South Carolina Rice Coast Landscape Changes

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Carolina Gold, the first variety of rice grown in South Carolina, provided the foundation for the economy of South Carolina during the colonial and antebellum periods. Rice shared its economic dominance with indigo during the latter 18th century and with cotton during the first one-half of the 19th century. It was an appropriate name because rice brought considerable wealth, and a distinct aristocratic planter society developed and flourished in Georgetown County, where cultivation centered. These rice plantation lands were among the few islands in the South where the romanticized southern plantation way of life was reality. In addition to leaving relict features on the landscape, rice cultivation and the plantation system left lasting impressions in the minds of 20th century Americans. These impressions, which center on the myth or image of the southern plantation, influenced and still influence man's behavior and his changing relationship to the land.

Historical geographers traditionally have argued that past economic activities influence present spatial patterns and landscape. More recently, geographers increasingly have become aware that what people think or imagine about place and changing attitudes toward place also have important geographic implications. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that the present-day rice plantation landscape of Georgetown County, South Carolina has been influ-

enced by a past economic activity and the image or myth that activity has created. The temporal approach of historical geography and the notion concerning man's image of place are utilized to reveal that the antebellum rice plantation system and planter lifestyle affected the landscape, economic use, and was instrumental in the resurgence of the rice plantation lands through time. The contemporary landscape includes relicts which are the result of rice cultivation and features which can be attributed, in part, to the image created by that economic activity.

RICE THE STAPLE CROP

While the origin of South Carolina's rice industry is uncertain, it was planted near Charleston before 1690 and Ralph Brown claimed it was "a principal plantation product of the Southern seaboard from South Carolina to Florida" for nearly a century.[1] It first was cultivated, much as any other crop, in open upland fields without irrigation. Later it was discovered that rice grown under wet conditions provided higher yields, and planters reclaimed irrigable inland swamps created by freshwater streams or springs.[2] Cultivation shifted from its inland swamp location to swamps bordering freshwater rivers further inland during the mid-eighteenth century.[3] This shift in location and the accompanying introduction of tidal culture was the most significant factor in the growth of South Carolina rice industry and Georgetown District, where production was greatest.[4]

Tidal rice cultivation, which utilized the effect of tidal change on a river to irrigate and drain freshwater swamps, was practiced adjacent to many large South Carolina rivers such as the Savannah, Combahee, Ashepoo, Edisto, and Cooper.[5] But the Santee, Sampit, Black, Pee Dee, and Waccamaw in Georgetown District were the greatest "rice rivers" and the focus of the rice plantation era (Fig. 1). The blending of the unique physical attributes of Georgetown District, especially its large rivers and adjacent tidal swamps, and the adoption of tidal culture helped create a genuinely wealthy and aristocratic plantation society.

During the colonial and antebellum periods, the tidal rice plantations contributed significantly to the economy of South Carolina. But to Georgetown District, rice was its essence. South Carolina pro-

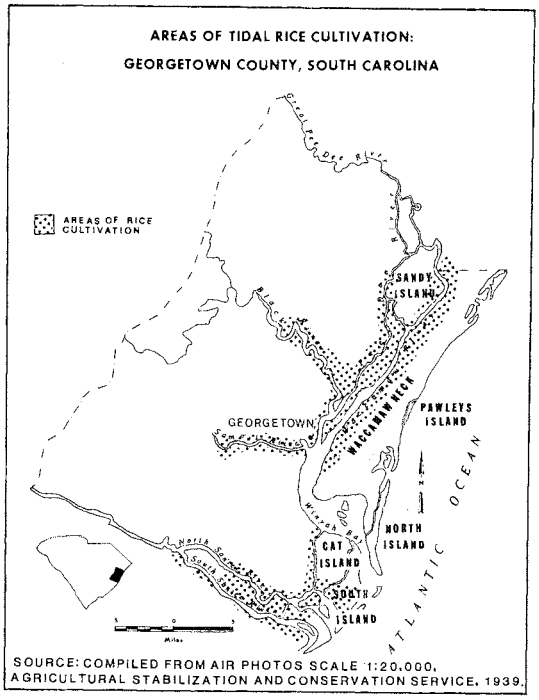

Fig. 1. Areas of tidal rice cultivation: Georgetown County, South Carolina.

duced 75 percent of the nation's rice crop in 1840 and nearly 64 percent in 1860, and Georgetown District produced nearly one-half of the state total. As late as 1860 only Indian corn and potatoes ranked higher in total state production, by pounds produced, than cotton and rice. The significance of rice in Georgetown District is remarkable. Rice production in 1860 was three times greater than the combined total of Indian corn and sweet potatoes, and state's two leading crops, which are grown for local consumption.[6]

Georgetown District ranked 15th in total population of the 30 South Carolina districts in 1860. Its slave population, however, ranked 6th while its white population was last by a considerable margin. It was 29th in improved acreage but 6th in cash value of farms. Compared to other rice producing districts, Georgetown represented almost a monoculture. It ranked between 25th and 30th in the production of wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, cotton, and pulses. The value of its livestock was 28th. Oxen were the preferred work

animal and Georgetown District ranked 5th in the state while 28th in asses and mules. Sweet potatoes was the only staple produced in reasonable quantity, Georgetown ranked tenth.[7]

Land use and the acreage devoted to rice is a vexing question. It is clear that the planters owned large parcels of land. Most of the land was not suitable for rice but did provide timber, pasture for livestock, foodstuffs for plantation consumption, or was left in swamp. Many properties fronted on the beach which provided healthful sites for second homes. The manuscript schedules of the 1860 agricultural census does give insight to the predominance of the rice planter with respect to improved acreage and cash value of farms.[8] One hundred and eight of the 364 farm operators in Georgetown District reported 100 or more acres (40 ha) of improved land. Eighty-nine, or less than one-fourth of the total operators, were large rice planters. They operated on 70 percent of the total improved acreage, averaged 533 improved acres (216 ha) with a range from 100 to 3,500 acres (40 to 1417 ha), and accounted for 93 percent of the total cash value of farms. This small group owned 86 percent of the working oxen, produced over three-fourths of the Indian corn and sweet potatoes, and accounted for over 99 percent of the rice production. In summary, a small number of rice planters dominated the agricultural system of Georgetown District.

By 1860 the plantation system and aristocratic planter society reached its peak. A distinct subculture in the antbellum South, albeit highly romanticized but still evident today, flourished in Georgetown District. The planter families were aloof from other residents with respect to spatial and, even more significantly, social distance. The planters enjoyed large homes, servants, and a pardon from manual labor. Other advantages of wealth such as travel, education, social and sport clubs, and all other appropriate leisure time activities of the day were theirs.[9] The economic success and attendant planter way of life was based on rice, slave labor, and large landholdings.

Tidal culture not only is responsible for generating the greatest proportion of wealth associated with rice plantations but also for the many landscape relicts of rice cultivation. Adjacent to the great rice rivers small rectangular fields outlined by dikes and canals clearly are evident in the field, on aerial photographs, and on topographic sheets (Figs. 2, 3, and 4). Fields varied in size from 1 to 2 acres (0.4 to 0.8 ha)

Fig. 2. Field outlines remain on the contemporary landscape.

Fig. 3. Aerial view illustrates rectangular field patterns adjacent to the Black, Pee Dee, and Waccamaw Rivers (from left to right).

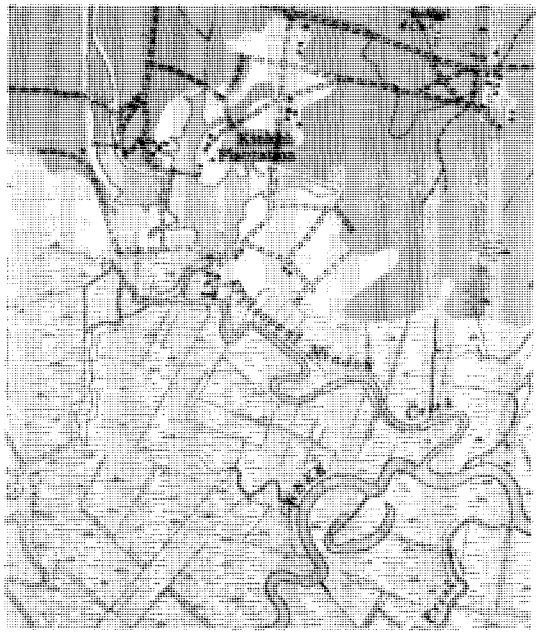

Fig. 4. A former rice plantation, as illustrated by part of the Minim Island, South Carolina, 1:24,000 topographic sheet, which was published in 1943. A reservoir, manor house, outbuildings, field outlines, and canals are located on this sheet.

to 15 or 20 (6 to 8 ha). Trunks, rectangular wooden culverts from 20 to 30 feet long (6 to 9 m), were installed in the dikes contiguous to the river or excavated canals to regulate water flow for flooding or draining fields (Figs. 5 and 6). Often a reservoir was created behind the fields to insure a water supply in case of drought or periods of low water (Fig. 4). These reservoirs also served as mill ponds on large plantations.[10] Other features such as an occasional original manor house, churches, mills, and live oak avenues survive today as landscape relicts and bear witness to a bygone era in the ever evolving relationship between man and the land. During the mid-nineteenth century and earlier, it was here where the planters expended their capital and the energies of their slaves to support the economy of South Carolina and their aristocratic way of life which lingers still in the minds of 20th century Americans.

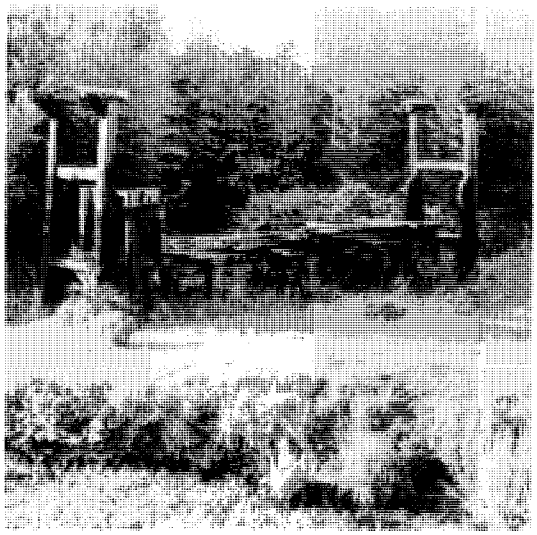

Fig. 5. An above ground view of a trunk.

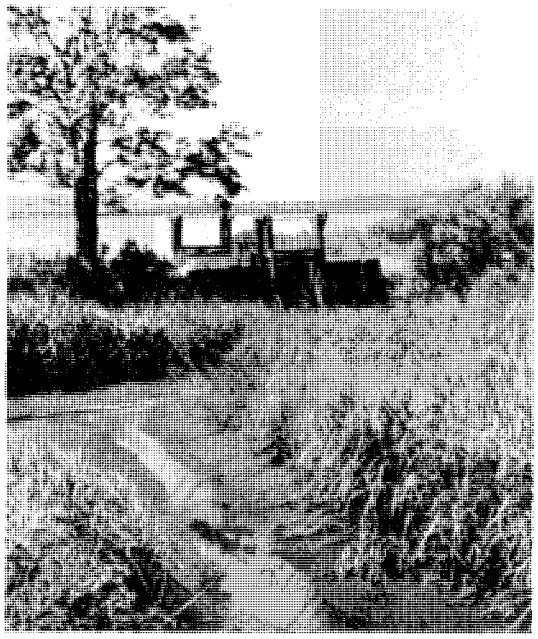

Fig. 6. Trunk installed in dike. The South Santee River is in the background and a field in the foreground.

DEMISE OF THE INDUSTRY

The turmoil of the Civil War and Reconstruction created almost insurmountable land ownership, labor, and capital difficulties which led to production declines and finally the demise of the South Carolina rice industry. Attempts to revive the industry were thwarted by competition from new production areas and a series of severe storms, hurricanes, and floods which destroyed not only canals and banks but disturbed soil conditions. Rice was no longer a viable economic enterprise after the turn of the 20th century, particularly for Georgetown County.

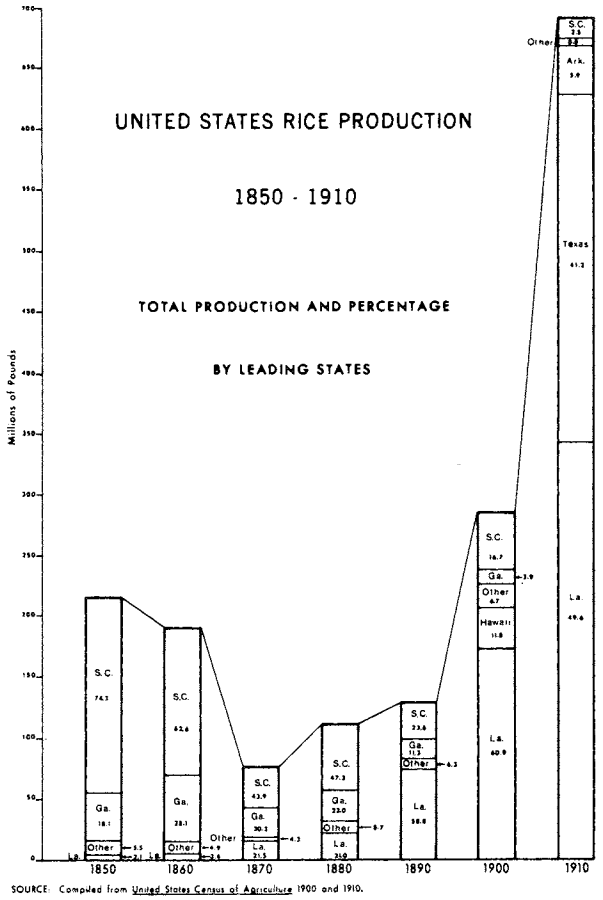

Fig. 7. United States rice production, 1850-1910.

Between 1860 and 1870, South Carolina rice production plummeted by nearly 73 percent. Georgetown County suffered an even greater decline as production in 1870 was reduced to approximately 10 percent of the 1860 crop. Postwar production reached its peak in 1880, for both state and county, but was still 56 and 81 percent below 1860 levels respectively. On the other hand wheat, corn, oats, and potato production in South Carolina equalled or surpassed prewar production by 1900.[11] A tremendous increase in upland cotton and tobacco production between 1860 and 1900 opened yet another era in the state's agricultural land use and cultural development.

Even though rice production dropped dramatically, South Carolina led the nation in its production as late as 1880 (Fig. 7). But concomitant with South Carolina's production declines, other states commanded an increasing proportion of total rice production. Sophisticated irrigation systems, the application of wheat-growing mechanization, and corporate financing utilized in Louisiana and Texas created intense competition for South Carolina planters.[12] Largely because of small fields the inability of independent planters to finance mechanization, South Carolina ranked a poor 4th in national production while Louisiana and Texas dominated in 1910.[13] These corporate producers not only dominated the industry but also took advantage of the fine reputation of South Carolina's product by marketing their product as "Carolina Rice," even though they used a different variety of seed.[14] In addition to economic problems, a series of hurricanes and floods between 1893 and 1911 hastened the demise of the rice industry.[15] Flooded fields, broken banks, and damaged equipment brought the Georgetown planters to their knees.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LAND USE CHANGES

Coeval with the demise of South Carolina's rice industry, other factors developed which can be related to 20th century land use change. Lowenthal claims that a fundamental change in American attitudes began in the 1880s and 1890s.[16] Americans generally became dissatisfied with the present, and instead of holding modernist or forward looking attitudes, they began to revere the past and "fantasize a Colonial or Revolutionary golden age."[17] The dissatisfaction with the present, which was most evident in the northern and

eastern United States, was a result of industrialization, urbanization, and increased immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. "Many older, or antecedent Americans retreated into a history they considered uniquely their own."[18]

Similarly, Gaines in 1925, recognized and analyzed the growth of a popular concept or myth of the southern plantation which was held during the 1910s and 1920s.[19] He carefully documented its evolution through American literature, drama, and song. He attempted to discount the myth by comparing it to the actual. Gaines claimed, "of all the native resources which have yielded contribution to the popular imagery, the plantation is most spacious and glorious."[20] Later, the plantation myth was romanticized even more, and some might say institutionalized, through such popular movies as Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind.[21]

A. E. Parkins brought this paradox between myth and actual to the attention of the American Association of Geographers in his 1930 presidential address when he claimed that quite different impressions of the antebellum South were gained from romantic novels, abolitionist or pro-slavery writings, and movies.[22] Parkins and Gaines both clearly stated, however, that in the rice region of South Carolina "society was the gayest in America," and it was one of the few areas of the South where reality approximated the plantation image of splendor, cultural magnificence, and social charm.[23]

Even today, there is perhaps no region in the United States or landholding unit that have more "imageability" than the South or the plantation.[24] Many of the images held by non-southerners are negative as illustrated by the Southern Trough in Gould's mental maps of residential desirability.[25] On the other hand, John Fraser Hart claims that the word plantation is value-loaded but carries great prestige regionally and probably nationally.[26] It is contended here that the past economic activity of rice cultivation, the change in attitude toward a fantasized past, and the plantation image or myth influenced and still influences present spatial patterns and the landscape.

At the same time Americans began fantasying their past and the plantation image developed, the planters and their descendants were faced with the increasing burden of maintaining their lands. Between 1890 and 1920 many planters stubbornly clung to tradition and made

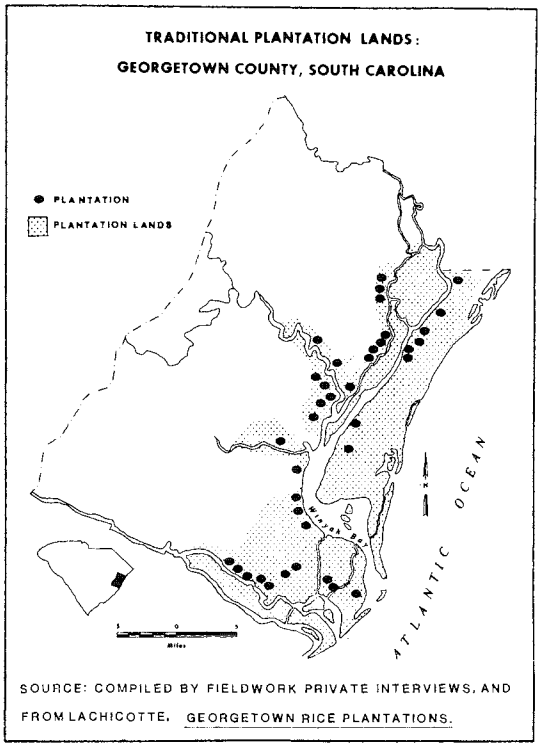

Fig. 8. Traditional plantation lands: Georgetown County, South Carolina.

heroic attempts to revive the industry and a way of life.[27] Most of these attempts were unsuccessful and plantations were sold. Admittedly, it is difficult or impossible to document their motives, but whether or not they became conscious of their roots and sought the status of the landed gentry, a number of wealthy old stock Americans from the Northeast bought-up the old plantations lands.

The antebellum rice planters owned far more land than the reclaimed fields (Fig. 8). Plantation land ownership changed frequently, and the original landholdings became fragmented through time. It was possible, however, to identify 38 major plantations in 1900 and trace ownership changes. In 1900 all 38 were owned by South Carolina residents and 37 by residents of Georgetown County (Table 1). By 1920 26 were owned by South Carolinians and 19 locally. Ten plantations had been purchased by residents of northern states. Northerners continued to purchase rice plantations until in

TABLE 1. Ownership of Major Georgetown Country Rice Plantations. 1900 to 1973: By Residence

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1978
South Carolina	38	36	26	15	14	19	17
Out-of-State		2	12	23	23	18	7
Northern States		2	10	20	20	15	4
Other Southern States			2	3	3	3	3
Other[a]					1	1	14
Total	38	38	38	38	38	38	38

Sources: Compiled from Deeds and Plats: Georgetown County Courthouse; Lachicotte, op. cit. [see text footnote 31] and fieldwork.

[a]Owned by the State of South Carolina, foundation, society, or ownership extremely fragmented.

1940 only 14 were owned by South Carolinians, and 20 owned by residents of New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and other northern states.

Names such as Vanderbilt, du Pont, Huntington, and Yawkey became part of Georgetown County. These northerners and others like them, put the rice plantation lands to more sublime uses. They used their plantations for retreats from the hectic business world, hunting and other recreational activities, production of woodstuffs, permanent residences, and entertaining friends or business associates. Notables and dignataries such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, George C. Marshall, and Ty Cobb all knew of the rice plantation lands of Georgetown County.[28] Rice plantation land use between 1860 and the end of World War II shifted dramatically from intensive cultivation of the planters to more extensive uses by the new northern owners.

Since World War II, the trend of northern acquisition ended and plantation ownership again changed. Seventeen residents of South Carolina owned plantations by 1978, and only 7 were owned by out-of-state residents. Of the remaining 14; 2 are owned by the State, 2 by a foundation or society, and 10 have been residentially or commercially developed into small parcels of land so as to diffuse ownership. This transition brought about substantial land use change

and a new focus in land use development.

Land use in the private hunt preserve, game preserve, and timberland category continues as it was during the 1930s and 1940s by the wealthy northerners[29] (Fig. 9). Prunty used the term "woodland

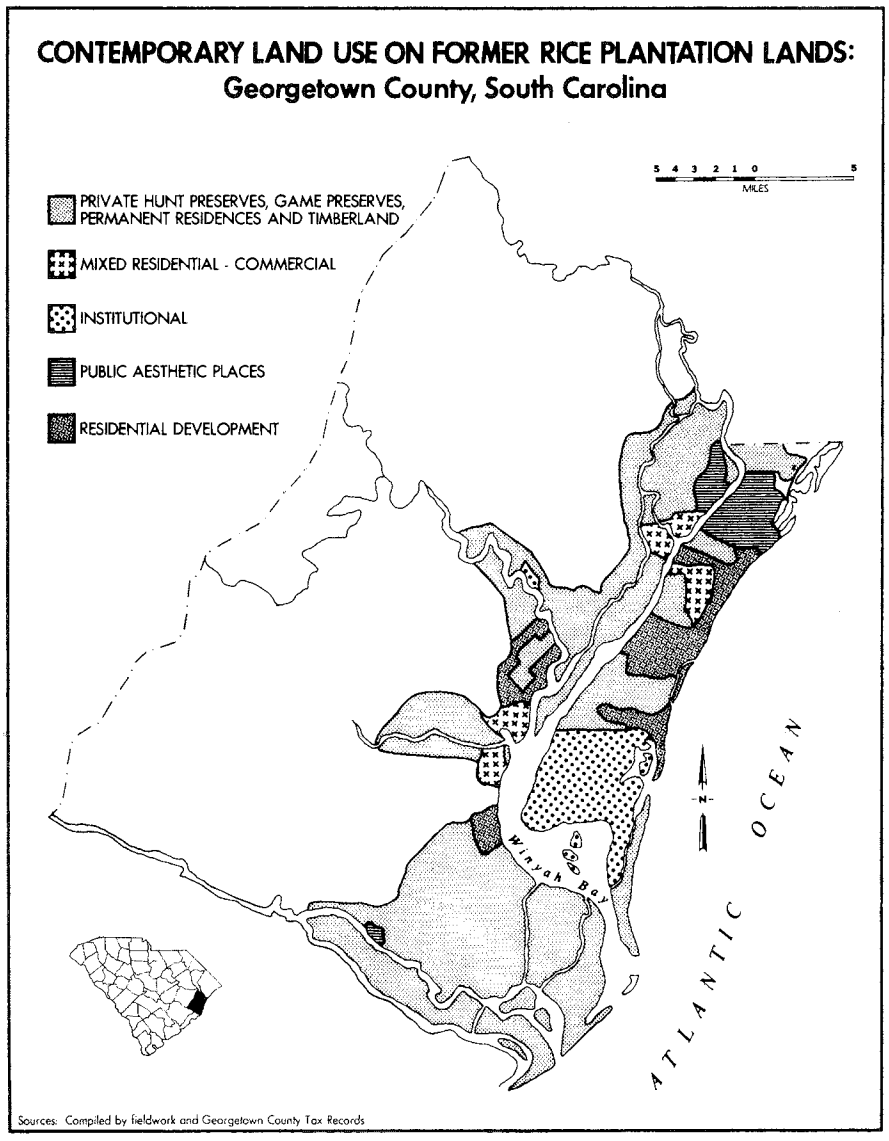

Fig. 9. Contemporary land use on former rice plantation land.

plantation" in describing similar land uses.[30] In some cases, trunks and gates are still constructed and used much the same as during the planter era but now regulate water flow in the fields to enhance waterfowl habitat. Former plantation land categorized as mixed residential and commercial includes areas absorbed by the urban growth of Georgetown and rural black residential areas. Foremost among the institutional is the 17,500 acres (7,085 ha), situated on Waccamaw Neck, amassed by statesman-financier Bernard Baruch. It was incorporated as the Belle W. Baruch Foundation in 1964 to foster research in marine biology, forestry, and wildlife. Public aesthetic places include a state park, original rice plantation house, and Brookgreen Gardens which combines natural gardens with a representative col-

Fig. 10. Single family dwelling at Wedgefield Plantation.

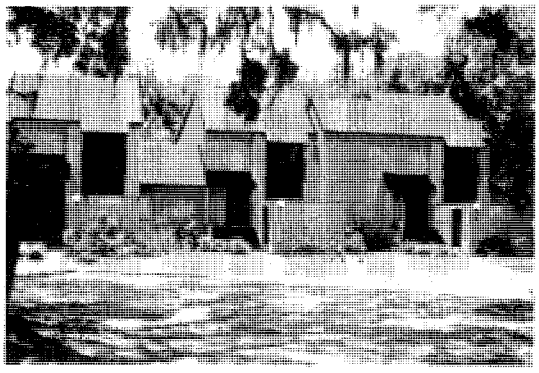

Fig. 11. Condominium development at Belle-Island Plantation

lection of American sculpture history.[31]

It is the residential development category where land use is most planned and intensive. Here, the antbellum rice plantation image is actively exploited and most prominent in present and future land use. In these areas former plantation land is developed or is at some stage of development as planned, high cost, low density residential land. These capital intensive developments are designed for exclusive, luxurious, resort-oriented living in architecturally restricted single family dwellings or condominiums (Figs. 10 and 11). Facilities such as a club house, restaurant, golf course, swimming pool, marina, tennis courts, riding stable, and beach access are provided. These amenities invariably center on a reconstructed, or at least on the site of the original, manor house with its manicured grounds, azalea and camellia gardens, dogwood, and live oak avenues draped with Spanish moss. Although less than one-fourth of the total area actually has been developed, land values and development increased dramatically during the last several years creating an economic resurgence with tremendous potential for the future.

In attractive promotional materials, the developers emphasize the man-made and natural amenities and artfully blend the charm of the rice planter image as an ideal lifestyle. The following statements, taken from promotional brochures, represent how the plantation image is being exploited to promote these developments:[32]

> Rice planting came to an end more than a half-century ago, but the traditions of graceful living have been perpetuated . . . providing a sumptuous life envied for its graceful elegance . . . where the rich texture of plantation life still continue . . . as it always has been . . . and like the leisurely planter, you have nothing to do but enjoy yourself since everything is done for you with great care . . . planted over two hundred years ago . . . great oaks, hung with sun-shot webs of Spanish moss; subtropical plants and flowers in rainbows of gentle color; views of rice fields untended now, burning sweet gold in the sun . . . It's the Low Country of South Carolina . . . steeped in the sense of tradition that surrounds plantation living.

An economic resurgence is occurring on those lands which focused on the production of Carolina Gold owing, in part, to the image created by its cultivation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ralph H. Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1948), p. 37.

[2]Converse D. Clowse, *Economic Beginnings in Colonial South Carolina: 1670-1730* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), pp. 126-32.

[3]George C. Rogers, *The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), p. 332.

[4]Prior to 1868 Georgetown District was the political unit which encompasses present-day Georgetown County. In this paper Georgetown District will be used in contexts prior to 1870 and Georgetown County after 1870.

[5]Good discussions of tidal rice cultivation, by geographers, concerning land reclamation, irrigation, and cultivation may be found in Ralph H. Brown, *Mirror for Americans: Likeness of the Eastern Seaboard, 1810* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1943), pp. 241-45; and Douglas C. Wilms, "The Development of Rice Culture in 18th Century Georgia," *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 12 (1972), pp. 45-57. Excellent graphics appear in the most thorough and recent account by Sam B. Hilliard, "Antebellum Tidewater Rice Culture in South Carolina and Georgia," in James B. Gibson, ed., *European Settlement and Development in North America: Essays on Geographical Change in Honor and Memory of Andrew Hill Clark* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 91-115. For good historical accounts see Arney R. Childs, *Rice Planter and Sportsman* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953), pp. 41-45; Duncan Clinch Heyward, *Seed From Madagascar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), pp. 35-42; and Rogers, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 330-34.

[6]United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States*, 1860 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), p. 129.

[7]Census Office, op. cit., footnote 6, pp. 128-31.

[8]Manuscript schedules of the 1860 census of agriculture, Georgetown District, South Carolina, Department of Archives

and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

[9]For an excellent discussion of the planters and their lifestyle, see Rogers, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 252-353. Partly as a result of the health hazard malaria presented, travel and socializing was greatest during the summer. For an account of this health hazard and the development of resort towns, see Charles F. Kovacik, "Health Conditions and Town Growth in Colonial and Antebellum South Carolina," *Social Science and Medicine: Medical Geography*, Vol. 12, No. 2D (1978), pp. 131-36.

[10]James M. Clifton, "Charles Manigault's Essay on the Economics of Milling Rice," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 52 (1978), pp. 104-05.

[11]Statistics compiled from the United States *Census of Agriculture* for the years 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900.

[12]The shift in rice production to Texas, Louisiana, and later to California is discussed in A.H. Cole, "American Rice Growing Industry: A Study in Comparative Advantage," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 41 (1927), pp. 595-643.

[13]United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Agriculture*, VII (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 622.

[14]Heyward, op. cit., footnote 5, pp. 213-14. The fine reputation of "Carolina Rice" exists today as a brand name on supermarket shelves. It is packaged in Houston and New York and grown in Texas and Louisiana.

[15]For accounts of the damage incurred by the 1893 hurricane, see *News and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, August 31, 1893; and *News and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, September 2, 1893.

[16]David Lowenthal, "The Place of the Past in the American Landscape," in David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geography in Honor of John Kirtland Wright* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 89-117.

[17]Lowenthal, op. cit., footnote 16, p. 106.

[18]Lowenthal, op. cit., footnote 16, p. 108.

[19]Francis Pendleton Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925).

[20]Gaines, op. cit., footnote 19, p. 1.

[21]Jack Kirby Temple, *Media Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 1-8 and 72-74. Temple provides a fascinating survey of southern imagery which appeared in the mass media during the twentieth century.

[22]A.E. Parkins, "The American South: A Geographer's Interpretation," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 21 (1931), p. 8.

[23]A.E. Parkins, *The South: Its Economic-Geographic Development* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1938), p. 235; and Gaines, op. cit., footnote 10, p. 144.

[24]Although imageability was defined as "that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer" by Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 9, the concept is applicable to more than just physical objects.

[25]Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Baltimore: Penquin Books, Inc., 1974), pp. 93-105. Recent migration statistics, however, seem to indicate that the image of the South is much more positive than that expressed by the college students utilized in the Gould and White study.

[26]John Fraser Hart, *The Look of the Land* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), p. 80.

[27]For the best account of such an attempt see Patience Pennington, *A Woman Rice Planter* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961).

[28]Alberta Morel Lachicotte, *Georgetown Rice Plantations* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Printing Co., 1955), passim.

[29]Large portions of this land in southeastern Georgetown County was given to South Carolina by its northern owners who purchased it in the 1930s and 1940s. North Island, Cat Island, and South Island was bequeathed to the state along with a 10 million dollar trust fund to maintain the area as a game preserve by Thomas Yawkey in 1976, *The State*, Columbia, South Carolina, August 6, 1976. In addition, some land on the islands situated between the mouths of the North and South Santee Rivers were included

in a donation of 25,000 acres (10,121 ha) by members of the Santee Club in 1974, *The State*, Columbia, South Carolina, June 27, 1974. Most of this land is situated in Charleston County, adjacent and south of Georgetown County.

[30]Merle Prunty Jr., "The Woodland Plantation as a Contemporary Occupance Type in the South," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 53 (1963), pp. 1-21.

[31]For an inventory of twentieth century land uses see James G. Carpenter, "The Rice Plantation Lands of Georgetown County, South Carolina: A Historical Geographic Study," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1973, pp. 47-62.

[32]The statements were taken from the promotional brochures of Litchfield Plantation, Wedgefield Plantation, and Belle Isle Gardens.