Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry

On the eve of the Revolution, the Carolina lowcountry was the wealthiest and unhealthiest region in British North America. *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* argues that the two were intimately connected: both resulted largely from the dominance of rice cultivation on plantations using imported African slave labor. This development began in the coastal lands near Charleston, South Carolina, around the end of the seventeenth century. Rice plantations spread north to the Cape Fear region of North Carolina and south to Georgia and northeast Florida in the late colonial period. The book examines perceptions and realities of the lowcountry disease environment; how the lowcountry became notorious for its “tropical” fevers, notably malaria and yellow fever; how people combated, avoided, or perversely denied the suffering they caused; and how diseases and human responses to them influenced not only the lowcountry and the South, but the United States, even helping secure American independence.

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PETER MCCANDLESS

College of Charleston
For Alastair and Colin
Where wouldn’t they go for pepper! For a bag of pepper they would cut each other’s throats without hesitation, and would forswear their souls, of which they were so careful otherwise: the bizarre obstinacy of that desire made them defy death in a thousand shapes; the unknown seas, the loathsome and strange diseases; wounds, captivity, hunger, pestilence, and despair. It made them great! By heavens! It made them heroic; and it made them pathetic, too, in their craving for trade with the inflexible death levying its toll on young and old.

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900
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Preface

Here was a thin neck in the hourglass of the Afro-American past, a place where individual grains from all along the West African coast had been funneled together, only to be fanned out across the American landscape with the passage of time.

Peter Wood, *Black Majority*

*Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* examines the impact of disease in the region known as the South Atlantic lowcountry. The book focuses primarily on South Carolina and its metropolis, Charleston, from 1670 to 1860. Because this area was in many ways the seedbed for much of subsequent southern and American culture, the story told here has a much wider significance. In the mid-eighteenth century, the rice and indigo plantations that dominated the region spread north into the Cape Fear region of North Carolina and south to the coastal lands of Georgia. After 1763, they moved into northern Florida. In the late eighteenth century, the lowcountry plantation regime began to move into the Carolina backcountry, though cotton replaced rice as the most important crop. In the nineteenth century, lowcountry folk spread their plantations and diseases westward throughout much of the South. What a small number of settlers began in 1670, where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers come together to form the Atlantic Ocean (a local joke), had a huge influence on the history of the South and the United States. The Carolina lowcountry became the wealthiest region in late colonial North

1 Charleston was officially called “Charles Town” from 1670 until 1781, but for convenience and to avoid confusion, I have generally used “Charleston” throughout the book except in quotations. It should also be noted here that the name “Carolina” originally referred to both South and North Carolina. The two did not become fully separate colonies until the 1720s.

Preface

America. It also became the unhealthiest, and the book argues that the two were intimately connected. *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* examines how the lowcountry became such an unhealthy place; how people tried to cope with the suffering it caused; and how their actions, experiences, and responses affected a culture that enormously influenced the development of the South and the United States.

Writing this tale would have been impossible without the path-breaking work of many other historians. My indebtedness to them will become abundantly clear from the notes, but a few works related to this one should be mentioned here. In the 1960s, Joseph Waring produced two volumes on medicine in South Carolina between 1670 and 1900 that remain an essential starting point for anyone exploring the historical epidemiology of the state and region. This is also true of John Duffy’s *Epidemics in Colonial America*, written in the 1950s. Another old work, by St. Julien Ravenel Childs, *Malaria and Colonization in the Carolina Low Country, 1526–1696*, is a goldmine of information on the early history of that disease in the region. Albert Cowdrey’s more recent *This Land, This South* contains a seminal chapter on the relationship between the southern environment and southern diseases. Cowdrey stressed the mixing of European and African microbes and the friendliness of the southern climate and topography to diseases of tropical origins. Two books in particular helped inspire and inform the present volume: Peter Wood’s *Black Majority* and Peter Coclanis’s *Shadow of a Dream* – both remarkable for their path-breaking scholarship and engaging style. Other authors whose works proved invaluable to me along the way include Joyce Chaplin, Margaret Humphreys, Todd Savitt, William Dusinberre, Sharla Fett, Philip Morgan, Judith Carney, Daniel Littlefield, Max Edelson, and Elizabeth Fenn. A book published just after I completed the manuscript, but in time for me to incorporate some of its information and insights, is J. R. McNeill’s *Mosquito Empires*. It focuses on the relationship between war, yellow fever, and malaria in the Caribbean region and includes a chapter on the lowcountry. Prior to its appearance, I had benefited greatly from McNeill’s earlier articles on yellow fever.3 The present work builds on and complements but does not replicate any of these works.

It is not a history of medicine, but medical theories, practice, and personnel form an important part of the story. It is a history not of epidemics but of the impact of infectious diseases – especially those of tropical origin – on the region. It is not an environmental history, but the epidemiological reality described here cannot be fully understood without discussing its connection to both the natural environment and human interventions in it. It is not a study of the lowcountry economy, but discussion of its effects is essential to the book’s overall argument.

Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry is divided into two parts of seven chapters each. Part I, Talk about Suffering, looks at the disease environment and its human impact. It focuses on differing perceptions of the environment and tries to assess the reality by looking at the effects of disease and the experiences of individuals, ethnic and professional groups, residents and newcomers. Part II, Combating Pestilence, focuses on therapeutic, preventive, and restorative measures people used to reduce the impact of disease. Specific chapters deal with healers and the arts of healing, regular and irregular; religious and other forms of prophylactics including inoculation and vaccination for smallpox; quarantine and sanitary measures; and the migratory strategies elites used to avoid local fevers.

The evidence used for this study derives almost entirely from contemporary documents and accounts written by residents, travelers, and visitors. Inevitably, the book is somewhat skewed toward the experiences, actions, and ideas of white elites – planters, merchants, officials, and physicians – because they produced the bulk of the sources. The voices of African Americans – who were a majority of the population during much of the period covered by this volume – and poor whites are more muted and filtered through the elite’s writings than I would like. The letters and other writings of the wealthy planters, merchants, officials, and doctors – along with accounts of travelers and immigrants – reveal much about the sufferings of Africans and poor whites, often unintentionally. The elite generally overlooked or looked away from those sufferings. In 1880, the Charleston city yearbook listed the names of every citizen who had died between 1808 and 1880 who allegedly had lived at least eighty years. The aim was a familiar one in the history of the lowcountry: to
counter charges that people rarely lived long there. The authors added that the list was surely incomplete: “many have doubtless escaped notice, especially among the colored population.” That was surely true and the admission is significant. Many things happened among that population that escaped the notice of the white elite, among them blacks’ massive suffering from disease. Many things have undoubtedly escaped my notice as well. Despite the limitations of the sources, I have tried to re-create the human encounter with these diseases and its broader impact to the best of my ability. The reader must judge how well I have succeeded.

Note on Capitalization, Punctuation, and Spelling
For consistency and ease of reading I have modernized capitalization, punctuation, and sometimes spelling in quotations from original sources.

* City of Charleston, *Yearbook*, 1880.
Books of this sort can never have just one author. Many people contributed to its germination and fruition. Some know how they helped; others are probably unaware of their contribution or have forgotten it (if not me), so long did it take me to get this far. At various points in the saga, conversations and exchanges with other scholars, friends, and family helped me enormously. Among those I would like to thank for their encouragement, advice, thoughts, insights, and shared information are Chris Boucher, David Brown, Jason Coy, William Dalrymple, Max Edelson, Walter Edgar, Elizabeth Fenn, Gerald Grob, Margaret Humphreys, John McNeill, Ron Numbers, Bill Olejniczak, Todd Savitt, Lester Stephens, John Tone, and Maarten Ultee. Student assistants Jason Farr and Chris Willoughby unearthed some highly useful information. Sheridan Hough, Alastair McCandless, and Colin McCandless read the original shaky manuscript with great care and, beside pointing out many mistakes and making excellent suggestions for improvement, convinced me that I wasn’t entirely crazy to write it. Lew Bateman, senior editor for history and political science at Cambridge University Press in New York, was highly supportive from the first, as was his editorial assistant, Anne Lovering Rounds. The Press’s readers and David Moltke-Hansen, coeditor of this series, saved me from some egregious mistakes as well as helped and encouraged me to make the book more broadly relevant. I am also greatly indebted to the copy-editing team at PETT Fox, Inc., for their careful work on the manuscript. Any remaining errors are mine.

The research and writing of this book were greatly aided by two summer fellowships from the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina and several grants from the College of Charleston Research and Development Fund. Archivists and librarians could not have been nicer to this often bumbling researcher. The staff of the College of Charleston Library, particularly at Reference, Interlibrary Loans, and Special Collections, was unfailingly helpful over the many years of this project. I received enormous help at the Waring Historical Library at the Medical University of South Carolina, South Carolina Historical Society, South Carolina Department of Archives
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List of Abbreviations Used in Notes

BPRO/SC  British Public Record Office, Records re South Carolina
CO  Colonial Office Records, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
COCSC  College of Charleston Special Collections
FP  Family Papers
HLP  The Papers of Henry Laurens
JCHA  Journals of the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina
       (manuscript)
JCHA  Journals of the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina
       (printed)
MSM  Medical Society of South Carolina, Minutes, Waring Historical
       Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston
NGP  The Papers of Nathanael Greene
PRO  Public Record Office, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
SCDAH  South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia
SCG  South Carolina Gazette
SCHM  South Carolina Historical Magazine
SCHS  South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston
SCL  South Caroliniana Library, Columbia
SHC  Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill
SRO  Scottish Record Office (National Archives of Scotland), Edinburgh
Stats.  Statutes at Large of South Carolina
WHL  Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston
WO  War Office Records, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
MAP 1. The Lowcountry, Charleston, and the Caribbean region.
MAP 2. The South Carolina lowcountry, showing Anglican parishes and slave proportion of population, c. 1760s.
MAP 3. Charleston Harbor, based on a British map, c. 1780.

Source: Based on a contemporary map published in London.
MAP 4. The Revolutionary War in the South.