

Simons, and Jekyll islands provide the intellectual framework for examining the interrelationship of land, space, and the creation of narratives of freedom.

The rice coast communities emerged as a result of three inwardly related and complementary historical developments: extensive headright privileges granted in the Georgia state constitution, the forced migration of thousands of Africans, and the concomitant transformation of the natural landscape. To encourage settlement of Georgia's new counties, the state constitution provided headrights for prospective settlers in 1777. Each household head would receive two hundred acres, and the state provided fifty acres for each additional free person or slave. A 1783 amendment allowed applicants to acquire up to one thousand acres in the coastal counties.²¹ By 1790 the population of the counties, with the exception of Chatham, remained under five hundred, with enslaved Africans making up the majority of the population.²²

On Glynn County's St. Simons Island, the landscape epitomized the individual and collective ordeal of slavery. Separated from the sea by Little St. Simons Island, which confronts the Atlantic Ocean and Altamaha Sound with an expanse of hammock land, marshes, dunes, and sand beaches, St. Simons contained Hampton, Hopeton, Retreat, and Cannon's Point plantations. These rice coast communities developed under the influence of Thomas Butler King, Hugh F. Grant, John H. Couper, Thomas Spalding, and Pierce Butler. Within the Altamaha watershed district, 1,700 acres of land formed the nucleus of Butler's St. Simons properties, an expanse of land stretching across the northern end of Little and Greater St. Simons islands.²³ Butler's holdings consisted of four cotton plantations on St. Simons Island and a rice plantation on Butler's Island. Six hundred acres on the Altamaha delta that consisted of mostly marshland to the north and west of Hampton became known as Five Pound Tree, which symbolized the fractured lives and the submerged voices of enslaved African Americans in that it served as an isolated home for the unruly. Coterminous with Five Pound Tree was an expanse of two thousand acres of marshland that became what was called the Experiment plantation.²⁴

Butler's Island serves as a spatial paradigm in which to view the conception of space within the coastal environment. Lying south and west of Darien and located ten miles upstream from Hampton, Butler's Island contained 1,500 acres of land, with more trees than marshland. Enslaved Africans banked and then cleared the land with hand tools for the cultivation of rice.²⁵ The high bank around the perimeter was nine miles in length. The removal of soil from the island side of the bank resulted in a large ditch that became a combination of aqueduct and canal. They placed floodgates and trunks (wood culverts) strategically in the high bank to facilitate the introduction of fresh water with the rise and fall of the river. Additionally they prepared a vast grid of banks, canals, and ditches, and drains and quarter drains from the heavy growth of the river swamp.²⁶

The transition from long-staple cotton to rice production occurred following the