

perfection of the cotton gin in 1793. The exclusion of salt water from the incoming flood tides made the growth of rice possible along the Altamaha. From the beginning, enslaved African Americans directed the interior landscape by constructing a canal three hundred yards long, four feet wide, and eight inches deep that improved communications and access to Hampton.²⁷ Both the task labor system and the gang labor system were employed on Butler's Island and St. Simons Island. The growth of long-staple cotton required the use of the gang labor system. Moreover, seven horses and seven workers were required to operate the cotton gin, which freed the cotton of most of its seed. An ancillary step called moting required women to pick broken seeds and debris out of the cotton by hand and to winnow the cotton over a fan for further cleaning. On St. Simons Island, the cotton gin produced four hundred to five hundred pounds of clean fiber daily. The cotton was forced into three-hundred-pound bags by the compressing screw, and if it was sent on to Savannah or Charleston, it would be further compressed by more efficient equipment.²⁸

On Butler's Island, four settlements determined the spatialized power relations within the natural landscape. The four settlements consisted of the overseer's house, located on the highest, most accessible land; the garden; the plantation complex, which consisted of the machine shops, the rice mill, and the sugar mill; and the slave quarters. Near the Champney River, located on the back side of the Altamaha, were the garden, the plantation complex, and the larger slave quarters.²⁹ These settlements were protected from flooding within the island by their own lesser banks. As in other watershed communities, the river landing and its wharf were an integral part of this landscape. In the Altamaha watershed community of Camden County, Robert Stafford established extensive landholdings on Cumberland Island, consisting of over 4,200 acres for the cultivation of rice and sea island cotton worked by 348 enslaved Africans in 1850. By 1860 the Altamaha watershed community included 2,785 enslaved Africans and African Americans who worked 8,000 acres of land.³⁰

Within the established watershed communities, resistance to enslavement became an integral part of the landscape. Materials as divergent as slave narratives, the post-Civil War petitions of former slaves, plantation records, and journals yield a composite picture of the complexities of the slave system that underscores the diversity of responses to the system. Collectively these materials demonstrate that narratives of resistance and freedom were a form of discourse within certain limits and with a conceptual language that established human agency. These narratives represented an attempt to construct an identity, a set of relationships, and boundaries for negation, resistance, and reinterpretation of their lived experience.³¹ Resistance and freedom persisted in the consciousness of enslaved Africans and African Americans in lowcountry Georgia.

TABLE 1. Rice Production in Lowcountry Georgia, 1860