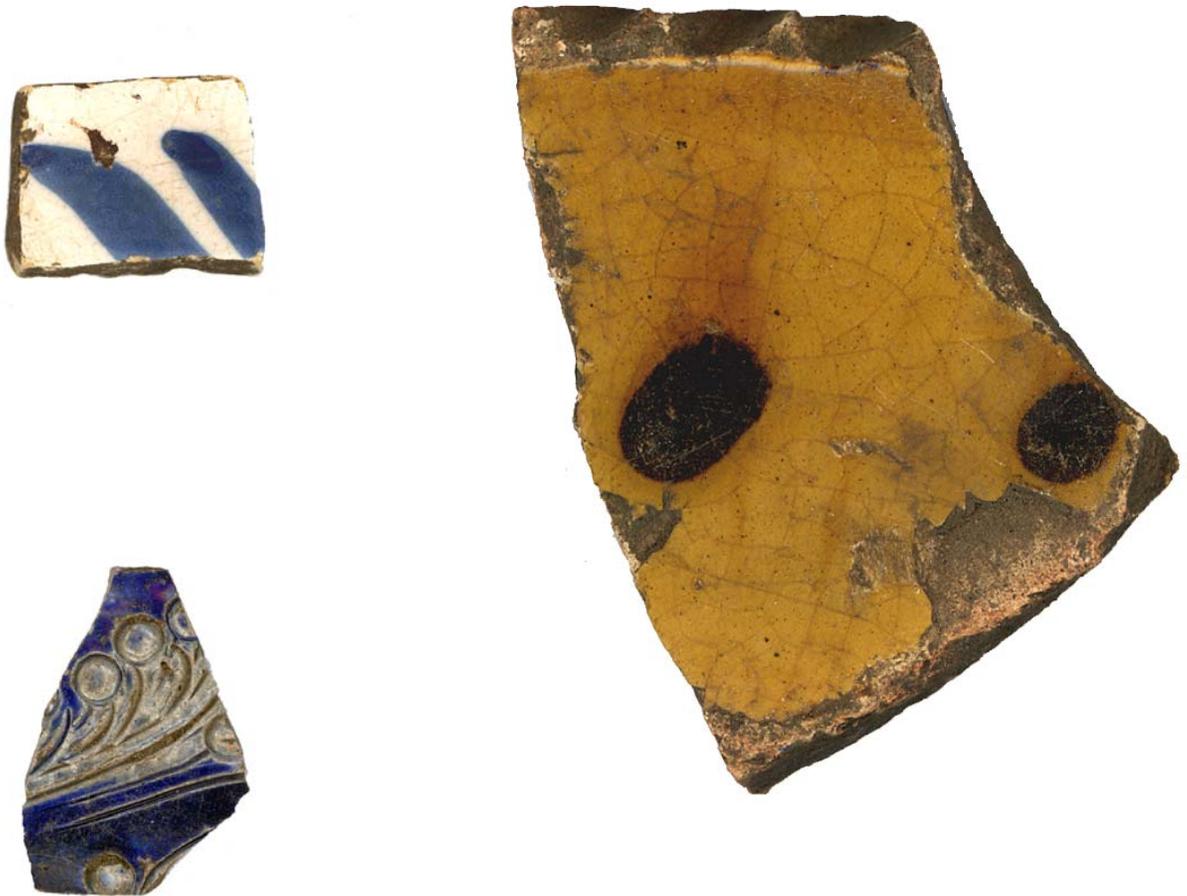


**INVESTIGATION OF AN
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY OVERSEER
SITE (38CH1278), CHRIST CHURCH
PARISH, CHARLESTON COUNTY,
SOUTH CAROLINA**



**INVESTIGATION OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY OVERSEER
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Research Series 64

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There is nothing which can better deserve our patronage than the promotion of science and literature. Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness.

-- George Washington

ABSTRACT

This study provides the results of data recovery excavations at 38CH1278, the remains of an early eighteenth century plantation settlement attributed to an overseer. The site is situated on modern-day Belle Hall Plantation, north of US 17 and east of the Mark Clark Expressway in what historically has been known as Christ Church Parish. The investigations were conducted by Chicora Foundation during July and August, 2004 for Mr. Mark Regalbuto of Plantation Partners. This work was proposed, and approved, under a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Office of Ocean and Coastal Resources Management (OCRM).

Historic research reveals that the plantation's earliest ownership can be traced to a grant to John Stephenson in 1682. The property passed to Stephenson's widow and second husband, who sold the 600-acres to Joshua Wilks. Wilks passed the property to his son, also Joshua. The younger Joshua Wilks is described in various records as a planter and he probably resided in Christ Church Parish. In 1744 Wilks sold the property, by that time up to 837-acres, to John Daniel for £2400. Daniels was a Charleston merchant and shipwright. At his death in 1747, Daniel's inventory reveals 49 slaves and various plantation products, such as potatoes, hogs, cattle, sheep, and fowl. There is, however, no evidence of a dwelling house. We believe that Daniel was an absentee owner, using the services of an overseer to manage the operations.

Historic research undertaken during these investigations included additional research into eighteenth century overseers, including analysis of newspaper ads, plantation accounts, and letters dating to the period prior to the American Revolution. These data were used to develop a historic context for eighteenth

century overseers and the associated archaeological data.

Site 38CH1278 produced a mean ceramic date of 1741 and an assemblage that was intermediate between what has been documented from eighteenth century slave and overseer sites. Research at 38CH1278 focused on the collection of information suitable for better understanding a site type for which there is very little historic or archaeological documentation.

The data recovery included close interval (10-foot) 12-inch power auger testing in the site core, originally defined as 60 by 60 feet. This was expanded in the field to cover an area 80 feet east-west by 140 feet north-south, for a total of 134 auger tests. These tests were used to define areas of high artifact density. This work explored three concentrations using a total of 775 square feet.

The excavations revealed extensive plowing across the site, with plow scars consistently running northwest-southeast. In addition, we identified what we believe are nineteenth century agricultural features representing cotton rows, which are cut through by the more recent twentieth century agricultural plowing.

The excavation units revealed only two possible cultural features - a shallow pit and a section of what may be a wall trench with interior post holes.

Artifacts include ceramics, primarily lead glazed slipware and Colono ware, tobacco pipe stems, buttons, lead flint wraps, a gun flint, a thimble, and similar items, generally in low densities, but clearly concentrated in the

primary excavation area at 165-175R140-150, 185-195R150.

Mechanical stripping took place in four areas to further explore isolated auger tests producing dense remains, as well as the possible wall trench section. This work continued to reveal nineteenth and twentieth century agricultural activity, and one additional feature.

We believe the absence of “English” architectural remains may be explained by the structure’s above grade construction using small piers. Similar architectural findings have been identified by Chicora at the dwelling of a yeoman planter in Christ Church Parish from the late eighteenth century.

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A CONTEXT FOR EIGHTEENTH CENTURY OVERSEERS

Introduction

The literature on plantation overseers is dominated by two secondary sources. The earliest of these, *The Southern Plantation Overseer As Revealed in His Letters* (Bassett 1925) is based entirely on the letters of overseers on James Polk's absentee cotton plantation in Yalobusha County, Mississippi and the research dates exclusively to the nineteenth century. While many find Bassett's work not only complete, but also ground breaking, in today's light it must also be criticized as creating a stereotype that has lasted well into the twenty-first century. Bassett claims that the overseers came from small farmers with little education and comments that "I can think of no other form of industry in which so much property was under the management of such illiterate men" (Bassett 1925:9). He sees nineteenth century plantation white society as consisting of essentially two classes - planters and overseers and comments that "each was a class in society and between them in social matters was a frozen ocean" (Bassett 1925:2). He notes that few of the overseers were of an "ambitious and advancing class" and that most were "unimaginative" and uninterested in the future. Bassett seems to do much to create the current view of overseers as "white trash."

This view was only partially moderated by the work of William Scarborough (1966). This work, too, is focused on the nineteenth century, although it pulls from far more diverse and representative primary documents. Scarborough asserts that the overseer system was introduced into America by the Virginia Company and was modeled on the English practice of using bailiffs to manage estates in Britain (Scarborough

1966:3). He claims that early overseers, presumably in Virginia, were known as bailiffs, although we have not found the term in any of the South Carolina records. He also asserts that the early overseers were indentured servants whose terms of service had expired.

Scarborough claims that a "unique" feature of the colonial overseer system was "the practice of leasing developed plantations, with slaves and stock, to overseers for a share of the crop." In exchange for the management and care of the plantation and its slaves, the overseer would receive "one-third of the net proceeds from the sale of the crops" and Scarborough claims that long-term leases of up to 21 years were "common." Moreover, he states that this practice disappeared by the end of the colonial period "primarily because it encouraged methods resulting in soil exhaustion" (Scarborough 1966:4). Otherwise, he reports "the managerial system in the pre-Revolutionary period differed in no important respect from that employed in the nineteenth century." He repeated Bassett's origin from farmers assertion stating, "springing largely from the yeoman farmer class of society, the overseer was not noted for his erudite comprehension of principles of scientific agriculture," although he does note that many overseers were the sons of planters. He also believes that all overseers could be divided into three classes (although it isn't clear if this division began in the eighteenth century): those who were the sons of planters who took on overseeing as training for later careers as planters, those who were "amateur" overseers that consisted of a fluid population of limited competence who could do little else and who offered their services at very low rates, and the

“professional” overseers who “energetically and conscientiously pursued their profession” (Scarborough 1966:5-6).

Scarborough suggests that the class of amateur overseers was the primary reason that the profession was so vilified by planters. Moreover, he claims that the task of directing (and thereby associating with) slaves was “distasteful” to most whites and was “held in social disrepute by a large segment of the general public” (Scarborough 1966:196). Consequently, the overseer was “relegated to a status in southern society far beneath that of the planter and even below that of the small independent farmer.” He believe that, at least for the nineteenth century,

With few exceptions, members of the propriety class failed to accord their overseers the respect to which their responsible positions entitled them and did little to encourage them to take pride in their profession. Moreover, many planters imposed demands upon their subordinates which few men could reasonably be expected to meet. Few plantation owners really appreciated the difficulties faced by those who directed their agricultural enterprises. Another factor which lessened the attractiveness of the occupation was the social isolated which the overseers were obliged to endure. Shunned by his employer, forbidden to fraternize with the slaves, discouraged from entertaining company, and obliged by the nature of his arduous duties to remain constantly at his post, the overseer lived in a virtual social

vacuum (Scarborough 1966:197).

He also believed that these factors, coupled with the lack of opportunity for advancement, caused the best overseers to seek other fields or to become owners themselves. In the nineteenth century Scarborough also identified differences in overseer quality within different regions, with those in rice and sugar areas “superior” to those in “any other staple area” - with the demand for superior overseers highest along the rice coast of South Carolina (Scarborough 1966:199). Unfortunately, he provides little evidence to support this position.

Much of these observations are repeated by Clark (1966) who examined overseers on South Carolina plantations during the mid to late antebellum. Clark believes the overseer “class” came from the small farmer and landless whites, carrying with themselves the burden of “questionable ability and character” (Clark 1966:91). He notes that in the nineteenth century the “overseer class as a whole had a bad reputation, perhaps with some justification” (Clark 1966:92). He notes that the reputation came from several factors - one was that the bad overseers attracted much attention, another is the planter often used the overseer as the scapegoat for the inhumanities present on the plantation. He also notes that the qualities of the overseer were based almost exclusively on the individual’s productivity - which led to many of these inhumanities.

Clark also believes that during the nineteenth century the overseer began to take on more oversight of slave life, ranging from food to shelter to religious training to medical attention (Clark 1966:94) - and this of course is consistent with archaeological thought that suggests through the eighteenth century into the nineteenth many Africanisms were likely replaced by molded behavior.

More recent studies of antebellum overseers include Schantz (1987) who examined

the Ball papers to reconstruct their nineteenth century overseers and Steffen (1996) who explored the relationship between overseers and the agricultural reform movement of the 1820s and early 1830s. While all of these works provide interesting and informative views of nineteenth century overseers, one wonders whether these nineteenth century generalizations are appropriate for eighteenth century circumstances. The difficulty in understanding the eighteenth century overseer is, in many respects, similar to the problems facing any detailed analysis of nineteenth century overseer lifeway – few left any accounts beyond simple economic statements associated with the plantation operation and slave activities. The overseer is, in many respects, just as invisible as the slaves themselves.

In addition, research on colonial overseers is further hampered by dearth of agricultural literature – all of which dates to the early and mid-nineteenth century. There are no journals such as *The American Agriculturalist* (begun in 1843), *DeBow's Review* (begun in 1846), *The Farmer and Planter* (begun in 1850), *The South Carolina Agriculturalist* (begun in 1856), *The Southern Agriculturalist and Register of Rural Affairs* (begun in 1828), or the *Southern Cultivator* (begun in 1843). There are also far fewer plantation records surviving from the eighteenth century.

And when we examine the literature looking for analyses of eighteenth century overseeing we find much archaeological literature exploring antebellum overseers (for example, Otto and Burns 1983), but virtually no archaeological literature for the colonial period (except our own work at the Mazyck Plantation [Trinkley et al. 2003]) and very little historical documentation. One interesting exception is the work by Walsh (1997) in Virginia, where she attempts to place the early overseers of “King” Carter in perspective. She notes that Carter supplied these overseers with little more in the way of domestic goods than he did his African American slaves. Using inventories, account

books, and other documents she finds that Carter provided only basic bedding, cooking pots, and usually a gun. She notes that that a 1733 inventory of overseer goods reveals that only 33% of the overseer houses had a bed, only 28% had blankets, 42% had bed rugs, and only 5% had a table, chest, or chamber pot (Walsh 1997:91). Based on this inventory she suggests that the overseers had only a few cast-offs and hand-me-downs. She also observes that on outlying quarters, white overseers and their families lived in “crude houses of similar construction [to the slaves, i.e., small, earthfast structures built of logs standing or lying directly on the ground or erected in postholes, with wooden, clay-daubed chimneys];” the only noticeable difference was that the overseers were afforded more space, typically a two-room house measuring about 16 by 24 feet (Walsh 1997:181).

An interesting historical account is provided by Morgan (1995) who examined an eighteenth century account of the Vineyard Pen on Jamaica. There he found the isolated white overseer had constant interaction with the slaves that included sexual relations, trade of goods and products, and especially the trade and purchase of provision crops. He suggests that the “familiarity of the pen owed much to the isolation and lonely existence of its overseer who, despite his formal powers, depended on the slaves for fellowship, even for friendship” (Morgan 1995:71). In many ways it appears that the pen was a more insular – and isolated – place for the overseer than for the slaves, who at least had their own community. Morgan notes that this extraordinary account reveals that exploitation and mutuality coexisted, with both parties working out the arrangements necessary for daily life.

The Legal Origin of South Carolina Overseers

In 1712 a law was passed making it a legal obligation for many South Carolina plantations to employ overseers:

And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that no person whatsoever, after the ratification of this Act, shall settle or manage any plantation, cow-pen or stock, that shall be six miles distant from his usual place of abode, and wherein six negroes or slaves shall be employed, without one or more white persons living and residing upon the same plantation, upon penalty or forfeiture of forty shillings for each month so offending (Cooper and McCord n.d.:363).

The 1712 date is no accident. It was about that time that the number of slaves imported dramatically increased to about 600 a year and just a year earlier Governor Robert Gibbes made a strong speech to the Commons House concerning the “great quantities of negroes” that were being brought into South Carolina, their increasing tendency to be “insolent and mischievous” and the threat their majority posed to white Carolinians (Edgar 1998:69).

With minor alterations this act continued until the Civil War. For example, in 1726 the act required owners to employ one white person for every 10 slaves (Cooper and McCord n.d.:272). Nevertheless, it appears to have been frequently ignored and in 1742 a letter to the *South Carolina Gazette* (November 8, 1742) complained that the act met with much “discouragement” and “various Pretences” aimed at its subversion. This was in spite of no fewer than at least five slave conspiracies between 1702 and 1737 (Wallace 1951:185).

Colonial Overseers as Portrayed in Newspaper Advertisements

While it would be easy to suggest that most eighteenth century plantation overseers were sought and hired through newspaper ads (like those we examined in the *South Carolina*

Gazette and are discussed below), such is almost certainly not the case, given the relatively few advertisements and the great many plantations. We cannot, of course, claim that the ads are representative – such advertising required money on the part of the owner, access to papers on the part of both the potential overseer and the owner, and an ability to read. Moreover, there are clearly cases, such as Henry Laurens, where no advertising ever took place at least in the *South Carolina Gazette* (there is a note that Laurens placed a blind ad in the *Country Journal* [Rogers et al. 1977:251n; no such paper is listed in Moore 1988]). Nevertheless, the *South Carolina Gazette* does provide at least a small sampling of what might have been the prevailing attitude regarding what made a good overseer, what qualifications were needed, and how such individuals were hired.

Recognizing these limitations we examined the indices for the *South Carolina Gazette* prepared by John H. and Gary S. Wilson (ESCN Database Reports, Mount Pleasant) and pulled out those listings under “overseer – employment.” The selected years were 1734-1738, 1744-1748, 1754-1758, and 1764-1768. A total of 206 potential ads were identified (Table 4). These were then examined, with complete transcriptions made of all identified ads. Since there were often multiple names referenced (and indexed) in a single ad and there were ads by overseers seeking employment, the actual sample consists of 125 advertisements. Some are for well-known Carolina planters, such as John Drayton, but more are from smaller planters and are perhaps a little more reflective of local expectations.

Most ads were repeated on three consecutive weeks, although a few ran only one week or as many as nine weeks. We are unfamiliar with advertising costs or possible discounts, so the importance of this is unclear – except that it was a practice that continued over the 40 year span, suggesting that multiple week ads tended to be more successful in generating responses. During this time period ads were

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Table 4.
Newspaper advertisements examined in this research.

Name of Plantation Owner	Date of Ads (South Carolina Gazette)				Name of Plantation Owner	Date of Ads (South Carolina Gazette)			
Codin	08/24/1734	08/31/1734	09/7/1734		Beresford, Richard	01/27/1757	02/3/1757	02/10/1757	
Baker	09/7/1734				Moore, John	02/3/1757	02/10/1757	02/17/1757	
Wright, R.	10/5/1734	10/12/1734	10/19/1734		Russ, Rachel	02/3/1757	02/10/1757	02/17/1757	
Beal	11/2/1734	11/16/1734			Timothy (publisher)	03/3/1757	03/10/1757	03/17/1757	
Lucas	11/2/1734	11/9/1734	11/16/1734		Customs House	07/21/1757	08/4/1757		
Broughton, Nath.	07/5/1735	07/12/1735	07/16/1735	07/26/1735	Russ, Rachel	08/25/1757			
Mazyck, Isaac	11/8/1735				Pinckney, William	08/4/1757			
Ravenel, Rene	11/8/1735				Boate, John	10/13/1757			
Whitaker, Benj.	10/25/1735	11/1/1735	11/8/1735	11/15/1735 11/22/1735	Drayton, John	10/13/1757			
Hume, Sophia	12/27/1735				Lake, Richard	10/13/1757			
Godfrey	12/6/1735	12/13/1735	12/20/1735		Peronneau, Elizabeth	10/13/1757			
Lake	12/6/1735	12/13/1735	12/20/1735						
Yeomans, William	12/6/1735	12/13/1735	12/20/1735		Lowndes, Charles	09/27/1758	10/2/1758		
					Smith, Benjamin	09/27/1758			
Hume, Sophia	01/31/1736	01/10/1736			Beane, Thomas	10/2/1758	10/6/1758		
Saunders, Roger	01/31/1736	02/7/1736	02/14/1736		Colleton	10/2/1758	10/6/1758		
Hall	03/20/1736	03/27/1736	04/3/1736		Philp, Robert	10/2/1758	10/6/1758		
Osmond, James	03/20/1736	03/27/1736	04/3/1736		Raper, Robert	10/2/1758	10/6/1758		
Peronneau, Henry	03/20/1736	03/27/1736	04/3/1736		Burn, John	10/27/1758	11/3/1758	11/10/1758	
Codin, Benjamin	03/6/1736	03/13/1736	03/20/1736		Lake, Richard	11/10/1758	11/17/1758	11/24/1758	
Hume, R.	08/7/1736				Mayne, Charles	11/3/1758	11/10/1758		
Cooper, Tho.	09/4/1736	09/11/1736	09/18/1736		Cahusc, Peter	12/15/1758	12/22/1758	12/29/1758	
D'Harriette, Benjamin	12/4/1736	12/11/1736	12/18/1736		Grimke, Frederick	12/22/1758			
Cattell, Wm.	12/4/1736	12/11/1736	12/18/1736						
					Simmons, James	01/7/1764	01/14/1764		
Elliot, Thomas	02/16/1738	02/23/1738	03/2/1738		Smith, Henry	10/22/1764	10/29/1764		
Grimke, Frederick	02/16/1738	02/23/1738	03/2/1738		Blind Ad	10/22/1764			
Baker, Dr.	05/11/1738				Blind Ad	10/29/1764			
Roger	05/11/1738	05/18/1738	05/25/1738		Blind Ad	11/12/1764			
					Blind Ad	11/19/1764			
Izard, Charles	01/2/1744	01/9/1744			Blind Ad	11/26/1764			
Jensy, Thomas	01/30/1744	01/23/1744			Lowndes, Rawlins	11/5/1764	11/12/1764	11/19/1764	
Edwards	06/11/1744				Blind Ad	11/5/1764			
Beauchamp, Adam	07/9/1744	07/16/1744	07/23/1744		Blind Ad	12/10/1764			
Whitaker, Benjamin	09/24/1744	10/1/1744	10/8/1744	10/15/1744	Blind Ad	12/17/1764			
Fowler, James	10/8/1744	10/15/1744	10/22/1744		Grimke, Frederick	12/24/1764	12/31/1764		
					Marion, James	12/24/1764	12/31/1764		
Whitaker, Benjamin	07/13/1745	07/22/1745	07/29/1745		Blind Ad	12/24/1764			
Rufledge, Andrew	08/5/1745	08/26/1745	09/2/1745		Blind Ad	12/24/1764			
Bendon, Stephen	12/16/1745				Blind Ad	12/3/1764			
					Blind Ad	12/31/1764			
Rutledge	08/4/1746	08/11/1746	08/23/1746		Deas, John	01/12/1765	01/19/1765	01/26/1765	
Freeman, William G.	10/18/1746	10/27/1746	11/3/1746		Lowndes, Rawlins	01/12/1765	01/19/1765	01/26/1765	02/2/1765 02/9/1765
					Matthewes, Anthony	01/19/1765	01/26/1765	02/2/1765	
Hill, Elizabeth	02/9/1747	02/16/1747	02/23/1747		Blind Ad	01/19/1765			
Timothy, Peter	10/19/1747	10/26/1747			MacKenzie, John	01/26/1765	02/2/1765	02/09/1765	
					Blind Ad	01/26/1765			
Allen, John	01/25/1748	02/1/1748	02/8/1748		Marion, James	01/7/1765			
Fenwicke, Edward	02/15/1748	02/22/1748	02/29/1748		Smith, Henry	02/9/1765	02/16/1765	2/23/1765	
Stoutenburgh, Luke	10/17/1748	10/24/1748	10/31/1748		Lejac, Francis	03/9/1765	03/23/1765		
					Brewton, Miles	05/18/1765	06/1/1765		
Harris, Richard	01/29/1754	02/5/1754			Lynch, Thomas	06/22/1765	06/29/1765	07/6/1765	
Timothy (publisher)	01/29/1754				Gadsden, Christopher	06/8/1765	06/15/1765	06/22/1765	
Timothy (publisher)	02/12/1754	02/19/1754			Raper, Robert	07/13/1765	07/20/1765	07/27/1765	
Stoutenburgh, Luke	02/19/1754	02/26/1754			Stoutenburgh, Luke	07/27/1765	08/3/1765	08/10/1765	08/24/1765 08/31/1765
Timothy (publisher)	07/4/1754				Harvey, John	09/21/1765	10/5/1765		
Beresford	12/26/1754				Smith, Henry	09/21/1765	09/28/1765		
Lloyd, William	12/26/1754				Blind Ad	07/14/1766			
Logan, William	12/26/1754				Blind Ad	07/21/1766			
Pickering, Joseph	12/26/1754				Blind Ad	07/27/1766			
Wright, James	12/26/1754				Harleston & Bonneau	10/27/1766	11/3/1766	11/10/1766 11/17/1766 11/24/1766 12/1/1766 12/8/1766 12/15/1766	
					Smith, George	11/10/1766			
Bee	01/16/1755	01/23/1755			Hume, Robert	11/17/1766	11/24/1766		
Logan, William	01/2/1755	01/9/1755			Parker, William	11/17/1766	11/24/1766		
Pickering, Joseph	01/2/1755	01/9/1755	01/23/1755		Quash, Robert	11/17/1766	11/24/1766	12/1/1766	
Lining, John	01/9/1755	01/16/1755	01/23/1755		Smith, Benjamin	11/17/1766	11/24/1766	12/1/1766	
Simmons, William	01/9/1755	01/16/1755	01/23/1755		Blind Ad	12/01/1766			
Wright, Charles	02/20/1755	02/27/1755			Blind Ad	12/22/1766			
Timothy (publisher)	03/13/1755	03/20/1755	03/27/1755		Beresford, Richard	12/29/1766	01/5/1767	01/12/1767	
Gaette, George	03/27/1755	04/3/1755	04/10/1755						
Beresford	04/3/1755				Harleston & Bonneau	01/5/1767	01/12/1767		
Logan, William	04/3/1755				Blind Ad	02/16/1767			
Timothy (publisher)	06/19/1755	07/3/1755			Blind Ad	02/2/1767			
Heyward, Henry	07/17/1755	07/31/1755			Blind Ad	02/9/1767			
Timothy (publisher)	07/3/1755				Manwell, Walter	06/15/1767	06/22/1767		
Drayton, John	09/19/1755	09/25/1755	10/2/1755	10/9/1755 10/16/1755	Stoutenburgh, Luke	07/6/1767	07/13/1767	07/20/1767	
Timothy (publisher)	09/19/1755				Corbett, Thomas	08/24/1767	08/31/1767		
Mayne, Charles	10/23/1755	10/30/1755	11/6/1755	11/13/1755	Thomson, George	08/3/1767	08/10/1767	08/17/1767	
Middleton, Henry	11/13/1755	11/20/1755	11/27/1755		Blind Ad	11/23/1767			
Rutledge, Andrew	11/6/1755	11/13/1755	12/11/1755		Pringle, Sam.	12/12/1767	10/19/1767	10/26/1767	
Timothy (publisher)	11/6/1755	11/13/1755			Blind Ad	12/14/1767			
Fauchereaud, Charles	12/25/1755				Gibbes, William	12/7/1767	12/14/1767		
Pinckney, William	12/25/1755				Blind Ad	12/7/1767			
Smith, Henry	12/25/1755				Blind Ad	01/18/1768			
Timothy (publisher)	11/27/1755	12/4/1755	12/11/1755		Blind Ad	01/25/1768			
					Gadsden, Christopher	01/4/1768			
Pinckney, William	01/1/1756				Blind Ad	01/4/1768			
Johns, John	01/15/1756	01/29/1756			Beresford, Richard	05/9/1768	05/16/1768	05/23/1768	
Lining, John	01/22/1756	01/29/1756			Logan, William	05/9/1768	05/16/1768	05/23/1768	
Dannom, James	02/19/1756	02/26/1756			Pringleau, Samuel	07/18/1768	07/25/1768	08/1/1768	
Simmons, William	02/19/1756				Blind Ad	11/14/1768			
Smith, John	02/19/1756	02/26/1756			Cannon, Daniel	11/21/1768	12/1/1768	12/8/1768	
Pringle, Robert	02/26/1756	03/11/1756			Blind Ad	11/21/1768			
Bullock, James	02/5/1756	02/12/1756	02/19/1756		Gibbes, William	12/1/1768			
Branford, William	03/25/1756	04/8/1756			Blind Ad	12/1/1768			
Holman, Thomas	03/25/1756	04/1/1756	04/8/1756		Blind Ad	12/15/1768			
Hutchinson, Thomas	03/25/1756	04/1/1756			Blind Ad	12/22/1768			
Lloyd, William	09/2/1756	09/9/1756	09/16/1756		Blind Ad	12/29/1768			
					Blind Ad	12/8/1768			

almost always signed by the owner or his agent. In the 125 ads, only 22 (about 18%) were blind ads with respondents contacting the newspaper publisher. However, fully half of these ads (11) appeared from 1764 through 1768 – suggesting that toward the end of the century there might have been an increase in blind ads. This in turn may mean that planters were becoming reluctant to deal with those unqualified applicants or, alternatively, that the number of applicants had increased to the point where planters could be far more selective and chose to weed through the applicants without taking the time of a face-to-face meeting.

We also found that there were very few ads during April, May, and June – the major crop season – and began to pick up in July and reaching their peak in October through March. Planters appear to have stuck it out with even poor overseers until the crops were harvested and then began looking in earnest for replacements during cool weather when, if need be, they could manage the plantation activities themselves. There were relatively few ads placed during the planting season that asked for immediate replacements – and those that occurred were found only in the 1764-1768 period. This may suggest that the number of potential overseers was increasing and that planters were less willing to suffer along with a poor manager, realizing that replacements could be obtained fairly quickly.

Of course, we have few contract examples, so it is uncertain whether planters might be forced to keep even bad overseers to see out a contract. We are inclined, however, to believe that most overseers served at the will of the owner, subject to dismissal at any time (based primarily on the Laurens papers, where overseers seem to be dismissed quickly, without any comment concerning their contract).

As the ads were read, we identified six areas of special note. The first category was the position being advertised. The next were the various qualifications or requirements. We

abstracted out family ties. Although these are certainly specified requirements, they seemed to us to be in a different category; reasonably one could be “responsible” with or without a wife. We believe there are other factors at play causing owners to be specific in terms of family. There were also some ads where knowledge of specific crops or activities (such as brick making or sawing) was specified. Again, this information could reasonably have been included in the qualifications section, but we again felt that there were some specific driving forces that caused owners to note specific crops or activities. There was the category we termed “rewards,” or compensation for the job. And finally, there was a category – appearing only in the last decade of our research – where owners were providing specific information on slaves either on the plantation or that the overseer might bring with him.

Position Advertised

We find that most (110 or 88%) specifically use the term “overseer” with no other qualifier. An additional eight ads (6%) request a “manager” or an individual to manage the plantation. While the importance of this distinction is unclear – at least in the ads themselves – the choice in words might well be important (as suggested by the Henry Laurens papers). The request for managers is so small that nothing can be made of the different dates – managerial ads are found scattered in 1744, 1757, 1758, 1764, and 1765. The remaining ads used no specific term, but reading made it clear that the owner was applying for someone to “oversee” planting, plantation activities, and slave management.

Qualifications or Requirements

During the first few years of our sample we found a very few ads that specified only “any person wanting” an overseer’s position should apply. This very quickly gave way to far more specific requirements. Review of Table 2 reveals that there was a significant period of

INVESTIGATION OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY OVERSEER SITE

Table 5., cont.
Analysis of Ads

Date	Position Offered										Requirements										Family Ties		Rewards			Specific Crops		Slaves				
	overseer	manager/master	sup person working	qualified	experienced	good character	good and faithful	sober	industrious	discreet	can read	capable able	can read/write	well recommended	understands plantation business	understands planting	understands sawing	understands brick making	understands husbandry	understands gardening	with wife/family	single only	environment	shares	10% wt indigo on hire	share	suitable wages	indigo	rice	indigo & rice	on plantation	any/ being own
1/1764	x																															
10/1764	x																															
10/1764	x																															
10/1764	x																															
11/1764	x																															
12/1764	x																															
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11/1768	x																															
12/1768	x																															

advertising (from 1746 through 1756) when very few specific requirements were itemized. Before that time owners specified that potential overseers be experienced or qualified and have good character in about equal proportions. A few were somewhat more specific, asking for individuals who understood the operation of a plantation. Only one owner specifically demanded an individual with knowledge in planting or sowing, while another wanted an overseer with knowledge of gardening.

What was common during this early period - as well as later - was the requirement that the prospective overseer come with good recommendations. Throughout the sampling period, we found that 85 of the 125 ads (68%) specifically mention that applicants must have recommendations. This emphasis on

recommendations seems to increase through time; while only 11 of the 28 ads up to 1746 (39%) mention recommendations, 84% of the ads from 1746 through 1756 and 72% of the ads from 1757 through 1768 require recommendations.

The number of additional requirements for employment also increases through time. During the period from 1746 through 1756 only four ads placed other demands on applicants - that they understand the plantation business, understand planting, or understand husbandry. By 1757, however, the demands were far greater, expanding to include faithfulness, sobriety, industry, the ability to read, discretion, and faithfulness. Demand also dramatically increased for overseers with experience in sawing, planting, and brick making. For example, sobriety is not mentioned in any of the

ads prior to 1757; from that date on it is found in 10 ads (17%). Two ads demand discretion and one calls for an individual who is “not passionate.” These all appear to refer to the treatment of slaves, with “not passionate” most likely used in the context of slow to anger.

Sawing is not mentioned until 1764 and brick making is not mentioned until 1766 – suggesting that both of these activities were perhaps very minor undertakings earlier in the Colonial period. Alternatively, earlier in the period these specialized activities may not have been auxiliary to cropping and the property owner might have sent out not an overseer, but a brickmaker. As the activities became more common and were associated with cropping, it might have been necessary to advertise for an overseer who also had special skills. Regardless, it suggests a basic change in the plantation economy.

While the ability to read might seem to be a significant issue for plantation management (receiving instructions from the owner, reporting plantation activities, keeping track of plantation accounts), only one of the ads specifically mentions this issue and it is a very early ad (from 1736).

Family Ties

Less than a quarter (23%) of the ads has any mention of family ties. Of these 14 (or 48%) prefer (or don’t object to) a man with a wife. Seven of these ads focus specifically on the wife’s ability to manage or tend a dairy or poultry yard. This suggests that at least a few planters looked for, or at least approved of, a team – one to handle planting and slaves and the other to focus on dairy and poultry operations. In addition, single men would typically require a housekeeper – necessitating the assignment of a slave minimally for cooking and washing tasks. The plantation owner would not lose slave labor if the overseer came with his own housekeeper.

There were, however, those ads that called specifically for a single man and an explanation here is uncertain. It may be that owners felt white women would agitate for their husbands to leave the plantation and move to where there were whites and better housing. Regardless, there does not seem to be any change in the frequency of single overseers through time, suggesting that this may have been entirely idiosyncratic.

Rewards

The ads provide relatively few details concerning payment – an area where individual plantation papers provide far more information. The one statement frequently repeated is that the selected candidate would receive “encouragement.” This might be phrased in a variety of ways – “find Encouragement,” “meet with very good Encouragement,” “may meet due Encouragement,” “will meet with great Encouragement” – but some version is found in 62% of the ads. Its use does vary over time. During the initial period from 1732 up to 1746, it is found in 61% of the ads. Between 1746 through 1756, when requirements were rarely mentioned, the term is used in 94% of the ads. Then in the later period, from 1757 through 1768, it is found in only 52% of the ads. The term is used with other trades, such as a June 15, 1767 advertisement seeking, “A person properly qualified to teach reading, writing and arithmetick, in a private family in the country, may meet with suitable encouragement.” But the phrase is found very infrequently outside of the overseer trade – suggesting that it is a “code” or had a meaning that is not entirely clear today.

Only two of the 125 ads (2%) mention that the overseer would be paid in “shares,” or a share of the plantation’s crop – a form of payment that previous researchers claim was common during the Colonial period. A single ad, from 1757, specifies that the overseer “may have in lieu of wages 10 lb weight for every 110 lb which shall be made of both good and bad

quality" indigo on the plantation. The first ad mentioning wages ("will give suitable wages") was also listed in 1757. Four additional ads after 1757 again specifically mention wages, for example "may depend on very good wages," or "extraordinary wages will be given."

Interpretation is difficult, but we are inclined to believe that the single reference to "in lieu of wages," coupled with the infrequent mention of a practice that was supposedly common, indicates that Colonial overseers operated far more often on wages than on any share of the plantation's profits. This is further supported by the individual contracts we have been able to identify, as well as the various letters and comments by Henry Laurens. At least in Colonial South Carolina there seems to have been little hiring based on "shares."

Finally, as will be discussed in greater detail below, there were different arrangements concerning living expenses. Some owners were liberal in what would be provided in addition to wages, while others required their overseers to pay their own living costs, sometimes at least as advances on their wages.

Specific Crops

During the earliest period from 1732 through 1746 none of the ads mention the crops being planted or require the overseer to have specific crop experience. From 1746 through 1756, however, fully 94% of the ads mention a specific crop - rice, indigo, or both. After 1756 there seems to be a gradual decline in this practice, with only 52% of the ads mentioning a crop (although as previously noted there were more common mentions of brick making and sawing).

Taken together, indigo alone is specifically mentioned in 24 ads, while rice alone is mentioned in only eight. While swamp cultivation of rice was certainly a specialized skill (one 1767 ads calls for an overseer, "well acquainted with the management of river

swamp lands"), indigo appears to have been a far more difficult crop to raise and, especially process. One ad, for example, specifically calls for an overseer capable of "managing 7 or 8 vats."

Slaves

The final category includes mentions of slaves - either slaves on the plantation or the overseer's ability to bring with him slaves. These are issues that appear only late in the advertisements. Beginning in 1764 there are occasional mentions of the number of slaves on the plantation - ranging from only a "few" to as many as 60. Only seven of the ads mention a number, but this practice seems to be something that was gaining in popularity during the late Colonial period - perhaps indicating that some owners were concerned that their prospective overseers understand the extent of his duties. The numbers, however, are much greater than individuals such as Laurens suggested were appropriate and this may indicate a market pressure - owners may have been attempting to cut production costs by requiring fewer overseers to manage larger labor pools. Alternatively, we can't dismiss that Laurens "guidelines" may have been prescriptions that bore little resemblance to reality.

Another issue that comes up very late in the ads is the owners' willingness to accept overseers bringing their own slaves onto the plantation. There are four ads that specifically allow the overseer to bring a "few," "one or two," or in one case "less than eight" slaves to work on the plantation either on shares or for hire. This may signal that late in the Colonial period more overseers were accumulating wealth and directing it toward the purchase of slaves from whom they could significantly supplement their income - a situation that has been suggested by some plantation accounts. Here an alternative explanation is that in the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, more individuals were entering the ranks of overseers who already had a few slaves. Why

smaller planters or yeoman farmers would turn away from independence to pursue overseeing is uncertain, although the economic pressures before and after the Revolution may have been contributory.

Overseers Advertising for Themselves

In the sample of 206 ads there are seven where individuals are seeking employment as overseers (about 3%). These fall into three categories. One is a general advertisement – someone seeking employment as an overseer – which accounts for three ads. For example there is the 1758 ad stating, “Any gentleman that hath occasion for an overseer, the subscriber’s time being near elapsed in Watboe employ, is willing to undertake the management of a plantation on reasonable encouragement.” A second category, in which two ads fall, are those for individuals specifically knowledgeable concerning indigo production. An example of this class is the 1754 announcement, “Pierre Fore, . . . having been to several years employed in the making of Indico [in] St. Domingo, for which he flatters himself he is fully qualified, is desirous of employ in that business in this province.” The final class of ad is by those who recently arrived in South Carolina and by virtue of their farming experience were seeking employment. One such ad (from 1765) states, “A Farmer, just arrived from England, will be glad to serve under any gentleman Planter, as an Overseer in a plantation for one to two years, on reasonable terms.”

These ads are so infrequent that relatively little can be made from them, except perhaps that the market was sufficient tight that few had the motivation to advertise, thinking they would find employment through word of mouth.

While difficult to interpret, those ads of “recently arrived” farmers might suggest that they felt one or two years of overseeing would better qualify them for the operation of their own plantation. Or the time limitation may

simply have indicated a reluctance to commit for a longer period.

Henry Laurens and His Overseers

Henry Laurens (1724-1792) was a successful and wealthy merchant and planter in South Carolina. His papers, largely published, provide a wealth of exceptional information on his attitudes toward, and dealings with, his various overseers. He is, however, somewhat unusual in not only being a planter, but also a factor.

Hiring and Salaries

There are relatively few occasions where Laurens outlines what he wants from an overseer, but one occurs in a 1765 letter where he states, “a capable, discreet Man, and excellent hand at damming & ditching, one that would abide diligently & soberly at his work shall have great encouragement from me & I am sure that it must be either his own fault or because of promotion if we should afterwards part” (Rogers 1976:6). The similarity to the wording of newspaper advertisements can’t be accidental – certainly the issues of capability, discretion, diligence, and sobriety have to have been at the forefront of all overseer requirements. In another letter, which actually explains his reasoning for firing an overseer, he remarks that “merely Sauntering about a field for the part of a day was but a very Small part of the business of a Man who had a large family of Negroes under his care” (Chestnutt et al. 1988:374).

Laurens sought his overseers from a variety of sources. When James Brenard at his Wambaw Plantation gave his notice, Laurens apparently valued his skill sufficiently to request that Brenard “look about & recommend a person in your stead” (Rogers 1974:580). At another time he comments to a friend, “pray send none [overseer applicants] but honest Men, good planters & such as love work, for I can pick up enough of a different stamp every day” (Rogers et al. 1976:146).

When an overseer was on the horizon Laurens provides clear evidence that the decision was not made quickly. During his effort to replace Brenard at Wambaw, a Mr. Myers “offers his service,” but Laurens wrote his friend Joseph Brown in Georgetown, asking if he knew anything of the man and remarking, “but as I am willing to pay well I will have none but such as are at least well recommended” (Rogers 1974:583). He also expected good recommendations, revealed by a 1768 letter concerning a Mr. Littleton who “produced to me a Certificate from under the hand of Robert Raper, Esquire (who he says directed him to apply to me) setting forth, that he served Mr. Raper two Years upon a Rice Plantation as an Overseer, behaved very well, made good Crops, & understands his business” (Rogers 1977:221-222). Not only does this tell us something of the typical recommendation, but we discover that this same individual a few years earlier was advertising himself as teaching geometry, trigonometry, surveying, mensurating, arithmetic, writing, and bookkeeping (Rogers 1977:222).

There are indications that overseers had some bargaining room. For example, in 1768 Laurens wrote a potential new overseer a letter of introduction that explained, “the bearer of this is Mr. William Cantey who has promised to become an Overseer for me if he likes the Land & he is therefore going immediately to view that & the State of the Buildings” (Rogers et al. 1976:562).

In another case Laurens writes a sick overseer that he would “gladly pay the expenses of an assistant for you if you could get one to your liking until you were quite recover’d” (Rogers et al. 1976:6).

These examples suggest that the pool of highly qualified individuals was sufficiently small that they could make at least some demands on the owners and that owners would make considerable allowances to retain seemingly satisfactory employees.

In a more detailed discussion Laurens outlines the exceptional range of negotiation possible, noting the overseer he wants is “for an out Plantation where he will be Master & have the Command of Cattle & Hogs & may use all that he reasonably can desire nor shall I differ with him about Rum, Sugar, & even Tea. I would have him to Live well to take good care of my Interest in general & particularly of my Negroes. He may enter his also upon shares or Wages, but the former will be best. The Wages come last but I shall also acquiesce in this demand provided he is a clever fellow & equal to the charge he is to undertake & in a few Years to do me a real service & acquire an independence for himself” (Rogers et al. 1976:16-17). This short passage provides several important pieces of information. First, it specifies that at least in this case (in 1765) Laurens preferred to compensate his overseer using shares, although he was willing to consider straight wages for the best kind of individual. Whether shares or wages, however, payment would also include luxuries, such as rum, sugar, and tea (the latter being a very expensive Colonial commodity). In addition, the account would indicate that the overseer would have use of the plantation’s stock, never being in want of fresh meat. Finally, the reference to independence probably means that the overseer would become more independent of Laurens’ constant supervision, being able to make sound decisions that brought in a good crop and succeeded in looking after the owner’s best interests.

Although Laurens seems to have paid wages frequently, there are relatively few mentions in his letters. However, on one occasion he does specify paying Mark Noble, overseer at Broughton Island, wages of £767.2.8 for two years and seven months – or about £25.11.0 per month or £294.12.0 per year (Rogers et al. 1977:126n). In another case he reports that the overseer salary would “commence” at £550 per year (Chestnutt et al. 1988:373). In a third letter, we have the very brief contract with one overseer:

Agreed the 13th february 1777 in presence of Mr. Zahn with [blank] Marlin to act as Overseer & Indigo Maker at Mount Tacitus to dwell on the East side in the House where Jo. Gaillard lived which Burnet is to put in good order. Wages £250 per Annum. Twelve Gallons Rum & plantation food which he Says he will be very frugal in" (Chestnutt et al. 1988:374).

The letter goes on to itemize that Marlin drew goods against his wages, including a "duffel blanket" and "high heeled shoes." One wonders how this ability to draw against wages (or even shares) might have affected the rapid turn over of overseers – just as it later affected the rapid departure of tenant farmers. It is likely that it would have been difficult – perhaps even impossible – to collect when an overseer's draw was greater than his ultimate share in the plantation's profit. Most certainly this approach limits the ability of most overseers, at the end of the year, to make any substantial improvements to their household or place in society – what money they might have earned would likely have already been spent. Therefore, we can't help but wonder if overseers were much like tenant farmers, always moving on in the hopes of something better elsewhere, often with feelings that the last owner cheated them out of their labor.

On another occasion Laurens specified that what he terms an inferior or second rate overseer, one who would be reporting to a manager who also resided on the plantation, "may be procured in South Carolina without much difficulty & at moderate Wages, of £150 Currency of South Carolina, together with plantation provision, twelve Gallons of Rum, & as many pounds of Muscovado Sugar per Annum" and even mentions that he had "often known Such hands . . . hired at £100 per Annum" (Rogers et al. 1981:316).

Working Conditions

Laurens also provides documentation concerning the issue of an overseer's own slaves, noting in another 1763 letter that, "the overseer if he employs any Negroes of his own to draw a share of the Crop of Rice in proportion to the number of such his Negroes & no more" (Rogers et al. 1974:59).

In 1765 Laurens asked his acquaintance James Marion in St. Thomas Parish to visit his new overseer, a Mr. Horlbeck. Laurens notes that while Horlbeck was "honest & sensible" he was not an expert planter and perhaps needed some oversight. He advises Marion that Horlbeck "has a general knowledge of farming, very quick of apprehension, & will readily catch your orders & I believe he has good nature & docibility enough to put them in execution without murmuring (Rogers 1974:585). Horlbeck's lack of expertise is clearly indicated by Laurens' letter, "I shall send you two dozen Hoes if they are wanted but you must enquire into the matter yourself & not trust to the driver" (Rogers 1974:588).

There were also some plantations where Laurens apparently had more than one overseer. For example, in discussions about housing at Wambaw, Laurens specified that his older overseer, Abraham Shad, should have his preference of housing over the newly hired overseer, James Brenard (Rogers 1974:590). In a 1766 discussion of how to set up a plantation Laurens comments on the usefulness of retaining both a "property manager" and also an "inferior Overseer," but provides no cogent discussion of either position (Rogers et al. 1976:159). In a letter concerning his Florida operations, Laurens does explain that a "Second rate Overseer" should be "a sober well disposed Man capable of following the Negroes in the Field, of marking out their respective Tasks & attending to the performance, according to directions which he will receive from the principal Manager on the Spot" (Rogers et al. 1981:315).

Consequently, the inferior or second rate overseer would be little more than a driver or foreman – a white who received orders from a more experienced overseer, or manager. Presumably, since Laurens mentions that the second rate overseer would be responsible for no more than 30 hands, there would be multiple inferior overseers on an especially large plantation, all reporting to a single Manager. In another letter Laurens tries to further explain his system of plantation management:

. . . two good Overseers provided to take charge of them, & as it will be considerable charge, one of the Overseers Should be a person Some what above the inferior Class. If there are 100 people three White Men will be required at the first outset, & they ought to be divided into two or more Classes according to the number of working hands (Rogers et al. 1981: 395-396).

It seems that Laurens, at least for some overseers, would go out of his way to promote or further their education or refinement. In 1767 he wrote his Altamaha overseer, Mark Noble, “the Books that I send you, Vizt. Anson’s Voyage, Charles 12th, Rebellion in 1745, Law of Consideration, Quincey Sermons, History of the Pilgrim, keep in the House & do not lend them abroad on any Account” (Rogers et al. 1976:590). This is an interesting mix of historical, political, and religious literature – books that seem certain to have been selected to encourage refinement and sophistication.

A far different view – one of isolation – is offered by a 1765 letter to an overseer at the Ball Plantation (which he has oversight of), “if you apprehend a want of Provision it will be proper to purchase of your own Negroes all that you know Lawfully belongs to themselves at the lowest price that they will sell it for” (Rogers et al. 1976:41). This comment is vaguely suggestive

of the interdependence of slave and overseer on at least some plantations. So, too, is one from 1766 where Laurens comments, “if you have no Neighbors or no good ones your Negroes will be exposed to the arbitrary power of an Overseer & perhaps sometimes tempted to knock him in the head & file off in a Body” – clearly documenting not only the constant fear of slave rebellion, but also acknowledging that a single white man – absent other white neighbors – had little power to control slaves. Taken together the two comments pose a careful balancing act of interdependence on one hand and repression on the other – likely a tough middle ground for any overseer to walk.

Firing and Friendly Departures

One of the earliest references was Laurens’ 1763 letter to James Lawrence, his Mepkin Plantation overseer, relieving him of his job. Laurens wrote, “the true reason of my taking this step is your familiarity with Hagar with besides being wrong & unwarrantable in itself must be extremely offensive to me & very hurtful to my Interest, as it must tend to make a good deal of jealousy & disquiet amongst the Negroes I chose to have a Man of more experience & one that has a Wife” (Hamer et al. 1972:248).

This letter clearly emphasizes an issue that is found in Laurens’ letters frequently – he expected his overseers to be constantly mindful of his business “interests” and to act in a manner that furthered those interests. In 1765 Laurens reproached his overseer at Mepkin, John Smith, concerning this issue of watching out for Laurens’ interests: “as you have undertaken the care of my Mepkin Plantation & for which I have agreed with you upon your own terms & something better by no abatement; I shall expect you will in every respect study & promote my Interests & behave like an honest Man” (Rogers et al. 1974:632). A similar comment was made in 1768 when he comments on the spending habits of one of his overseers, “he does me an Injury & himself greater” (Rogers et al. 1976:590).

The comment concerning his choice of a married man is also interesting, since it may help explain the newspaper advertisements that specify a man with a wife (although it certainly doesn't explain the number of ads asking only for single men). The dismissal also documents that unions between white overseers and black slave women occurred, harkening back to Morgan's (1995) observations concerning familiarity and domination at the Vineyard Pen in Jamaica.

This is a topic briefly mentioned by a variety of sources, including Pease and Pease (1990:142) and Morris (1996:24). Morgan suggests that colonial South Carolina adopted a "relaxed, tolerant view of miscegenation" and that there were abundant, public cases of mulatto children borne of slave women (Morgan 1998:406-408).

At other times the firing was conducted second hand. For example, in 1766 Laurens got a report concerning the excesses of his overseer. He wrote James Grant, "I am sorry to see that Harvie does not behave well. He produced me Certificates of his former conduct that were very satisfactory but every Planter experiences such disappointments in that class of people. It is best to refer him to me for Payment of his Wages" (Rogers et al. 1976:197). This suggests that it was recognized that even good recommendations were not always enough - as well as overseers as early as mid-century already having a reputation of being a distinct under class ("this class of people").

In one case Laurens provided a rather detailed explanation for his release of Mark Noble (to whom he had loaned an eclectic library) at Broughton Island:

. . . several parts of Mr. Noble's behaviour came to my knowledge which had been hid from me before, which added to the complaints alledged against him at Broton Island, convinces

me that he is not competent for the charge the he has undertaken. He wants diligence & he wants sincerity. The first deficiency renders his knowledge of Planting business so much or so little as he has of it, almost useless, & the latter exposes me to unknown dangers of Loss whenever his own Interest or his vanity may prompt him to do amiss. Every person who has been at the Island impute Idleness & vanity & obstinacy to him, & the loss of my Canoe, Horse, Cattle, Tools, &ca., &ca., give me convincing proofs thereof, & I find that under the sanction of Jonathan Bryan, Esquire he has petitioned for a Warrant to Survey a parcel of that Marsh Land adjoining to the College Land pretending that he had eight or ten Negroes & that he can direct those in the ditching & banking his Tract without inconvenience or loss of time in my affairs. This Plan of *his*, he ought *at least* to have communicated *to me*; especially as I took occasion to chide him among other things for neglect of business by too frequent absence from his duty (Rogers et al. 1977:444-445).

There were occasions when Laurens' overseers left on far better terms. For example in 1765 James Brenard, at the Wambaw Plantation, announced his intention to leave. Laurens responded, "I have fully consider'd the notice you gave me of your intention to remove & Settle upon a plantation of your own If you go, you shall not want my good wishes that your change may be for the better" (Rogers 1974:579). In 1769 Laurens grumbled that he had been out of town, "fixing a New Overseer" at his Mepkin Plantation, noting that the

previous overseer had “grown Rich & set up for himself” (Rogers et al. 1977:251). These brief accounts reveals that there were overseers, fairly early in the eighteenth century, that achieved adequate wealth to move from managing other people’s lands and slaves to managing their own. Another Laurens overseer moving on to create his own plantation was Peter Horlbeck, who became a planter in St. George, Dorchester Parish, after leaving Laurens’ employ (Rogers et al. 1974:575n). Laurens comments, while guarded, seem to suggest his displeasure with the change in social context, as well as the inconvenience such advancements caused him.

Attitudes

Laurens frequently remarked to his overseers about the need to care for his slaves. In one instance he reminds his Wambaw overseer, Abraham Shad, “take care of him & let him rest with very little work until I come. You say you don’t like him but remember he is a human Creature whether you like him or not” (Rogers et al. 1974:666). Whether this concern was based on the value of African American slaves as property, a sincere Christian concern, or simply a concern that the overseer was such a low sort as to take pleasure in hurting the slaves is unclear – but it is a reoccurring theme in Laurens’ letters.

On several occasions Laurens provides rather candid statements concerning overseers. For example, in 1766 he notes that “I observe that every Man [applying as overseer] thinks himself entitled to the best Wages” (Rogers et al. 1976:120). In another letter, also from 1766, he vaguely comments, “I have experienced too many disappointments by Overseers,” making one wonder if Laurens was simply unlucky, or if “that class of people” was perhaps as bad as implied.

On another occasion he scolded an overseer, “I hear that you entertain much company & live in a manner unbecoming your station but I will not believe all that is said of

you for I know that some people speak thro’ envy. However let this be a caution to you to walk honestly & discreetly, whereby your conduct will put to silence all evil report” (Rogers 1976:91).

The complaint of entertaining excessively is frequently associated with the issue of sobriety as well as budgeting. Of equal interest, however, is the concern that he was living beyond his “station,” suggesting that the overseer was “putting on airs” and behaving like a planter rather than an overseer.

In 1777 he wrote of the “roguery” and villainy of the overseers, their having “taken base advantages of his neglect,” and how “some of whom had been wasting & others appropriating” the funds and resources of the plantation. Because of these problems, Laurens estimated that his absence from direct oversight would result in upwards of 40% losses (Chestnutt 1988:293, 329). Whether these complaints signals a decline in the overseers’ reputation or whether this might be associated with the Revolution is unclear, but this is Laurens’ strongest condemnation of overseers and 40% losses would certainly have not only been deeply disturbing, but would likely have put many plantations in the red.

Another equally damning letter dates from 1772 and was written by John Lewis Gervais to Laurens, detailing the problems on one of Laurens’ plantations. Gervais notes that the overseer acted “Unkindly” and “Ungratefully” towards Laurens, and that his excuses were “pueril.” He found the lands “not in order” and that the overseers employed no fewer than five slaves “about his house.” Gervais found that the tasks laid out for the slaves fell short by nearly a fifth of what they should have measured and that a great quantity of seed rice could not be accounted for and was presumed stolen. The plantation lacked provisions – “neither beef, pen fowls big or small, Rice, Sugar, Rum, &ca.” Gervais found further that the Negroes were being seriously

underfed, that they had received no boots or caps the previous winter, and that only a few received blankets. Gervais goes on to note a vast amount of provisions that had been sent, but seem never to have been distributed to Laurens' slaves. He also notes that the overseer had begun his own plantation and there is a veiled reference to the probability that all of these missing supplies had been sent by the overseer to his own plantation. In fact at one point Gervais states clearly that the overseer "plundered the plantation" and had recently been seen with other overseers in the neighborhood "dancing and drinking for three four days together" (Rogers et al. 1980:287-291).

This long litany of problems is perhaps the clearest documentation of the losses that could be suffered at the hands of an unscrupulous, dishonest, and incompetent overseer.

But we must also realize that the problems were in a sense encouraged by the low wages offered and the owners perhaps unwittingly placing their white overseers in direct competition with their slaves for food, shelter, and clothing (discussed in more detail below).

Other Eighteenth Century Overseer Accounts

While Laurens seems to be the most detailed and prolific writer concerning eighteenth century overseers, there are other accounts and letters that provide additional details, often confirming Laurens' observations. For example, in the Robert Pringle letters there is an exchange over a period of several years as Pringle sought to have an English colleague help a local overseer, Field Cossett, dispose of an inheritance. In the initial letter from 1742, Pringle notes that Cossett was "a person that has us'd the Sea, & but in Low Circumstances here, being only in the Station of an Overseer" (Edgar 1972:474). The next year Pringle explains again that Cossett has "no fix'd or Certain abode of his Own, being in Low Circumstances, and in the

Station only of an Overseer, and Oblidg'd often to Shift and move about" (Edgar 1972:577).

These letters seem to suggest that the position of an overseer – even in the first half of the eighteenth century – was seen as a "low circumstance" resulting in frequent moves and no real home – something akin to a tenant farmer of the twentieth century. In addition, it causes us to wonder how easily the overseer was able to move even a few accumulated goods from plantation to plantation.

The James Glen papers also provide some minor details concerning overseer contracts. Glen and John Drayton, between 1761 and 1766, were involved together in a rice plantation. Glen provided the management and kept the books, periodically providing Drayton with an accounting. Review of these documents reveals that the return was prorated based on the involvement of each party – actually the number of slaves owned by each individual. The overseer's pay was based on the number of slaves supervised and was pretty consistently £5 per slave. While the total number of slaves – and hence the total contract for the overseer – is unknown, Drayton was contributing about £60 per year (James Glen Papers, South Caroliniana Library). Assuming that Glen was an equal partner, the overseer was working for as little as £120 – consistent with Laurens' observations that an inferior overseer could be found to work for as little as £100.

The Ball family papers provide a glimpse of overseer issues at the end of the eighteenth century. In September 1786 David Franklin was retained as the overseer for the Hyde Park plantation at a salary of only £38 per year. Moreover, all but £11.48 was advanced through purchases of 5 gallons of rum, beef, bacon, a fat wether [ewe], and cow. There is evidence that in 1791 Franklin was supplementing his wages by hiring out (probably on shares) his two slaves, so that at the end of the year he received not only his salary minus advances (£40), but also £30 for "all

claim for Tom’s share in crop of 1791 and £12 for a year’s hire of Old Sambo.” Even into 1793 Franklin’s contract had not increased. A February 1793 memorandum states: “I do agree to give Mr. David Franklin £50 wages from 2/11/1793 on condition that he act as overseer of my Kensington lands in addition to his charge as overseer at Hyde Park. The rest of our agreement continues same as first made” (John Ball Account Book, 1786-1812 South Carolina Historical Society folder 11/515/6).

Similar wages were offered by John Ball to Joseph Clark, who was hired in September 1795 at 40 shillings a month, or £24 a year. Beginning in 1796 the wages were increased to £30. And while no wages were documented for a third overseer, it appears that he agreed to manage the fowl and hogs on shares. There was never a charge made to the overseer’s account for his share of the livestock, so it appears this was similar to later sharecropping, with all the goods supplied by the owner and a share of the proceeds going to the overseer for his management (John Ball Account Book, 1786-1812, South Carolina Historical Society folder 11/515/6).

The Ball salaries appear to be dramatically out of line with those being offered by Laurens. While it is entirely possible that such differences existed, it may be that Ball’s accounts were in £ sterling, while we know that Laurens’ accounts were in South Carolina currency. With an approximate 1:7 exchange rate (at least prior to the Revolution), Ball’s £30 might actually be £210 in South Carolina currency – and this would place the two accounts in far better agreement.

While there are a few other accounts, all are similar – providing primarily economic accounts of the overseer and providing little direct information concern the social life, status, origin or any eventual social or economic rise.

Synthesis

Wages

Henry Laurens paid wages of between £200 and £550, although he noted that some overseers could be obtained for as little as £100 to £150. All of these wages, however, were supplemented with housing and “plantation provisions.” It also appears that minimally rum and sugar were added to the salary. James Glen and John Drayton were paying perhaps £120 or more. A Carolina author in the English journal, *Gentleman’s Magazine* indicated a salary of £250 in 1755 and inclusive of rum and other items, consistent with that offered by Laurens (Merrens 1977:161). John Ball paid £24 to £38 – although if converted to South Carolina currency the range is likely £168 to £266. So, while we have a small sample and there is considerable variation, we can also see some agreement, with a probable average of around

Table 6.
Estimates of Mean Total Wealth per White Inhabitant for the South Carolina Low Country.

Period	SC Currency	£ Sterling	2002 \$
1722-1726	£ 960.79	£ 146.68	\$21,980
1727-1731	926.30	134.44	20,150
1732-1736	1987.48	153.38	22,990
1737-1741	1139.57	149.75	22,450
1742-1746	1428.86	204.12	30,600
1747-1751	1814.23	248.52	37,250
1752-1756	1902.22	270.59	40,560
1757-1762	2125.34	303.62	45,510

£200 a year, with some making far less and a few perhaps more.

In addition, there are differences regarding other items provided. Laurens states that for a good overseer he would happily provide provisions, rum, and even tea. On the other had, Ball deducted any advances or provisions from his overseers’ wages, keeping a rather detailed account. So clearly there were differences in the “perks” that might be offered.

Regardless, it is difficult to understand these salaries without a better understanding of colonial salaries and wealth distribution in the Carolina low country. Two sources for such data are Bentley (1977) and Jones (1980) summarized by Coclanis (1989:85-90). Wealth is typically viewed in terms of both non-human (i.e., non-slave) and the total since most wealth was tied up in slaves (Coclanis [1989:87], for example, suggests that between 48 and 50% of total wealth was tied up in human bondage throughout the colonial period). In addition, wealth can be viewed as both per capita (encompassing the total population) or per probated wealth holders. Understandably there are significant differences - on a per capita basis the figures are reduced by inclusion of individuals with little or no wealth (such as children and many women). On the other hand, if only probated (or inventoried) wealth holders are examined the figures may be more accurate, but we discount a very large proportion of the population whose estates were never probated or inventoried for one reason or another.

We have chosen to present Table 6 that provides mean total wealth for white inhabitants - this includes wealth as personal property, slave property, and real estate; and it presents the data as per capita, thereby providing what is a relatively low estate of wealth.

It's realistic to temper this assessment by noting that in the period from 1722 through 1732, over half of the inventories revealed decedents with inventoried wealth of £100 sterling or less and that nearly four-fifths of the population had inventories for £200 sterling or less.

The point is that a few pounds (or a few slaves) one way or the other might be the difference between relative poverty or wealth in the early colonial period. Certainly an annual salary of £20 to £30 sterling minus living expenses would be very frugal and would likely result in most family heads falling into the

category of having an inventory of less than £100 sterling.

Another way of looking at overseer salaries is to compare their salaries with other occupations. Waller (2000:242) notes that during the eighteenth century merchants in England made between £200 and £400 sterling a year (£1,400 to £2,800 in South Carolina currency), although "a family of the lower-middling class could live comfortably on an income of £50 a year" (or £350 in South Carolina currency). We can also document that Ball was paying his children's tutor £100 a year - three times as much as his overseer.

Olsen 1999 provides additional salary data, noting that English agricultural laborers at the beginning of the eighteenth century averaged £18 sterling a year and that the end of the century the rate had increased to only £26. In comparison, a factory worker at mid-century made about £3 sterling a year. A London laborer could expect to make £25 sterling a year, while in rural areas the salary would drop to £11.

It seems that Carolina planters were paying overseers a wage only slightly better than an English laborer, far less than a shopkeeper and only a little better than a housekeeper. In other words, the salaries paid were exceedingly low. Such wages, whether by design or not, would have kept most overseers in something approaching poverty. Even with the supplemental food, rum, and sugar, most overseers would have been hard pressed to purchase their own slaves, much less their own plantation - and it is perhaps easy to see why individuals such as Pringle view overseers as in "low circumstances." It is also easy to understand why some overseers were enticed to steal labor and supplies from their employers - for some it must have been difficult to see so much wealth and to be paid so little.

There is another wage issue that deserves to be discussed in some detail.

Previous authors have suggested that early overseeing was done almost exclusively on the basis of a percentage of the crop brought in. We find very little evidence to support this view in eighteenth century Carolina. Such a proposition is mentioned in only one newspaper ad and “shares” are mentioned in only two other ads. In all of his writings Laurens mentions the idea only once and, even then, says that he will acquiesce to wages.

It seems reasonable that in a cash strapped society owners might well want to provide a percentage of the crop in lieu of wages. Moreover, the owner might reasonably expect the overseer to be more attentive if his income was dependent on the job done. On the other hand, this places an additional burden on the overseer who probably preferred cash and didn’t care to assume uncertain liabilities. That there are so few accounts of operating on shares suggests that overseer wages won out fairly early in Carolina.

Social Status

While we can make informed salary judgments relatively easily, it is more difficult to evaluate status without falling into the traps of previous authors – for example assuming a clearly defined tripartite division in white society. Period commentators, however, do seem to place overseers – at least by mid- to late-century – in an under class. Pringle speaks of “low circumstance” and Laurens repeatedly speaks of “that class.”

The newspaper ads provide some clues. The frequent mention of sobriety suggests that drinking was an issue – it certainly was in England, where the “lower” classes were found of both beer and gin and the “upper” classes would boast of drinking multiple bottles of wine at dinner (Robert Walpole’s wine budget at his seat in Norfolk for one year was £1,500)(Olsen 1999:238-242). It is also curious that planters would advertise for sobriety and then include relatively large sums of rum in the inducements.

We speculate that alcohol was a drug of choice and like most drugs, as long as it was kept undercover by the overseer, the planter would tolerate considerable abuse.

Other requirements included a broad range of generic issues – good character, faithful, industrious, discreet, and understanding various aspects of plantation business. Laurens provides several examples of questioning the good character of an overseer – once because of the sexual relation with a female slave and often because of not looking out for his best interests.

Of course, most of these characteristics are not clearly obvious and the planter was forced to accept recommendations. We have previously mentioned that these recommendations might be of minimal value. We suspect that those writing recommendations had different motives, just as today.

Moreover, most of these characteristics are not clearly associated with a specific “class.” And, in addition, we wonder how planters could possibly expect to hire and retain the individual matching these expectations with the paltry salaries offered. Franklin and Schwenger clearly recount the expectations placed on the overseer:

Managers were asked to be firm, fair, and demanding as well as vigilant, compassionate, and strict. They were told to punish slaves who did not adhere to plantation rules but never to use threats or excessive force. They were expected to go to the fields with the hands; remain there until the end of each day; keep an eye on livestock, farm machinery, and the storehouse; and maintain accurate records of how slaves worked. They should do everything in their power [to protect the slaves]. They should

be knowledgeable about the plantation and know how and when to plant a crop, correct slaves, appoint drivers, organize a work routine, and produce a good crop (Franklin and Schweninger 1999:235-236).

They were, in essence, expected to manage plantations and slaves with values of hundreds of thousands of dollars in today's money, while being paid a wage typical of an ordinary laborer (\$3-4,000 in today's money).

Perhaps even more amazing is that owners, with such low wages, placed their overseers in the position of competing with slaves for food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities and luxuries.

While Bassett is incredulous that so much wealth was entrusted to "such illiterate men" (a proposition with which we disagree), we are far more amazed that the wealth was entrusted to individuals so extraordinarily underpaid. The planters, it seems, sought to create *and maintain* an "underclass" to deal with those issues they chose not to deal with. The maintenance of the overseer class, of course, was no different than what was happening in England at the same time. There - as in Carolina - there were constant concerns over anyone threatening "to mingle every man with the class that is superior to him, and . . . to support a gay and splendid appearance utterly inconsistent with their station and circumstances" (quoted in Olsen 1999:16). And this is certainly a theme found in Pringle ("low circumstances") and Laurens ("I hear that you entertain much company & live in a manner unbecoming your station").

If overseers broke out of their "station," then there were not only social problems (rank and its privileges were closely guarded), but also great inconvenience to the planter. Laurens, for example, seems to express some

consternation that an overseer had "grown Rich & set up for himself."

While certainly the wealthy were more literate than the poor, both Olsen (1999:160) and Taylor (1997:312) suggest that literacy was generally high throughout society. This seems to be supported by the act of advertising in a written medium, the constant reference to letters from overseers, and the requirement that they keep tract of plantation accounts.

McCurry comments that, contrary to the perceptions of authors such as Bassett and Scarborough, antebellum "white society in the rural Low Country included small planters with fewer than twenty slaves, great ones with more than one hundred slaves, and planter-merchants with all manner of property; tenant farmers, laborers, overseers, and all kinds of poor whites; and, as elsewhere in the South, a substantial class of yeoman farmers (McCurry 1995:47; see also Land 1969:2-3). Although the colonial period likely showed less variety, we believe the tapestry was far more complex than many authors have suggested.

Origins and Advancement

We are able to offer relatively little new data on the origins of the low country's overseers. The newspaper ads certainly demonstrate that some of those entering the overseer market came either from Virginia or directly from England. And Pringle reveals that at least some entered overseeing since they had nowhere else to turn. Unfortunately Laurens provides few clues on the origin of his overseers. In our research we have found no evidence of sons of prominent families. We are also rather unconvinced that any significant proportion of the overseer profession could trace its origins back to prominence.

Additional research might be able to track names in the Laurens papers - or other correspondence - perhaps identifying their origin. Such research might even be expanded to

provide additional clues on such issues as wealth and status in society.

The potential for such efforts to succeed, however, seem slim. We briefly examined four individuals: Field Cossett (1742 – Pringle), James Brenard, James Lawrence, and Abraham Schad (1763 – Laurens). None are mentioned in Lesser's (1995) Proprietary period research. On-line sources such as Ancestry.com provided no listings for any of these individuals.

The Combined Alphabetic Index at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History provides only a little information. We can learn, for example, that Field Cossett and his wife sold 20 acres on the Ashley River in 1737 – perhaps contributing to his “low circumstances.” James Brenard was the possible owner of a small tract in Prince George by 1774. And Abraham Schad was granted 100 acres in 1759, sold a slave in 1773, and made some minor contributions to the American cause during the Revolution.

While it is possible that additional information might be forthcoming from church records, marriage and death records, and other untapped resources, we expect that most of the eighteenth century overseers will remain relatively unknown – further emphasizing the importance of archaeological research ferreting out and exploring their settlements.

As to advancement, when we look at the Laurens papers we find many more overseers who were fired or who are simply not heard from after one or two years, then we do overseers who left Laurens employ because they purchased their own plantation. This suggests – but certainly does not prove – that relatively few overseers were able to overcome the low wages and social pressures to advance from the “class” or “status” of overseer to small planter.

The documents do suggest that when such advancement was possible it was largely facilitated by the overseer owning one or two

slaves who he was able to either hire out or have work for shares. Thus, it seems the only documented way out of overseeing and to that of a small planter was by owning slaves. Hints of this approach come from the newspaper ads, where by the late colonial specific mentions are made of overseers bringing their own slaves to the plantation – a feature not observed earlier. Authors such as Chaplin (1993:280) provide accounts such as that of Virginia immigrant Francis Cox who came to Georgia with seven slaves, set them out on hire as he took an overseers position and with the resulting earnings was able to purchase his own plantation.

Given colonial purchase prices of around £20 to £50 sterling per slave (Carmen 1939:292-303, Merrens 1977:161, 182 – well above the typical annual salary of the overseer), advance through this process was likely difficult and reserved to the most industrious or most fortunate. We suspect that most remained, at best, yeoman farmers forming the basis of this rather large class by the antebellum (McCurry 1995).

Summary

The historical documents that we have been able to identify suggest that eighteenth century overseers were more diverse than many might like to suggest.

It is relatively easy to outline what we don't know – even after this research. Where did the eighteenth century overseers come from – instate, out of state, England? What was their social status prior to taking on the occupation of an overseer? Was it an advancement from some even more lowly state?

Was there a difference in overseeing an absentee estate (such as those of Laurens), as opposed to those where the owner, if not on the property, was at least close by (such as those of the Ball family)? Were there detailed contacts and is there any eighteenth century law

concerning overseer and owner relationships or obligations? Was there a deliberate effort to keep overseers in a degraded state? What was the average length of a relationship between overseer and owner in the eighteenth century?

There is evidence that relatively few overseers operated on the basis of shares or a percentage of the total crop – a set salary seems far more common in the eighteenth century. We also have some evidence to suggest that most overseers were at least literate, if not well read.

The limited data available suggest that planters did look down on the profession of overseeing and the disdain in which they held overseers might have increased through the eighteenth century. Some of this disdain, however, was almost certainly an effort to maintain a rigid class system not untypical of eighteenth century England.

The accounts suggest that even with the occupation of overseer there were different levels, using terms such as “manager” and “inferior overseer.” These levels seem to have been based either on expertise or length of service (the two, we feel, were not always the same).

What we know with more certainty than anything else is that overseers in general received very low wages. Whether by design or circumstance, those wages certainly served to keep many (perhaps most) overseers in a state of poverty and dramatically reduced their potential for moving up the social or economic ladder.

When the historic accounts from South Carolina are added to the research from Virginia and Jamaica, we garner a sense that eighteenth century overseers were in constant competition with slaves for scarce resources, had very few material possessions, had very few opportunities to add material possessions, and had close interaction with their slave populations at a variety of levels.