



USS Constitution
Museum

The Entwined History of Slavery and USS *Constitution*'s Live Oak

Carl Herzog, 2022

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston

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Introduction

The decision in 1794 to build six frigates for a new United States Navy led to a huge procurement program for the nascent federal government. Sourcing live oak trees, a strong, durable, and rot-resistant timber, for the framing of the new frigates posed a particularly expensive and difficult task that became fraught with complications and setbacks. Live oak timber only existed along the coast in the southern states, where it was difficult to access and harvest. But the success of live oak timber in the construction of those early ships prompted the Navy to make it a central component of numerous other Navy ships for the growing fleet.

With the U.S. Navy's urgent need to source live oak, harvest it, and transport it to shipyards along the East Coast, the federal government became enmeshed in the plantation slave economy of Georgia. The work of enslaved people was frequently used to complete government projects that were foundational to the new United States. The Navy's paradoxical role in using the labor of enslaved people to build ships destined to defend American freedoms underscores the impact of the slave economy during this time. Live oak for USS *Constitution* and the other initial frigates was available in South Carolina, but the Navy thought that timbers further to the south and closer to the ocean would be better grade. The decision was made to pursue contracts with landowners on the remote coastal islands of Georgia, specifically St. Simons Island. At the time, Florida and the Gulf Coast were not yet part of the United States. Harvesting these forests of live oak trees literally cleared the way for the establishment of cotton plantations and led to a dramatic expansion of the enslaved population in the area.

Enslaved people were frequently compelled to labor for government projects that were building the new United States. Their contributions to building the ships that were destined to defend American freedom at sea reflects an often-unrecognized impact of slavery in the United States during the decades that followed the nation's founding.

Live Oak

When planning the frigates for the new United States Navy, the government decided to use live oak for framing. The denser, heavier wood had been used by the French in shipbuilding and was reputed to last substantially longer than white oak. Frigate designer Joshua Humphreys pushed for the use of the timber. However, it was much more expensive and arduous to acquire live oak than the more commonly available white oak.

Live oak grows in a narrow belt along the shores of the coastal region from Virginia to the Gulf of Mexico. It is called “live” oak because it is an evergreen tree that does not lose its leaves through the winter like most other oaks. Live oak’s natural habitat along the shoreline makes it particularly resistant to saltwater and ocean spray. Branches often grow almost perpendicular to the trunk and extend out, creating wide canopies – a testament to the strength of the wood. Using live oak for specifically shaped frames and supporting elements of a ship allowed designers and builders to take advantage of the wood’s inherent strength in curved pieces, rather than attempting to assemble structural elements from multiple pieces of smaller timber.



Figure 1: Live oaks on manicured ground at Gascoigne Park, showing branch angles and canopy. The gray hanging clusters are Spanish moss, an epiphyte that commonly lives on live oak branches.

John Morgan

Tench Coxe, the commissioner of revenue in charge of procurement for the new Navy, sent Connecticut shipwright John Morgan to St. Simons Island in August 1794. Morgan was tasked with supervising a team of New England woodcutters in harvesting live oak. Despite his shipbuilding knowledge, Morgan was not considered an ideal choice for the job. Coxe and others lacked faith in Morgan’s business and management abilities, and they made additional, though unsuccessful, efforts to restrict Morgan’s role to actually harvesting timber.¹

¹ “From Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, 21 January 1795,” in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 18, January 1795–July 1795, ed. Harold C. Syrett. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 170–171.

James Habersham, a customs commissioner, and John Clay, an independent agent, were to contract with property owners for the timber. Both men were in Savannah, about 100 miles to the north of St. Simons. However, it is unclear to what extent Habersham and Clay actively contributed to the project, if at all, as there are few records of any transactions between either of them and the property owners. It is possible that government copies of these records were destroyed in two later fires that occurred in the War Department archives. Except for some receipts for payments, no extant records of contracts have been found.

St. Simons landowner Richard Leake recorded in his plantation journal on March 26, 1795 that he had received from Robert Bolton, a Savannah merchant, payment of £131 3s, 10d. The payment was listed as the amount of “Captain Morgan’s certificate paid you (Bolton) by Mr. Habersham.” An additional £35 followed in May that year. What these payments were for remains unclear.²

Correspondence among Navy officials at the time suggest that there was little detail to these agreements, and only one or two separate agreements may have even been made. The lack of paperwork was distressing to Coxe, who struggled through the summer and early fall of 1794 to get information from Morgan on his progress. Neither Morgan nor Habersham and Clay were writing back to Coxe with any details. In the Fall, Coxe sent Captain John Barry to St. Simons to check on Morgan’s progress.³

Conditions on St. Simons

The U.S. Navy arrived on St. Simons at a turning point for the island. In the two years prior, several large pieces of wooded land on the island had been bought by plantation owners eager to plant sea island cotton and a few other commodities on the land. A larger population had occupied St. Simons in the mid-1700s when there was an active British fort there, but much of that population had left by the time the would-be cotton planters arrived.⁴ The new owners were eager to see the land cleared of the heavy timber, but it was grueling work. There was a dense underbrush of saw palmettos and other bushes that had to be cleared out before even getting to the trees. The weight and hardness of the live oak wood itself, along with the awkward shape of the trees’ branches, made cutting more difficult than for other species of oak, particularly if each timber was to be assigned to a specific piece of a planned ship.

² Richard Leake, “Plantation Journal and Business Records, 1785 June 6-1802 January 17”, Georgia Historical Society (Savannah, Georgia).

³ Department of Treasury, “Letters of Tench Coxe, Commissioner of the Revenue, Relating to the Procurement of Military, Naval, and Indian Supplies” (Washington, D.C., May 8, 1792), 195–204, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴ T. Reed Ferguson, *The John Couper Family at Cannon’s Point* (Mercer University Press, 1995) Ch. 5 “From Liberty County to St. Simons Island.”

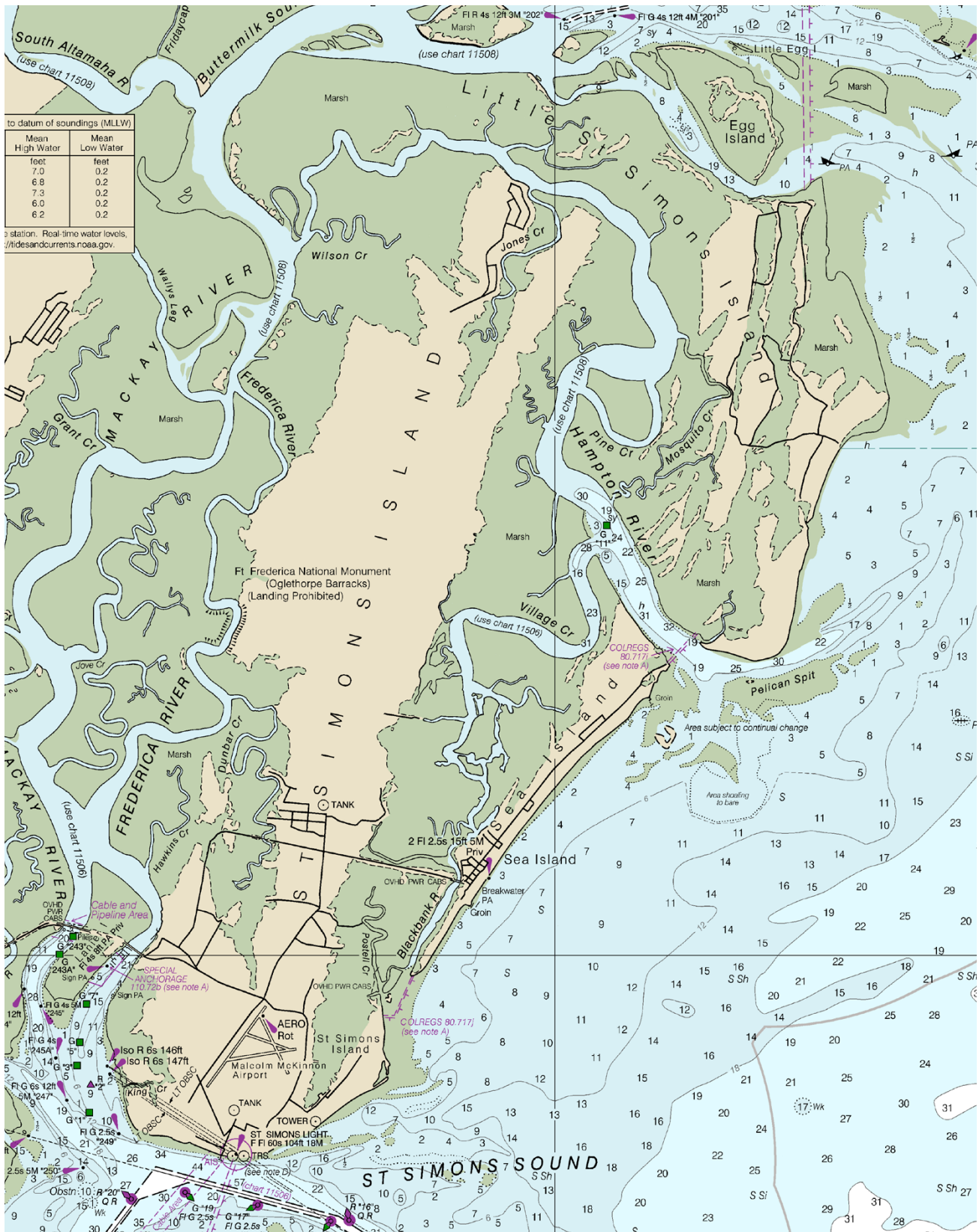


Figure 2: Excerpt of NOAA nautical chart 11502, “Doboy Sound to Fernandina”, showing St. Simons Island today. The green area surrounding the tan land represents salt marsh shallows that flood at high tide.

Slavery on the Coastal Islands

Elements in several accounts point to the relatively sparse population, lack of established housing, and difficult living conditions on the island at the time. But records from the new property owners on the island indicate that enslaved people were already living and working on the island with little oversight by the enslaving landowners.

A task-based system of enslaved labor that had developed in the South Carolina rice plantations carried over to the coastal islands of Georgia and the fledgling sea island cotton plantations there. Under the task system, enslaved people were compelled to do certain tasks for the day or week based on the time of year and the person's gender, age, and ability. Once the tasks were completed, the person spent their free time as they wished. Many enslaved people used this time to grow additional food or produce products they could sell at local markets, generating small amounts of money for themselves to purchase items to improve their own lives.⁵ It was very different from the "gang" system adopted by Chesapeake tobacco plantations and later inland cotton plantations. In the latter system, enslaved people worked all day, following the assignments of a foreman who set and enforced the pace of the work.

With the combination of the task system and the unique geography of the coastal islands, it was not uncommon for enslaved people there to work independently. Their enslavers were often absent, particularly in the uncomfortably hot and humid summer months. An overseer, often also an enslaved person, might be on hand to ensure work was done, but there were fewer constraints on the enslaved workers than there would be in the presence of a landowner. Enslaved workers tended to live in family units and participated in farming and trading. They were often skilled at using small boats to navigate the maze-like salt marsh creeks and islands, and could fish for their own food. They could also be sent to work in different locales.⁶ Some were compelled to work as boat captains and coastal pilots ferrying white landowners, other enslaved people, and cargo among the islands and up and down the coastline.

These circumstances encouraged landowners to hire out enslaved people, but also allowed for a higher number of fugitives from slavery. Maroon communities of self-emancipated, formerly enslaved people tended to be more successful at staying in hiding and surviving amid the difficult terrain of the islands. The system also allowed enslaved people to better preserve and practice cultures brought from West Africa while adapting to the languages and cultures acquired in America. As a re-

⁵ See Justene Hill Edwards, *Unfree Markets: The Slaves' Economy and the Rise of Capitalism in South Carolina* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

⁶ See Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1982): 564–99.

sult, groups like the Gullah-Geechee in Georgia were able to foster a unique creole language and culture that still exists today.⁷

Finding Enslaved Workers

While the presence of the normal task system encouraged the hiring out of enslaved people by landowners, those who were hired out for live oak timber work were subject to a very different work schedule and lifestyle. Under pressure to cut and ship an enormous amount of timber as soon as possible, both free and enslaved workers were initially spending all day, six days a week, working in the woods. There was little free time, and at first workers only had crude shelters. There is little evidence that family members of any of the enslaved or free woodcutters were present in the initial harvesting of live oak on St. Simons.

When the Navy's woodcutters first arrived from New England in 1794, the island's new landowners were just beginning to develop their properties. It is unclear how much work had begun, but infrastructure to support a labor force was still minimal. Arriving in October 1794 to follow up on Morgan's progress, Navy Captain John Barry noted that the second group of New England woodcutters who had arrived for the project were first put the task of building their own lean-to shelters to protect themselves from the weather.

After arriving on the island, Barry arranged to stay at Pierce Butler's house, which had been built at the north end of the island in the 1730s. In a letter to Barry, Butler apologized for the state of the accommodations: "The settlement is in its infancy I have not had leisure yet to do more than Lodge my Negroes"⁸

Once Barry arrived, he began to look for enslaved laborers to assist with the work. Initially, Secretary of War Henry Knox noted that "some people," likely shipwright and frigate designer Joshua Humphreys, had cautioned against using enslaved labor because the job would not be done correctly and would cost the government additional money. But with virtually no progress made since August, Barry sought local help.

The New England woodcutters were responsible for designating which trees to cut and how, and enslaved people were tasked with the arduous work of clearing the underbrush and moving cut timbers. Barry later reported that Morgan had hired out six enslaved men from plantation owner James Spalding. Barry himself hired out 10 more from plantation owner John Couper.

⁷ See "The Gullah Geechee", Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullah-geechee/>

⁸ "Pierce Butler to John Barry" October 3, 1794 in *John Barry Collection, 1791-1908*, ed. John S. Barnes (New York: New York Historical Society)

In addition to the enslaved men hired from Spalding and Couper, Morgan hired at least five more enslaved people from Richard Leake, one of the primary landowners from whose property the live oak was being harvested. Leake's records indicate that two women, identified only as Sarah and Hannah, were sent to Morgan, along with three men, Billy, Peter, and a third whose name is unclear. It appears these enslaved people were sent for Morgan's personal use. The men were hired to perform a specific short-term task of only a couple days each, while the women were hired for a month or more, likely as household servants. Leake appears to have provided additional slaves directly for timber harvesting.

Leake regularly hired out enslaved labor and occasionally paid for enslaved labor from others. On March 6, 1793, Leake recorded that he had contracted with "Mrs. Hogg" to hire out "her negro boy Billy" for a year's time at \$5 per month.⁹ It is unlikely that the enslaved people were provided to the Navy at no cost or that the enslaved people were themselves being paid for their work. The practice of "hiring out" enslaved people to a third party made economic sense to the enslaver only when the value of the contract exceeded the value of the regular work the enslaved people would otherwise be doing. Built into this calculation, however, was that the risk of death or injury during such a contract would become the responsibility of the contracting party.

These circumstances made hiring out enslaved labor to the government a more secure choice for enslaving property owners. The government was generally willing to pay good prices and could be trusted to pay on time. Both federal and state governments regularly made use of enslaved labor in this way for a variety of infrastructure projects needed by the new nation. Dangerous, arduous, or low-paying projects that required large numbers of workers were commonly left to enslaved workers, and the enslaving landowners were paid for the work.¹⁰

The enslaved workers secured by Barry were initially put to work clearing land around the live oaks to gain access. They cut through the woods to create a road for transporting the timber across the island to the only deepwater spot where a ship could land for loading, nearly 10 miles away.¹¹ In a series of letters to Morgan, Coxe outlined the shiploads of equipment and supplies that were being sent to St. Simons. It included provisions for the workers along with oxen and carts for transporting timber overland.¹²

⁹ Leake, "Plantation Journal and Business Records, 1785 June 6-1802 January 17."

¹⁰ See Ryan A. Quintana, *Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹¹ "John Barry to Tench Coxe" November 10, 1794 in *John Barry Collection, 1791-1908*.

¹² Department of Treasury, "Letters of Tench Coxe, Commissioner of the Revenue, Relating to the Procurement of Military, Naval, and Indian Supplies."

Difficulties and Delays

In addition to all the normal difficulties associated with timber work, harvesting live oak for shipbuilding had very specific requirements. Employing the unique shapes of live oak branches in constructing specific pieces for each ship meant that full-size templates of the pieces needed to be matched with specific parts of individual trees at the time of cutting. Once cut, each resulting timber had to be identified as the specific ship part it was destined to become. Because ships of different sizes and designs were being built in several shipyards along the Atlantic coast, every timber was unique and had to be shipped to a specific yard. As a result, hundreds of timbers had to be identified and sorted for specific destinations as they were cut and hauled to the dock on St. Simons. The logistics and precision required for this undertaking exponentially increased the labor involved.

The work was further complicated by the fact that many trees were rotten inside or otherwise unsuitable, but this could not be discovered until individual pieces were cut from the felled tree. Entire days of labor were often wasted on trees that proved unusable.

As the summer and fall wore on, Coxe sent more letters to Morgan outlining the ships dispatched to retrieve the timber from St. Simons and emphasizing the importance of appropriately labeling the timber for transportation to the correct shipyard. His desperation for news from Morgan seemed to grow as months passed with no response. Coxe appeared to have ongoing doubts about Morgan's reputation and abilities, but Habersham and Clay, the Savannah agents tasked with the contracting, didn't accomplish much either. None of them responded to Coxe's letters.

Pierce Butler complained in a letter to Hamilton that, as a result of Morgan's poor management of the project, the government was paying so much for the timber that the ships might as well be made of solid silver. Butler did not list specific issues or concerns, but his letter triggered a flurry of inquiries in Washington about the state of the project.

Ongoing Work

Both Morgan and Barry returned north at the end of 1794, but the work at St. Simons was far from complete. Joseph Copperthwaite, an army colonel from the American Revolution, was sent to oversee the project. He was given substantially greater authority to manage the project and make contracts as he saw fit. However, no contracts made by Copperthwaite for timber or enslaved labor have survived. Contrary to Morgan, Copperthwaite had no shipbuilding or woodworking experience and appears to have been recruited solely for his respectable back-

ground and military management. On January 5, 1795, Coxe wrote to Habersham: "... Col: Cowperthwaite is a man, personally entitled to respect here. He has been since the Revolution the High Sherrif of the City & Co. of Philada. for several years and he now commands one of the Battalions of the Philadelphia Militia."¹³

Despite returning to the north, Morgan continued to make an effort to stay involved in the timbering. He signed a contract in his own name with Richard Leake in March 1795 to buy the rights to the timber on Leake's estate. This occurred after Morgan was relieved of his duties as the government's representative, suggesting that he may have been attempting to purchase the timber rights for himself to then sell to the government.¹⁴

Though not recorded initially by Barry, Leake also appears to have provided additional enslaved people for the project. Leake kept enslaved workers on the island, though he had not planted there and his land was being cleared by the Navy. He reported that these people did not return to his other plantation on Sapelo Island until January 1796, at which point he immediately put them to work clearing fields for cotton.¹⁵ Leake sold his St. Simons property that year to James Hamilton, who planted extensive cotton on the newly cleared land.

The enslaved people held by Leake continued working during that time, suggesting that other enslaved workers hired out to the government also continued to do so for more than a year. Although they were initially tasked with transporting timber to the deepwater dock and loading it onto ships, similar experiences of enslaved workers suggest they may have also developed timbering skills specific to live oak and participated in timber harvesting. The Navy continued to have difficulty finding New England woodcutters willing to go to Georgia for the project, which increased the value of a skilled enslaved workforce.

Leake did not indicate in his journal how many enslaved people returned from St. Simons in 1796, so it's unclear whether the number rose or declined over the course of work. In 1793, Leake reported for tax purposes to McIntosh County that he enslaved 31 people. Sales records in his papers indicate that he purchased eight more people in 1800 alone.¹⁶ His land holdings expanded and contracted with purchases and sales of different properties, but his enslaved labor force grew as his experiments planting sea island cotton became more successful. The presence of enslaved workers for more than a year on St. Simons suggests that permanent housing was

¹³ Department of Treasury, "Letters of Tench Coxe, Commissioner of the Revenue, Relating to the Procurement of Military, Naval, and Indian Supplies."

¹⁴ Margaret Davis Cate, *Our Todays and Yesterdays: A Story of Brunswick and the Coastal Islands* (Brunswick, Georgia: Glover Bros., 1930), 84-85.

¹⁵ Leake, "Plantation Journal and Business Records, 1785 June 6-1802 January 17."

¹⁶ "Leake Family Estate Papers, 1773-1913." (Chapel Hill, North Carolina), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina.

constructed for them, as well as for the timbermen from New England. A mix of oyster shells, lime, and sand, known as “tabby construction,” was the common construction material used on the island to build durable foundations and walls.

Expanding Needs

The eventual success of using live oak in the construction of USS *Constitution* and other initial ships, as well as the immediate need for additional ships, prompted the government to invest in acquiring live oak habitat property. In 1800, the United States purchased the 5,600-acre Blackbeard Island, which is located just to the north of St. Simons Island. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Navy gained access to stands of live oak along the coast in the Gulf of Mexico. Live oak was harvested in these areas for decades, and enslaved labor continued to contribute to the work. Blackbeard Island is still owned by the federal government and is now the Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge.

Both in the areas purchased by the government and on other privately contracted lands, the Navy turned increasingly to local labor, including both southern white woodcutters and enslaved Black laborers. In 1799, Phineas Miller of Cumberland Island, Georgia, was hired to provide live oak framing for six new 74-gun ships of the line. This incredible demand grossly outpaced what Miller was prepared to deliver, and he scrambled for additional labor in the form of paid ship’s carpenters and enslaved laborers. In newspaper ads in the spring of 1800, Miller sought to hire out “A whole gang of Negroes,” which he expected would include families with women employed in the cotton fields and men sent to assist with timber harvesting.¹⁷

The journal of James Keen, a Navy timber supervisor sent to Blackbeard Island in 1817, includes a list of all the workers on site, including 21 enslaved men, one enslaved woman, and her child. All of these people were provided by enslaver Thomas Newell of Savannah. Newell’s grandfather was Robert Bolton, the merchant who had facilitated financial transfers between Leake and Morgan in 1794. Newell’s father was among the first exporters of sea island cotton from the region.

Keen had distinct opinions about the enslaved people he supervised during the project. He labeled six individuals as “Worthless slave”; another four were labeled “Good Slave.” He also noted that two were members of Newell’s boat crew and two were old. Of the remaining four, he had no opinion.

The use of enslaved people in harvesting wood for USS *Constitution* and other ships in the new United States Navy is not an anomaly born of some momentary, unique circumstance. Hired-out enslaved people were already being used by new state gov-

¹⁷ Virginia Steele Wood, *Live Oaking: Southern Timber for Tall Ships* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 36.

ernments to build roads, waterworks, and other major infrastructure projects that had arduous and extensive labor demands in hazardous conditions, and often at remote locales.¹⁸ The U.S. Navy's use of enslaved people in harvesting live oak extended that labor pattern from the state level to the federal level. The decision to use southern live oak in the construction of USS *Constitution*, and numerous other naval ships in the ensuing decades, created a huge demand for wood whose harvest had incredibly high risks and labor requirements. Paying enslavers for the forced labor of enslaved people was an expediency that Navy officials and contractors saw as fundamental to the job. Thus, enslaved people were essential to the construction of naval warships built to secure the very American freedoms they were denied.

St. Simons Island Today

In May 2022, the USS Constitution Museum visited St. Simons Island. The occupied portions of the island are now a bustling beach resort, but the north end of the island, where much of the live oak was originally harvested, has returned to a natural state.

Cotton plantations dominated the island in the first half of the 19th century, but collapsed with the onset of the American Civil War. Following the war, pine timber cultivation occurred on some of the island. By the end of the 1800s, wealthy industrialists discovered it as a bucolic vacation retreat and began preserving land from further development. Today, the non-profit St. Simons Island Land Trust owns much of the property where live oaks were originally harvested for the Navy. Live oak and its accompanying underbrush have now reclaimed much of the landscape.

At Cannon's Point, on the northeast corner of the island, the ruins of the Couper plantation remain. These include tabby construction slave quarters, the overseer's house, and the main house, all of which were built after the original live oak was cleared and sea island cotton was planted. The St. Simons Island Land Trust, which currently owns the Cannon's Point property, continues to conduct archaeological excavations on several sites throughout the property, including other 19th century building ruins and extensive shell middens that belonged to indigenous people who lived on the island as long as 3,000 years ago.

At Gascoigne Bluff, where ships were loaded, two of the 12 tabby slave cabins built on the Hamilton Plantation in 1820 still exist today. They are currently preserved and interpreted by the Cassina Garden Club, which has owned them since the 1920s.

¹⁸ See Ryan A. Quintana, *Making a Slave State: Political Development in Early South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).



Figure 3: Slave quarters at Gascoigne Park. Originally part of Hamilton plantation, now maintained and interpreted by the Cassina Garden Club.



Figure 4: Slave cabin at Gascoigne Park. The interior is divided in half to accommodate two enslaved families. Part of the property now owned by the Cassina Garden Club.



Figure 5: Gascoigne Bluff. Though seemingly low-lying, this is much steeper than the surrounding shorelines and is the only area of the island with deep water access. Ships of live oak were loaded here.



Figure 6: At Cannon's Point, live oak and its underbrush has grown back over the landscape. Though the variety of plant species have changed, the dense underbrush demonstrates the difficult conditions faced by woodcutters and enslaved workers in the 1790s.

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