March 2009 Newsletter

They Can Run the Boat, But Not Ride: Slavery, Segregation and Ferries

By Edward Salo*

Race is a dominant theme in South Carolina history. African Americans played a dual role in the history of South Carolina ferries. On one hand, they operated the ferries, first as slaves and later as freedmen; on the other hand, laws restricted their use of the ferries. Operating ferries was a skilled position that brought esteem; yet, ferries also were a place where slaves could escape. During Jim Crow, African Americans continued to work on ferries, but when they rode as passengers, they did so in separate sections of the boats. Segregation however did not dissuade African Americans from using ferries to connect their worlds to wider audiences. In the Progressive era, for example, modern ferries opened travel to the Sea Islands, integrating the largely isolated Gullah culture into the larger state.

Often overlooked by historians and archaeologists, ferries played an important part in the transportation network that developed during the colonial period, and continued to operate until the twentieth century. Underwater archaeologist Christer Westerdahl argues that ferries and inland road networks were important because they were part of a larger maritime cultural landscape that includes ports, harbors, wharfs, and other structures. Ferries were "the first *transit point* at which river-based cultural area [met] the outer world" (Westerdahl 1992: 6). Ferries in South Carolina, for instance, were the local connection to the larger Atlantic world network within which South Carolina operated and developed.

The Importance of Ferries in South Carolina's History

Ferries contributed significantly to multiple themes of South Carolina's history. However, for an unexplained reason, many historical studies of America's maritime heritage ignore the role of ferries. Because of the very nature of South Carolina Lowcountry's geography,

it was vital, from the start of the colony, to have a means to cross the many rivers that flow from the interior to the Atlantic Ocean.

Because of the importance of agriculture to the colony, the initial settlement in South Carolina focused on the coastal plain and specifically around the Charleston area. By the early 1700s, to meet the needs of the growing population, expansion of South Carolina colonial settlement from south of Charleston toward Port Royal and Beaufort resulted in the establishment of several unregulated, private ferries along the rivers of the Lowcountry. In the South Carolina backcountry, on the other hand, river fords, not ferries, predominated as river crossings (Weir 1997:158). To manage the developing transportation infrastructure, the South Carolina Colonial Assembly in 1703 chartered the first regulated ferry in South Carolina on the Santee River (McCord 1841:2-3).

Early Regulation of Slaves and Ferry Transportation

Even before the founding of South Carolina, British colonists in Bermuda already legislated the movement of enslaved laborers on colonial ferries. The Bermuda precedents served as models for South Carolina's legislation to control the use of ferries by slaves. In 1623, lawmakers in Bermuda approved rules that restricted "boyes [sic] and negroes" from traveling on the ferry that connected the main island with St. George's Island without written permission from their masters (Bernhard 1988:554). Later in the mid-1700s, the colonies of Virginia and Rhode Island passed similar laws that forbade the carrying of slaves on ferries without the owners' permission (Wiecek 1977: 271). White officials and slave owners understood that ferries offered an avenue for unsupervised African mobility which could easily encourage runaways or even aid possible slave uprisings.

In 1696, the Lords Proprietors approved a new slave code (Jennings 2006:873). The 1696 law, partially based on existing laws in the West Indies, threatened any slave who "shall take away or let loose any canoe or boat" with thirty-nine lashes and loss of an ear for repeat offenses (Harris 2002:53).

African Slave Ferryman

Enslaved African Americans could not travel on ferries without permission, but they could work as ferrymen. Slaves in fact operated and managed most Lowcountry ferries and they integrated their own experiences and traditions to make ferries work (Starobin 1968:31).

While the number of Native Americans in the Carolina Lowcountry declined in the late 1600s, they already had taught generations of whites and blacks about their knowledge of the geography of the area. Historian Peter Wood (1974:114-115, 117) mentions that by 1701 African slaves operated various forms of boats along the Savannah River to transport skins from the Native American tribes up the river to the trading posts in Savannah. One can assume that the slaves and the Native Americans exchanged knowledge of trade routes and knowledge of how to navigate the rivers of the region. Also, the Africans used their boat building expertise to adapt the Colonial boats for the needs of trade and travel. Slaves provided to be good pilots for boats that carried goods from the plantations to the markets of Charleston, Beaufort, and Georgetown. Again the knowledge of the rivers and Native American paths would have been necessary for the Africans to accomplish their missions of transporting goods from plantations markets places. Also, the Africans continued to adapt the river flats and other plantation watercraft to reflect their maritime traditions (Vlach 1990:97-107).

With the rise of cash crops in the Lowcountry, the planters relied more and more on the Africans both as skilled and unskilled labor, including in the maritime realm. For example, during the 1720s and 1730s many ethnic Congo-Angolans slaves were members of boat crews. Because they had already learned boating skills from their home country, and translated those skills to the rivers of the Lowcountry. Historian Lynn Harris (2002:103) argues that the role of a skilled boatman was a "superior one amongst the slave community and in the eyes of the planter" compared to other skilled and unskilled positions at the plantation.

Peter Woods (1974:230) describes hundreds of African boatmen, of various skilled levels, working the waterways of the colony. This could include unskilled oarsmen, to skilled navigators and captains. Slaves even operated the boats that ferried people from ships in Charleston harbor to the port.

The archival record also indicates that from the earliest ferry charters, enslaved laborers staffed several Lowcountry ferries. In 1725, the Pon Pon Ferry charter required that the commissioners find "two able servants or slaves" to operate the ferry 24 hours a day (McCord

1841:61). Several other ferry charters until approximately 1733 also stated that the owner could operate the ferry with slaves or servants.

To use slaves as ferrymen was a fairly standard practice in the other British American colonies, and even some of the British island colonies. For example, the British used slaves on ferries that cross the "wide estuaries" of their Caribbean colonies. Also, records indicate that a 22-year old mulatto slave, named York, stated that he worked at the Burwell's Ferry in Virginia for several years before 1769 (Higman, 1984:175; Walsh, 2001:48). Among the large slave owners in Philadelphia, was a ferry owner who operated ferries between Philadelphia and Burlington, New Jersey. It appears from the historical record that the ferryman used his slaves to operate the ferries (Nash 1973:250).

Allowing enslaved African Americans to operate the ferries represented a level of freedom for those laborers. African slaves that worked at the ferries, for example, were exempted from working on road projects (McCord 1841:515). If there was no direct overseer present, the slaves would be responsible for collecting the ferriage and making sure that the ferry boat and other equipment was in working shape. Since ferries operated twenty-four hours a day, the slaves would most likely live at the ferry site, away from the larger slave community on the main plantation. This added freedom might also include a garden space at the ferry. In addition to the tangible aspects of freedom, the slave ferrymen also gained direct contact with travelers from outside their normal social realm. They might meet famous politicians, religious leaders, or just ordinary citizens from other colonies who used the ferry. Like slaves who worked in town as skilled artisans, slaves that operated ferries gained opportunities that most field slaves lacked. While this freedom was refreshing, events outside Charleston would soon alter the colony's view of the growing African population.

Controlling the Slave Patronage of Ferries

In September 1739, a slave revolt known as the Stono Rebellion disrupted the Lowcountry. Approximately twenty enslaved African Americans, owned by Andrew Percival, gathered at Hutchinson's store where they looted the store and killed the storekeepers. Equipped with guns, the slaves moved south (Wood 1974:312-315). African Americans from nearby plantations joined them and the rebellion reached approximately 100 slaves. However, the South Carolina militia quickly attacked the slaves and defeated them. The rebellion was the largest

slave revolt to occur anywhere on the mainland during the Colonial period, and given its magnitude, the threat of future insurrection lingered in the region throughout the colonial period (Weir 1997:193-194).

Faced with possible revolt by their labor force, whites reacted in unison and within months, in 1740, the Commons House of Assembly passed the "Bill for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other Slaves in this Province" (also known as the Negro Act), which instituted more restrictive control on slaves (Jennings 2006:873). Ferry charters, for instance, contained the new requirement for "two able and sufficient person . . . with one white man, who shall constantly attend the said ferry" (McCord 1841:114-115). The new charters forbade slaves to operate ferries without white supervision. The expertise and labor of the African slaves could be utilized; however, whites had to be physically present, ensuring that slaves stayed in their place and could not use the ferry for their own means.

Additionally, the Commons House of Assembly gave ferrymen more authority to control the movement of Africans. In 1740, it revised an existing law to now require that:

> that at every Ferry in this Province a free white Man shall be
> employed to attend it. And that every such free white man shall be
> impowered to examine all suspected Persons who shall attempt to
> cross such Ferry; and if he shall see Cause, to command Persons to
> his Aid and Assistance in order to send any such suspected Person
> to the next Justice of the peace to be dealt with according to Law
> (Easterby 1952:456-466).

And if a ferry operator did carry over any servants without passes or slaves without tickets, or any person charged with or convicted of any criminal offense, they were subject to a penalty (Easterby 1952:466).

These new laws, and paranoia of a race-based rebellion, resulted in ferry crossings becoming, as historian George C. Rogers Jr., suggested, little more than checkpoints where white governmental officials could apprehend runaway slaves, indentured servants or deserting seamen. Desertion in the eyes of some officials was just as big a problem as the issue of controlling enslaved laborers. To counter these problems, the Commons House of Assembly ordered that Charleston area ferry operators could not carry a person unless:

> he has a certificate from a justice of the peace it shall so happen,
> that any person shall come to the ferry, in order to go to the
> northward, not having any certificate, not being personally known
> to the said ferryman as fore said, that the said ferryman shall

apprehend all such person, and carry them before the next justice
of the peace (Rogers 1970:44).

If challenged, the justice of the peace would determine if the person was free or in some form of
bondage.

These new laws and regulations were not just a draconian response to the threats of slave
rebellion. They also recognized how unregulated ferries offered African Americans, and other
subjugated groups, too much mobility and too much of an opportunity to escape. For example,
Alexander Moon advertised in the *South Carolina Gazette* that a slave ran away from him at the
Combahee Ferry, and he offered a 20 pound reward for the return of the slave (*South Carolina
Gazette*, 1741). To control the desertion of sailors to the northern colonies, Commons House of
Assembly passed a 1743 bill that established penalties for ferrymen transporting sailors who
lacked the Certificate of Discharge (Easterby 1954:229).

Since ferries were public space, used by many, they also were ideal spaces to send
political messages to the entire population regarding the retribution for escaped slaves. In 1732,
before the Stono Rebellion, local officials allowed Charlie Jones, who had killed a runway slave
who allegedly robbed him, to cut the slave's head off, impale him on a pole, and place it at the
crossroad near Ashley Ferry (Meaders 1975:295). The runaway slave was treated like the
captured pirates, whose heads the leaders of Charleston placed at the Battery as warning to other
pirates of the price of their crimes.

Using fear and random checks, the Assembly through its 1740s laws hoped to stop slaves
from using ferries as a means of escape. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, South
Carolina officials wanted tougher laws to control slave mobility. In 1801, the General Assembly
passed legislation forbidding the transportation of slaves on ferries without written permission of
the owner. That same year, the General Assembly required all ferry keepers to swear an oath: "to
prevent negro slaves and other persons of colour [sic] from being brought into or entering this
State" (Gilmore 1970:48; McCord 1841:445, 515). These laws further isolated the slave
community from travel and outside interaction, and increasingly made ferries a "white-only"
space.

Many other slave states passed laws to control enslaved laborers' travel along ferries. In
1831, the Kentucky State Assembly forbid ferry operators along the Ohio River from
transporting slaves without written consent by their owners. To ensure the operators followed the

law, they had to post a $3,000 bond, and pay a $200 fine for every violation (McDougle 1918:263). In Mississippi, the General Assembly outlawed slaves from crossing ferries and toll bridges without permission of their owners. In 1839, Virginia passed a special penalty against ferryman who allowed slaves to cross the rivers that bordered the state (Farnam and Day 2000:187). All of these laws, like South Carolina's statutes wanted to exert greater control on slave travel as part of a legal system that curtailed African American mobility at every possible avenue.

Jim Crow and the Ferries

The Civil War and Reconstruction era opened a brief window of opportunity for African Americans to use South Carolina's ferries at some basic level of equality with whites. After the election of Wade Hampton, III, as "Redemption" governor in 1876, South Carolina soon took serious steps towards a formally segregated state. Politicians from the upstate, including Martin Gary, advocated the Mississippi Plan of disfranchisement of African Americans by extralegal means. By 1890, the election of Benjamin Tillman governor ended any racial moderation in the state. The turn of century ushered in many laws and ordnances to segregate the races. For example, in 1903, Columbia ordered the streetcars segregated (Sellers 2006:854-856). As part of the growing Jim Crow society in South Carolina, the General Assembly passed laws to establish separate facilities on ferries. In February 1904, the General Assembly changed Section 2158 of the Code of Laws of South Carolina to require steam ferries to have segregated facilities:

> All railroads and steam ferries, and railroad companies engaged in
> this State as common carriers of passengers for the accommodation
> of white and colored passengers: Provided, Equal accommodations
> shall be supplied to all persons, without distinction of race, color or
> previous condition, in such coaches or cabins (South Carolina
> General Assembly 1904:488-489).

Political scientist Franklin Johnson (1918:19) argues that this segregation requirement was for all boats carrying passengers in the state, not just steam ferries. What happened in South Carolina could be found throughout the south. For example, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina all passed similar laws to separate the races on ferries. The segregation of ferries would remain standard in South Carolina until 1960s, when South Carolina finally ended its law-enforced racial separation.

Ferries and the Tenant Farming System

Although the state was undergoing a transportation revolution after Civil War, ferries still were important to the economic development of the coastal areas of the state. They were key transportation cogs in the larger landscape of the tenant faming that defined the Lowcountry for decades after the Civil War (Aiken 2003). Because of the tenant farm system, African American men often traveled extensively within the region to provide income for their families. Then at the end of the century, men traveled from home to participate in the booming mining and production of phosphate fertilizers. By the turn of the century, many other laborers took jobs with Charleston-based commercial lumber operations exploiting the area's rich abundance of pine forest. The cut timber was traditionally transported by water; therefore, the camps typically were set up close to navigable waterways. One such camp appears to be represented at archaeological sites 38CH1406 and 38CH1407 in Charleston County. Ferry systems provided access to these waterways and transportation to employment opportunities (Poplin et al. 2006:7).

Even into the 1930s, ferries still remained an important means of transport for African American workers. For example, in Port Royal, Beaufort County, many African Americans worked in the local oyster canneries. To get from their neighborhoods to the plants, African American women either walked or rowed their own boats to the canneries. Additionally, other workers rode in ferry bateaux (Spirke and Amer 1999:57).

African American Operated Ferries

Owning and/or operating a ferry became a limited means of advancement for African Americans in the 1910s-1920s. The state highway department established ferries to connect the coastal islands, where high concentrations of African Americans had lived for decades, to mainland South Carolina. The coastal islands are the cultural center of the Gullah people. The new ferries allowed them to explore the larger white world. Sociologist Lee Brooks suggested that the connection of the islands resulted in the development of "freedom of movement [that was]…important in considering the various aspects of community health in particular and of community organization in general" (Brooks 1930:99). However, some islands remained isolated even into the late twentieth century (Conroy 2002).

The operation of ferries to the islands also provided economic opportunities for African Americans. In 1959, the Coosaw Island Improvement Association, an African American group,

started a ferry service between Coosaw Island and Beaufort. Subscriptions paid by Coosaw Islanders and Beaufort County funds funded the automobile ferry. A newspaper article described the ferry as "bringing a new era of progress and improvements in community life on the picturesque sea island" (*News and Courier*, 12 September 1959).

The operation of Coosaw Island Ferry illustrated the duality of ferry history for the African Americans in South Carolina. As stated above, African Americans operated the ferries, first as slaves and later as freedmen; however, laws restricted their use of the ferries. During Jim Crow, African Americans continued to work on ferries, but had to ride in separate sections of the boats. In spite of that, ferries in the Progressive era opened travel to the Sea Islands, integrating the previously isolated Gullah culture into the larger state. Then in the 1950s, African Americans developed ferries as a transportation tool means to bring social mobility to their communities.

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