, the terminology persists to the present day: the water-control structures in remnant rice fields of the Lowcountry continue to be called "trunks," preserving in the very language of the landscape an echo of the African technological transfer.[59]

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Sweetgrass Baskets and the Agricultural Labor Process

The development of the Lowcountry rice economy depended not only upon the construction of massive hydrological systems but also upon the creation of specialized labor processes and material technologies that allowed the crop to be processed and marketed efficiently. Among these technologies, sweetgrass baskets served crucial and multifaceted roles that extended far beyond simple utility. The fanner baskets, which constituted a significant portion of sweetgrass basket production in plantation contexts, served the essential function of winnowing rice—tossing the harvested and pounded grain upward to allow the wind to carry away the lighter chaff while the heavier grains fell back into the basket.[60] This winnowing process, using baskets specifically designed for this purpose, represents a technology directly transmitted from West African rice cultivation practices, with enslaved women from rice-growing regions bringing the technique and the associated material forms across the Atlantic.

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The transition from West African basket materials to the specific plant materials available in the Carolina Lowcountry required the knowledge and adaptation of enslaved women working within plantation labor systems. The bulrush, sweetgrass, and palmetto fronds that characterize contemporary Gullah basketry represent American

plant materials that were adapted to the technical requirements of African coiling basket production.[61] This adaptive process was not a one-time technological transfer but rather an ongoing innovation that continued across generations as women refined their understanding of which plant materials worked best for different basket types and purposes.

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The labor processes surrounding sweetgrass basket production within plantation contexts reveal significant dimensions of enslaved women's agency and skill. While men typically collected the raw materials—cutting sweetgrass by hand in ways that allowed the plant to continue growing, gathering palm fronds and other materials from throughout the coastal landscape—women controlled the technical transformation of these materials into finished baskets.[62] The production of a single basket could require weeks or months of labor, with women drawing upon deep technical knowledge regarding the proper preparation of materials, the maintenance of consistent coil size and tension, and the aesthetic principles governing the arrangement of colors and patterns.[63] Importantly, these baskets were created not simply as labor coerced by plantation masters but as products that enslaved women marketed through informal economy networks, selling their baskets to other enslaved people, to non-slaveholding whites, and occasionally to planters themselves.[64]

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The Consolidation of the Rice Plantation System and Its Discontents

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Lowcountry rice economy had consolidated around a distinctive form of plantation organization—the task system—which organized enslaved labor differently than the gang labor systems that would dominate sugar, tobacco, and later cotton plantation complexes in other colonial and American regions.[65] Under the task system, enslaved people were assigned specific tasks to complete each day, and once those tasks were finished, they could pursue other activities including tending their own subsistence plots, hunting, fishing, or producing crafts for sale.[66] This system emerged partly from practical recognition that rice cultivation could not effectively be organized through continuous labor from sunrise to sunset, as the tasks involved varied significantly in intensity and nature throughout the year. It also reflected the relative demographic autonomy of enslaved people in the Lowcountry, where the black population majority allowed for greater maintenance of African languages, social structures, and cultural practices than existed in regions where European immigration continuously replenished the white population.

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Yet the development of the rice economy proceeded simultaneously with the elaboration of slavery into increasingly brutal and restrictive forms. As rice wealth accumulated in the hands of a planter elite, slaveholders invested more heavily in the acquisition of additional enslaved people, driving an increase in the volume of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to South Carolina and Georgia. The disease environment of the Lowcountry—a combination of malaria, yellow fever, and other tropical diseases against which African-origin people possessed greater acquired immunity than Europeans—made the region simultaneously attractive for slave traders and devastating for the enslaved population itself.[67] The conditions of rice plantation labor were so extreme that, similar to Caribbean sugar plantations, the enslaved population did not experience natural increase until the 1760s—meaning that until that date, survival rates and fertility rates were so depressed by disease and brutal treatment that the enslaved population could only be maintained through continuous importation of new captives from Africa.[68]

[67] [22][25][8]

[68] [22][8]

The development of material technologies including sweetgrass baskets and, increasingly in this period, tabby construction for plantation buildings, must be understood within this context of accumulating brutality even as these technologies simultaneously provided enslaved people with means of maintaining cultural autonomy and exercising skill and agency. The peculiar constellation of factors that characterized the Carolina Lowcountry in the eighteenth century—the demographic majority of enslaved Africans, the specific ecological conditions, the availability of particular material resources, and the relative labor autonomy provided by the task system—created distinctive opportunities for the development and elaboration of creolized material cultures.

Building the Lowcountry—Tabby Construction as Colonial and Creolized Architecture, 1700–1860

Tabby Adoption and Colonial Military Architecture

The adoption of tabby construction techniques by British colonists in the early eighteenth century proceeded initially from military considerations. James Oglethorpe, having observed Spanish tabby fortifications and recognizing both the defensive advantages and the practical feasibility of tabby construction in a region where traditional European masonry materials were unavailable, promoted the adoption of tabby construction for Fort Frederica and associated military installations.[69] The decision to employ tabby for military architecture reflected careful calculation regarding material accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and the availability of enslaved labor capable of performing the labor-intensive processes of shell burning, mixing, and construction.[70]

[69] [5][34][13]

[70] [5][13][34][13]

The composition of tabby itself—equal parts lime, water, sand, oyster shells, and ash—represented a material formula that emerged through experimentation within the specific ecological and economic contexts of coastal colonization.[71] The oyster shells, derived from the massive middens accumulated over millennia of indigenous habitation, were burned in kilns to produce quicklime, which was then "slaked" (hydrated) by the addition of water, creating calcium hydroxide.[72] This slaked lime was combined with sand, water, and often whole oyster shell fragments that would remain visible in the finished material, creating a substance that could be poured or tamped into wooden forms and that would harden to stone-like durability.[73] The ash that constituted one of the five components was typically a byproduct of the lime-burning process but contributed significantly to the hardening of the finished product through chemical reactions that transformed the material over time.[74]

[71] [5][34]

[72] [5][34]

[73] [5][34][40]

[74] [5][34]

The process of tabby production was extraordinarily labor-intensive, requiring enslaved workers to perform multiple specialized tasks including the collection of oyster shells from the middens, the burning

of shells in kilns to produce lime, the hauling of sand from coastal deposits, the mixing of these components with water into the proper consistency, and finally the skilled labor of constructing wooden forms and tamping or pouring the mixture into place.[75] Despite this labor intensity, tabby construction proved significantly cheaper than brick or stone masonry, which would have required either importing materials at great cost or training skilled masons capable of producing high-quality brickwork under tropical conditions.[76]

[75] [5][13][34][13][40]

[76] [5][13][34][13]

Plantation Tabby: The Domestication of Colonial Building Material

The successful adoption of tabby for military purposes led quickly to its adoption for plantation architecture, with the material becoming particularly associated with the residential and agricultural structures of the Lowcountry elite during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first documented uses of tabby in Florida dated to the 1580s, and by the turn of the eighteenth century, Spanish colonists in Florida had employed tabby for various structures.[77] Following the British acquisition of territory in South Carolina and Georgia, tabby appeared first in military installations and then increasingly in domestic contexts—main plantation houses, kitchens, barns, and crucially, in the slave cabins and quarters that housed the enslaved populations upon whose labor plantation prosperity depended.[78]

[77] [34][40]

[78] [2][5][13][13][40]

The material properties of tabby made it particularly well-suited to plantation architecture. Once hardened, tabby proved extremely durable, resisting deterioration far better than wood in the humid subtropical climate of the Lowcountry.[79] The material also provided thermal mass that helped keep structures cool in summer and warm in winter, valuable properties in a climate of temperature extremes.[80] When properly coated with stucco or lime putty mortar to protect the exterior surface from water infiltration, tabby structures could endure for centuries with minimal maintenance beyond the periodic reapplication of the protective coating.[81]

[79] [5][13][13]

[80] [5][40]

[81] [5][13][13]

Importantly, the adoption of tabby for slave cabins and agricultural buildings reveals how material technologies became imbricated within the violence of slavery itself. Planters chose tabby for slave quarters precisely because it offered durability and because enslaved workers could be trained to perform the construction labor, eliminating the need to employ skilled masons whose wages would have consumed significant portions of plantation profits.[82] Thus, one of the most durable and imposing material expressions of Lowcountry architecture was created through an intimately interconnected process in which enslaved people not only were housed in tabby

[82] [13][40]

structures but performed the skilled and unskilled labor necessary to produce those very structures.

The Barnwell Tabby on Hilton Head Island, carefully excavated and studied in recent decades through the efforts of scholar-activists and community members, provides a particularly revealing case study of tabby plantation architecture.[83] Archaeological investigations revealed that the structure's walls could date to as early as 1710, with floors potentially dating to 1760, making it the oldest discovered structure on Hilton Head Island aside from indigenous shell rings.[84] Recovered artifacts—fragments of fine pottery, glass bottles, and personal items including buttons and tools—revealed a layered picture of daily life in the structure, with evidence suggesting it likely served as a plantation dwelling, possibly that of Henry Ladson on the Marabuoy Plantation property.[85] The careful reconstruction of the structure in recent years, undertaken by conservators and architects including Colin Brooker and Rick Wightman who worked to honor original construction methods and materials, has allowed for tangible understanding of the technical processes through which tabby structures were created and maintained.

[83] [2][16][40]

[84] [2][16]

[85] [2]

Engineering Sophistication and Material Innovation

The engineering knowledge embedded in tabby construction extended far beyond simple material mixing and structure building. Colonial builders working with tabby had to understand the relationships between the five components and how variations in their proportions would affect the hardness, durability, and structural properties of the final product.[86] They had to calculate bearing capacities and plan structural systems that could support loads of substantial weight while maintaining the integrity of the cast material.[87] The construction process itself required careful orchestration: wooden forms had to be built to hold the liquid or semi-liquid mixture in place; the mixture had to be tamped or compacted to eliminate air pockets that would weaken the finished material; and the material had to be allowed to cure over extended periods before forms could be removed and additional building could proceed.

[86] [5][13][34]

[87] [5][13]

The archaeological and architectural analysis of surviving tabby structures reveals significant variations in tabby composition across time and geographical region, reflecting ongoing experimentation and adaptation by enslaved and free workers engaged in tabby construction.[88] "Oglethorpe tabby," associated with the structures built during the initial British promotion of the material on St. Simons Island and elsewhere in Georgia, employed whole oyster shells suspended throughout the mixture in ways that provided structural

[88] [2][5][13][18][13][40]

strength and distinctive visual appearance.[89] The later "Spalding tabby," associated with the tabby revival led by Thomas Spalding on his Sapelo Island plantation in the early nineteenth century, reflected refinements in the recipe and construction process that improved durability and workability.[90]

[89] [5][13]

[90] [5][13]

Analysis of mortar and binding agents through thin-section analysis and other archaeological techniques has revealed that enslaved and free workers engaged in tabby construction made sophisticated judgments about material composition, with evidence suggesting that local variations in sand sources, shell availability, and ash composition led to intentional modifications in the tabby recipe to optimize the material for particular purposes.[91] The wattle and daub tabby dwelling examined by archaeologist Jacob Hamill, for instance, revealed that enslaved people at Port Royal constructed the structure using tabby that they had formulated themselves, demonstrating that despite severe constraints on time and labor availability, the enslaved community utilized their knowledge of tabby-making to create dwellings that met their needs while simultaneously exercising a kind of technological autonomy within the plantation landscape.[92]

[91] [2][18]

[92] [18]

Decline, Revival, and the End of Tabby Tradition

The trajectory of tabby construction reveals the contingency of material technologies and their dependence upon specific economic, ecological, and social conditions. Following the Civil War and emancipation, tabby construction declined sharply as multiple factors converged to make the material less attractive to builders. The depletion of the readily-accessible oyster shell middens, which had accumulated over millennia and from which colonists and planters had drawn freely for over a century, removed one of the fundamental material prerequisites for tabby production.[93] The introduction of Portland cement from England by the 1870s, which could be shipped and applied with greater convenience than the labor-intensive tabby production process required, offered an alternative building material that did not depend upon local shell resources.[94]

[93] [5][13][13]

[94] [5][13][13]

Yet tabby construction did not disappear entirely. A brief revival occurred during the development of Jekyll Island as a millionaire's retreat in the 1880s and 1890s, with several mansions constructed using tabby mixed with Portland cement.[95] This later tabby, however, frequently proved less durable than the earlier forms, as builders sometimes failed to properly process shell materials or used ocean shells without washing away the salt, leading to long-term deterioration of structures that appeared solid when first constructed.[96] By the early twentieth century, tabby construction had largely ceased,

[95] [5][13][13]

[96] [13][13]

though structures built during the height of tabby use—from the early eighteenth century through the Civil War—continue to survive as physical testimonies to the engineering knowledge and labor of those who created them.

Sweetgrass Basketry—Craft, Commerce, and Community in the Lowcountry Landscape, 1700–1930

Basket Production and the Plantation Labor System

While tabby construction primarily served to create the fixed architectural infrastructure of plantation complexes, sweetgrass basket production evolved as a more mobile and flexible technology through which enslaved and free African American women could exercise particular forms of agency and autonomy. The production of baskets for use in rice winnowing, grain storage, and household purposes constituted a crucial dimension of plantation labor, yet it occupied a distinctive position within the hierarchy of slave labor tasks. Unlike field work or construction labor, which planters strictly controlled and monitored, basket production frequently occurred in spaces of relative autonomy, with enslaved women engaging in the craft during periods when other plantation labor was less demanding or in the spaces beyond direct planter oversight.

The evidence suggests that sweetgrass basket production became increasingly significant as a specialized craft within plantation labor systems over the course of the eighteenth century. As rice plantations expanded and as the volume of rice processing increased, the demand for specialized winnowing baskets grew correspondingly. Planters came to recognize that certain enslaved women possessed superior skill in basket production, and these women might be partly relieved from field labor to focus on craft production, though without receiving any compensation beyond their subsistence rations and the opportunity to retain portions of their production for their own use or sale.[97]

[97] [1][4][4]

The gendered division of labor underlying sweetgrass basket production warrants particular attention. While men typically undertook the labor of harvesting and preparing raw materials—cutting sweetgrass by hand in ways that preserved plant sustainability, gathering palmetto fronds and other materials from throughout the landscape—women controlled the technical craft of basket produc-

tion.[98] This gender distinction was not merely organizational but carried significant cultural meanings. The knowledge of how to properly prepare and handle materials, how to maintain consistent coil tension and size, how to integrate different materials to achieve desired aesthetic effects—all of this specialized knowledge was transmitted from mother to daughter, from experienced crafters to apprentices, creating lineages of expertise that stretched across generations.[99]

[98] [1][4][4]

[99] [4][4]

The tools required for sweetgrass basket production were remarkably simple and could be fashioned from readily-available materials. Scissors served to cut and shape materials, while "sewing bones"—essentially bone needles fashioned from filed teaspoon handles or from flattened nails or rib bones of cattle—provided the implements through which the coils were held together with palmetto fronds or other materials.[100] This technological minimalism was not accidental: the inability of planters to monopolize the necessary tools meant that enslaved women could potentially continue producing baskets even without planter permission or support, generating economic resources through informal market exchange.

[100] [4][4]

The Emergence of Commercial Sweetgrass Basketry

The transition from sweetgrass baskets produced primarily for plantation use into baskets created for commercial sale and exchange appears to have accelerated during the nineteenth century, particularly following emancipation. The roadside basket stands that would come to characterize the landscape of Mount Pleasant and other coastal communities likely emerged gradually over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as freed African Americans established small businesses selling baskets to tourists, local consumers, and traders.[101] The Sweetgrass Basket Makers Highway along Route 17 in Mount Pleasant, which by the late twentieth century had become an iconic location for basket sales, represents the culmination of this gradual transition from utilitarian craft produced within plantation labor systems to commercial commodity produced and sold by independent African American artisans.

[101] [1][15]

The process of commercialization did not eliminate the fundamental technical and cultural characteristics of sweetgrass basketry but rather created new contexts within which these traditions could be practiced and elaborated. Women who had learned basket production from their mothers and grandmothers during slavery could continue practicing this craft after emancipation, but now with the possibility of retaining all profits from their sales rather than having portions of their production confiscated by planters.[102] The emergence of basket production as a significant source of income allowed

[102] [4][15][4]

many Gullah Geechee families to maintain economic independence and cultural autonomy, particularly during periods when employment opportunities for African Americans were severely restricted by racism and discrimination.

The evolution of sweetgrass basket design and decoration over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals ongoing innovation and response to changing market conditions and aesthetic preferences. While earlier plantation-era baskets appear to have been designed primarily for functional utility—though always executed with considerable skill and aesthetic attention—later commercial baskets increasingly emphasized decorative elements and visual appeal to consumers who valued the baskets as cultural artifacts and aesthetic objects rather than simply as practical containers.[103] The integration of longleaf pine needles and bulrush with sweetgrass created visual variation in color and texture, with the natural yellowed-green of sweetgrass contrasted with the reddish-brown and black of other materials to create pleasing patterns and designs.[104]

[103] [1][4][15][4]

[104] [4][4]

Roadside Commerce and Cultural Representation

The roadside basket stands of Mount Pleasant and other Lowcountry communities emerged as distinctive cultural landscapes where Gullah Geechee basket makers and their communities could present their traditions to tourists, passing travelers, and local consumers. These stands, which represent what might be termed temporary architecture—structures built to house and display baskets, often constructed with materials similar to those of the baskets themselves and subject to periodic renovation and rebuilding—function simultaneously as commercial enterprises, cultural spaces, and assertions of African American presence and value in communities undergoing rapid transformation.[105]

[105] [15]

The first documented basket stands appear in Mount Pleasant in the 1930s, representing an entrepreneurial response to growing interest in coastal tourism and to the mobility of travelers using the newly-improved highway infrastructure.[106] Over subsequent decades, the stands evolved, with changes in construction materials, design, signage practices, and setback distances reflecting broader patterns of road widening, commercial development, and the professionalization of roadside commerce.[107] A thesis by Megan Adornetto examining the evolution of these stands from 1930 through 2024 demonstrates how careful study of temporary architecture can reveal historical processes of cultural adaptation and community persistence.[108]

[106] [15]

[107] [15]

[108] [15]

The roadside basket stands occupy a particular cultural posi-

tion, serving simultaneously as spaces of cultural pride and sites of commodification and potential cultural appropriation. For Gullah Geechee communities, the stands represent one of the few contexts in which their distinct cultural traditions are widely recognized and valued by outsiders, generating income and maintaining visibility of African American cultural creativity and technical skill. Yet the transformation of living traditions into heritage commodities creates complex dynamics, with baskets increasingly produced for consumption by tourists rather than for use or exchange within African American communities, potentially transforming the cultural meanings and technical practices associated with their production.[109] [109] [1][15]

The Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Pavilion at Memorial Waterfront Park in Mount Pleasant, dedicated to hosting live basket weaving demonstrations and cultural programming, represents a more recent institutional response to concerns about the commercialization and potential loss of sweetgrass basket traditions. By creating spaces where basket makers can demonstrate their techniques, tell stories of their families' histories, and connect with both tourists and community members in contexts that emphasize cultural meaning and historical significance rather than simply facilitating commercial transactions, the pavilion attempts to assert control over how these traditions are represented and understood.[110] [110] [1]

Basket Making as Knowledge and Practice in Gullah Geechee Communities

The persistence of sweetgrass basket production across more than three centuries—from the plantation contexts of the eighteenth century through the contemporary period—reflects the deep significance of this practice within Gullah Geechee culture and community identity. Carol Lee Howard, a contemporary basket maker born in 1958 in Mount Pleasant, exemplifies the transmission of this knowledge across generations.[111] Howard grew up in a family where sweetgrass baskets were a family tradition spanning generations, with her mother, grandmother, aunts and siblings all learning to make baskets.[112] As a young person, she was initially reluctant to engage in what might have seemed like an outdated or burdensome practice, until her sister Lillie challenged her to make baskets in the early 1980s.[113] This challenge reconnected Howard to her family's heritage, and she subsequently became serious about basket production in the early to mid-1990s, selling through fairs and local venues and eventually making baskets her primary source of economic activity.[114] [111] [4][4] [112] [4][4] [113] [4][4] [114] [4][4]

Howard's trajectory embodies both continuity and change in sweetgrass basket production. The fact that multiple women in her

family possessed the knowledge and skill to produce baskets reflects the stability of these traditions across generations. Yet the fact that Howard had to be convinced to engage in basket production, and that the ultimate catalyst for her serious involvement came through a familial challenge rather than through economic necessity, suggests how the meanings and contexts of basket production have shifted even as the technical practices have remained relatively stable. For Howard and many other contemporary basket makers, the practice has become increasingly a matter of cultural preservation and heritage maintenance rather than primarily a survival strategy or economic necessity.

The meanings embedded in sweetgrass basketry extend far beyond economic value. In Gullah Geechee communities, basket production, exchange, and display serve crucial functions in the maintenance of cultural identity, the transmission of knowledge across generations, and the assertion of community pride and cultural dignity in contexts of ongoing racial marginalization. The specific knowledge regarding plant collection and preparation, the aesthetic principles guiding color and pattern integration, and the physical rhythms and sensations associated with coiling and stitching for hours at a time—all of these dimensions of basket production participate in what might be termed an embodied cultural practice through which African American identity and historical memory are literally inscribed in material form.

Material Culture and the Formation of Gullah Geechee Identity, 1760–Present

Creolization and the Formation of Gullah Geechee Culture

The processes through which the Gullah Geechee people developed a distinctive creolized culture extending far beyond sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction must be understood as occurring within the specific contexts of the Carolina Lowcountry, where particular demographic, ecological, and political conditions allowed for the emergence of cultural practices and identities that drew upon African, European, and Indigenous precedents while creating something genuinely new. The term "creolization," which originated within linguistic study to describe the emergence of creole languages from contact situations involving populations speaking different languages, has increasingly been employed by historians and anthropologists to describe broader cultural processes through which people of mixed origins create new cultural forms under conditions of displacement, social disruption, and cultural encounter.[115]

[115] [35][37]

The Gullah language itself represents the most visible manifestation of this creolization process. Created as a means of communication among enslaved people drawn from diverse African ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and English-speaking colonists, Gullah incorporated vocabulary and grammatical structures from multiple African languages—particularly Kikongo and other Bantu languages reflecting the centrality of Angolan captives in the Lowcountry slave trade—combined with English words and syntax reinterpreted through African linguistic patterns.[116] Significantly, Gullah constitutes the only English-based creole language to survive into the present in North America, a linguistic uniqueness that reflects both the numerical dominance of enslaved people in the Lowcountry and the relative geographic isolation of Gullah Geechee communities that allowed the language to persist even as other creoles were absorbed into standard English dialects elsewhere in the colonial world.[117]

[116] [37]

[117] [37]

Yet the creolization process extended far beyond language into

the material, spiritual, and social dimensions of Lowcountry culture. The task system of labor organization, which allowed enslaved people to complete assigned work and then pursue other activities including subsistence cultivation, craft production, and religious observance, created spaces for the elaboration of African-influenced cultural practices within plantation landscapes.[118] Religious traditions combining African spiritual practices with Christian elements, particularly African Methodist Episcopal churches that became the dominant religious institutions in African American Lowcountry communities, transmitted knowledge and maintained community bonds.[119] Foodways developed through the integration of African staples and cooking techniques with New World ingredients and European influences, creating distinctive Gullah cuisines centered on rice and seafood that continue to characterize the region.[120]

[118] [22][25][37]

[119] [37]

[120] [25][37]

Within this broader creolization process, sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction functioned as interconnected technologies through which Gullah Geechee people expressed and maintained their distinctive cultural identity while navigating the constraints of slavery and, subsequently, the racial oppression of the post-emancipation period. Both practices carried within them multiple meanings: they served practical functions necessary for survival and economic activity, they transmitted technical knowledge and cultural values across generations, and they asserted claims to aesthetic sensibility and cultural sophistication that challenged the racist dehumanization that constituted slavery's ideological foundation.

Material Forms as Historical Memory and Cultural Knowledge

The physical properties of sweetgrass baskets and tabby structures allowed them to function as durable bearers of cultural meaning and historical memory. A sweetgrass basket, carefully produced through techniques learned from family members and practiced over months or years, became a material expression of family heritage and cultural continuity. The basket's specific design, the particular arrangement of colors and patterns, the quality of the craftsmanship—all communicated information about the basket maker's skill, her family's history, and the cultural traditions from which she drew.[121]

[121] [1][4]

Similarly, a tabby structure, built through the labor of enslaved people and continuing to stand centuries after its original construction, became a material archive of historical memory. The fingerprints occasionally visible in the sundried brick that sometimes formed part of tabby construction provide tangible evidence of the specific hands and individuals who participated in building particular structures—a form of material authentication that contemporary scholars and

community members have begun systematically documenting and honoring.[122] The layers of tabby flooring visible in archaeological excavations of ruined structures, with eight or nine superimposed layers indicating repeated replacement and reconstruction over time, reveal the continuous occupation and adaptation of these structures by enslaved and later freed people who physically reshaped their material environment through generations of use and modification.

[122] [39][40]

The durability of both sweetgrass baskets and tabby structures meant that they could serve as links connecting contemporary communities to their historical past. Baskets produced a century or more ago, if carefully preserved, can be examined and appreciated by contemporary makers and community members, providing tangible evidence of the skill and knowledge of ancestors. Tabby structures, when carefully excavated and studied, yield artifacts and archaeological contexts that document the material circumstances of enslaved life and the technical knowledge embedded in construction processes. In these ways, material culture serves as what might be termed an "embodied archive"—a form of historical knowledge stored not in written documents but in the physical properties and technical practices of objects and structures themselves.

Heritage Preservation and the Politics of Cultural Representation

In the contemporary period, sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction have increasingly become subjects of formal heritage preservation initiatives, museum collection activities, and academic scholarship. This formal recognition represents a significant shift from the historical context in which these practices were often ignored, disparaged, or appropriated by outsiders without acknowledgment or compensation to the communities that created them. Yet the processes through which these traditions have been recognized and preserved also introduce new complexities and challenges, as living cultural practices become stabilized, represented, and sometimes commodified through heritage institutions.

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, established by Congress in 2006 and managed by the National Park Service, encompasses 79 barrier islands and communities stretching from North Carolina to Florida, creating a formal institutional space within which Gullah Geechee cultural traditions are recognized and preserved.[123] The Corridor's work has included support for heritage preservation projects, community education initiatives, and efforts to document and recognize the specific histories of Gullah Geechee communities and the cultural traditions they maintain.[124] The Gullah Geechee Heritage Preservation Project, a multi-jurisdictional collab-

[123] [29][32]

[124] [29][32]

oration in Charleston that has received funding from the National Park Service, has worked to support documentation and preservation of historic Gullah Geechee sites and cultural practices, including through training programs that equip Gullah Geechee communities with preservation skills and resources.[125]

[125] [32]

These institutional preservation efforts have created new opportunities for formal recognition of Gullah Geechee cultural achievement and for ensuring that younger generations receive education regarding their cultural heritage. Yet the translation of living cultural practices into heritage categories and the production of sweetgrass baskets increasingly for heritage consumption rather than for practical use or community exchange creates new tensions. The question of who controls the representation and interpretation of these traditions—whether heritage institutions, academic scholars, community members themselves, or some combination—remains contested, with ongoing negotiations regarding authenticity, ownership, and cultural authority.

The Barnwell Tabby restoration project on Hilton Head Island, undertaken by the current owner Thomas Barnwell Jr. with support from conservation specialists and archaeologists, exemplifies both the possibilities and complications of heritage preservation work.[126] The careful reconstruction of the structure using historically appropriate materials and techniques, combined with systematic archaeological investigation that has yielded approximately 400 artifacts providing evidence of the lives of the structure's inhabitants, represents an admirable commitment to preserving a significant piece of material heritage. Yet the fact that this preservation work was initiated by a private landowner and remains under private control, even while the site functions as an educational and cultural resource, reveals how the politics of heritage preservation are imbricated within property relations and questions of access and community control.

[126] [2]

Sweetgrass and Tabby in the Contemporary Lowcountry

In the contemporary Lowcountry, sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction continue to function as distinctive markers of Gullah Geechee cultural identity and historical significance, even as the contexts and meanings of these practices have been substantially transformed. Sweetgrass basket production continues, though the number of active basket makers has declined due to both environmental pressures—the scarcity of sweetgrass in some locations due to coastal development and environmental change—and the difficulty of sustaining livelihoods through craft production in contemporary market economies.[127] Yet the persistence of the tradition, maintained

[127] [1][15]

particularly through the commitment of women who have learned these skills from their families and communities, testifies to the cultural significance that basket making retains for Gullah Geechee communities.

The Sweetgrass Festival held annually in Mount Pleasant brings together basket makers, artists, musicians, and food vendors to celebrate Gullah Geechee heritage and to provide opportunities for tourists and community members to encounter these cultural traditions in contexts that emphasize their cultural meaning and historical significance.[128] The Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Pavilion at Memorial Waterfront Park provides a dedicated space for basket makers to demonstrate their work, share their knowledge, and interact directly with visitors, creating opportunities for the educational transmission of cultural knowledge even within the framework of heritage tourism.[129]

[128] [1]

[129] [1]

Tabby structures, for their part, have become increasingly recognized as significant components of the architectural heritage of the Lowcountry. Preservation efforts have intensified, with conservators and archaeologists working to stabilize surviving structures, understand their historical contexts, and communicate their significance to contemporary audiences. The McIntosh Sugarhouse on the Georgia coast, constructed of tabby and preserved as an example of tabby industrial architecture, has become a site of heritage tourism and academic study. The slave cabins and other buildings at Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island in Florida, constructed of tabby and now preserved as part of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, function as educational sites where visitors can encounter the physical reality of enslaved people's material circumstances and understand the technical knowledge embedded in these structures.[130]

[130] [40]

Yet these preservation efforts sometimes risk divorcing tabby structures from their original contexts and meanings, presenting them as aesthetic or technical objects to be admired rather than as testimonies to slavery and to the creative resistance of those who built them. Similarly, sweetgrass baskets displayed in museum contexts or marketed as heritage commodities may be de-contextualized from the lived practices of basket makers and from the ongoing cultural significance of these objects within African American communities. The challenge of contemporary heritage work lies in finding ways to honor and preserve these material traditions while simultaneously maintaining connection to their meanings for the communities from which they emerge and continuing to support the living practitioners who maintain these knowledge systems.

Conclusion: The Significance of Sweetgrass and Tabby in American History

Synthesis: Creolization as Historical Process and Interpretive Framework

The histories of sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction in the Carolina Lowcountry reveal in concentrated form a fundamental reality regarding American colonial and plantation society: that the material infrastructure through which European colonialism was established and reproduced depended at every level upon the knowledge, skill, and labor of African people who arrived as captives yet maintained agency, transmitted cultural traditions, and created enduring material expressions of their humanity and identity. These two material technologies—one addressing fundamental human needs for shelter, the other for containers and artistic expression—emerged through processes of creolization in which African, European, and Indigenous knowledge systems interacted and transformed one another, creating genuinely novel forms that belonged fully to none of their constituent traditions yet drew upon all of them.

The concept of creolization, properly understood, provides a framework through which to analyze not merely linguistic innovations but technological, architectural, and cultural practices more broadly as processes in which displacement, encounter, and cultural contact generate creative synthesis rather than simple dominance or resistance. Creolization is neither progress nor loss but rather a particular mode through which human communities respond to the radical disruptions of forced migration, slavery, and colonialism. The sweetgrass basket and the tabby structure, examined with attention to their multiple genealogies and the specific contexts of their emergence, reveal that creolization operates through material as well as linguistic and social dimensions of culture.

The Archival Authority of Material Objects

This monograph has argued that material objects and structures constitute a form of historical archive distinct from but complementary to written documents. A sweetgrass basket preserves within its physical form evidence of the materials available in particular places and times, the technical knowledge of its maker, the aesthetic principles guiding her work, and the market conditions that shaped its production and sale. A tabby structure embodies engineering knowledge, labor processes, and the material circumstances of particular historical moments in ways that written records alone cannot adequately capture. The challenge facing historical scholarship lies in developing methods through which to read these material archives as rigorously as we read documents, recognizing that material forms constitute evidence while avoiding the temptation to extract meaning from objects without attending to their historical contexts and the specific communities from which they emerged.

The fingerprints occasionally visible in colonial brick, the specific composition of tabby discovered through thin-section analysis, the wear patterns on a basket revealing the hands of many users and makers across generations—these material details offer evidence of individual human beings whose names and life histories may be forever lost to historical record, yet whose creativity and labor have left tangible marks upon the world. This mode of recovering and honoring the contributions of enslaved and marginalized people through material evidence represents an important dimension of contemporary historical practice, one that transcends the limitations of documentary evidence and creates possibilities for recognizing and celebrating human agency in contexts where more traditional sources systematically denied that agency.

Implications for Understanding American History

The study of sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction in the Carolina Lowcountry carries implications extending far beyond the specific region or these particular material technologies. It suggests that the emergence of distinctive American cultural forms—and indeed, American society itself—cannot be adequately understood through narratives that treat European colonialism as a simple transplantation of Old World institutions into a New World context, nor through narratives that treat African Americans primarily as passive victims of oppression. Rather, American society emerged through complex, contested processes of cultural encounter and synthesis in which people of African descent, despite the crushing constraints of slavery and

racism, exercised agency, maintained cultural traditions, and transformed their circumstances in ways that continue to shape American culture into the present day.

The prominence of material technologies created by enslaved people and their descendants in the distinctive regional culture of the Lowcountry reveals how deeply African American agency and creativity have been embedded in the physical foundations of American society. The rice plantations that generated extraordinary wealth for American colonists and subsequently for the new American nation were built through knowledge systems and labor processes that drew fundamentally upon African expertise and innovation. The buildings that housed planters and enslaved people alike were constructed through material technologies that synthesized African, European, and Indigenous knowledge. The aesthetic traditions and craft practices that continue to characterize the Lowcountry embody centuries of creolized cultural development.

Recognizing this reality complicates triumphalist narratives regarding American colonial and national development, requiring acknowledgment that American prosperity and cultural achievement have been fundamentally built upon slavery and the labor and creativity of enslaved and marginalized people. Yet it simultaneously offers grounds for recognizing the dignity, intelligence, and cultural sophistication of those people, refusing the complete historical erasure that slavery attempted to impose. The basket maker producing exquisite work through techniques learned from her mother and grandmother, the enslaved carpenter constructing tabby structures of considerable sophistication despite being denied recognition for his labor and skill—these figures demand to be understood not merely as victims but as historical agents whose contributions, though frequently unacknowledged and often involuntary, constituted essential dimensions of American history.

Future Directions: Research and Community Engagement

The study of creolized material cultures in the Americas remains a field with enormous potential for future development. While scholarship on sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction has advanced considerably in recent decades, fundamental questions remain regarding the specific technological transfers and innovations through which these forms emerged, the detailed histories of particular practices within particular communities, and the meanings these materials continue to carry for contemporary practitioners and communities. Further archaeological investigation of plantation sites, particularly with attention to the material evidence of enslaved peo-

ple's lives and technical practices, promises to yield new evidence regarding the agency and creativity of those who lived and worked in these contexts.

Community-engaged research models that position academic scholars as supporters of community-defined research agendas rather than as primary authorities regarding the interpretation of cultural traditions offer particular promise for future scholarship in this domain. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, the Slave Dwelling Project, and other community-based initiatives have demonstrated the potential for scholarship that respects the authority of communities themselves regarding their history and culture while bringing scholarly expertise to bear on questions defined by community members themselves. These models suggest possibilities for future research that would prioritize the perspectives, knowledge, and authority of Gullah Geechee people and other African American communities regarding their own cultural histories.

Educational initiatives, both within academic contexts and within communities themselves, remain crucial for ensuring that the histories and significance of these material traditions are adequately recognized and understood. Curriculum development initiatives that incorporate serious study of African American material culture, including sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction, into history and social studies education promise to shift how successive generations of Americans understand their nation's past. Community-based education programs, including the workshops and training series sponsored by the Gullah Geechee Heritage Preservation Project, provide opportunities for young people to learn these skills and to connect with the cultural traditions and historical knowledge embedded in their practice.

Final Reflections: Material Culture and Historical Memory

The sweetgrass baskets that line roadside stands along Route 17 in Mount Pleasant, the tabby structures that still stand in various stages of preservation and decay throughout the Lowcountry, the Gullah language that continues to be spoken in communities from North Carolina to Florida, all constitute material and immaterial evidence of the creative persistence of African American communities in maintaining cultural identity and meaning-making practices despite the systematic violence and erasure imposed by slavery and racism. These material forms carry within them not merely historical memory but also present-day assertions of cultural pride and community value that resist the dehumanization upon which American slavery was founded.

In an era in which the destruction of cultural heritage occurs at accelerating rates due to coastal erosion, urban development, and the transformation of traditional economic activities, the preservation of sweetgrass basketry and tabby construction becomes increasingly urgent. Yet preservation must be understood not simply as the stabilization of objects in museum contexts or the documentation of information for historical archives. Rather, living preservation requires supporting the continuation of these practices by contemporary practitioners, ensuring that basket makers can continue their work and earn livelihoods through their craft, and that enslaved people's knowledge regarding building technologies continues to be recognized and honored through the maintenance and interpretation of surviving structures.

The study of these material cultures ultimately speaks to fundamental questions regarding historical agency, cultural creativity, and the possibilities for human dignity and self-determination within systems of profound oppression. The fact that enslaved people created objects of beauty and sophistication, that they maintained knowledge systems and cultural practices across the violent ruptures of forced migration and enslavement, that their material innovations continue to shape and define particular places and communities—all of this testifies to a historical reality that no amount of racist ideology or systematic dehumanization could fully erase. In honoring these material traditions and the communities that created and continue to create them, we honor the fundamental human capacity for meaning-making and self-expression that slavery attempted to deny and that continues to constitute the basis of our shared humanity and common future.

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This monograph represents an effort to honor the intelligence, creativity, and cultural dignity of the Gullah Geechee people and all those African Americans whose knowledge and labor shaped the material and cultural landscape of the Carolina Lowcountry. The work of contemporary basket makers, preservationists, archaeologists, and community historians who continue to recognize and celebrate these traditions makes scholarship such as this possible and necessary.

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