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978-1-107-00415-3 - Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry

Peter McCandless

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Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry

On the eve of the Revolution, the Carolina lowcountry was the wealthiest and unhealthiest region in British North America. *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* argues that the two were intimately connected: both resulted largely from the dominance of rice cultivation on plantations using imported African slave labor. This development began in the coastal lands near Charleston, South Carolina, around the end of the seventeenth century. Rice plantations spread north to the Cape Fear region of North Carolina and south to Georgia and northeast Florida in the late colonial period. The book examines perceptions and realities of the lowcountry disease environment; how the lowcountry became notorious for its “tropical” fevers, notably malaria and yellow fever; how people combated, avoided, or perversely denied the suffering they caused; and how diseases and human responses to them influenced not only the lowcountry and the South, but the United States, even helping secure American independence.

Peter McCandless received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1974. He joined the faculty of the College of Charleston that year and retired in 2008 as Distinguished Professor of History. He won the Distinguished Teaching Award and was selected as a South Carolina Governor’s Distinguished Professor. He has traveled extensively in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Turkey. He is the author of *Moonlight, Magnolias, and Madness: Insanity in South Carolina from the Colonial Period to the Progressive Era*; an associate editor of the *South Carolina Encyclopedia*; and author of numerous articles and other writings in historical journals. He is currently a member of the American Association for the History of Medicine and the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society; and he serves on the executive board of the Waring Library Society in Charleston, South Carolina, which is devoted to the collection and restoration of materials related to the history of medicine.

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PETER MCCANDLESS

College of Charleston



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA
www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107004153

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First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

McCandless, Peter.

Slavery, disease, and suffering in the southern Lowcountry / Peter McCandless.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies on the American South)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00415-3 (hardback)

1. Diseases – Social aspects – South Carolina – History. 2. Diseases and history – South Carolina – History. 3. Plantation life – South Carolina – History. 4. Environmental health – South Carolina – History. 5. South Carolina – Social conditions. 6. Charleston Region (S.C.) – Social conditions. 7. South Carolina – Economic conditions. 8. Charleston Region (S.C.) – Economic conditions. 9. South Carolina – History – Colonial period, ca. 1600 – 1775. 10. South Carolina – History – 1775–1865. I. Title II. Series.

RA418.3.U6M35 2011

362.109757-dc22 2010051694

ISBN 978-1-107-00415-3 Hardback

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For Alastair and Colin

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Where wouldn't they go for pepper! For a bag of pepper they would cut each other's throats without hesitation, and would forswear their souls, of which they were so careful otherwise: the bizarre obstinacy of that desire made them defy death in a thousand shapes; the unknown seas, the loathsome and strange diseases; wounds, captivity, hunger, pestilence, and despair. It made them great! By heavens! It made them heroic; and it made them pathetic, too, in their craving for trade with the inflexible death levying its toll on young and old.

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900

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Preface

Here was a thin neck in the hourglass of the Afro-American past, a place where individual grains from all along the West African coast had been funneled together, only to be fanned out across the American landscape with the passage of time.

Peter Wood, *Black Majority*

Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry examines the impact of disease in the region known as the South Atlantic lowcountry. The book focuses primarily on South Carolina and its metropolis, Charleston, from 1670 to 1860.¹ Because this area was in many ways the seedbed for much of subsequent southern and American culture, the story told here has a much wider significance. In the mid-eighteenth century, the rice and indigo plantations that dominated the region spread north into the Cape Fear region of North Carolina and south to the coastal lands of Georgia. After 1763, they moved into northern Florida. In the late eighteenth century, the lowcountry plantation regime began to move into the Carolina backcountry, though cotton replaced rice as the most important crop. In the nineteenth century, lowcountry folk spread their plantations and diseases westward throughout much of the South.² What a small number of settlers began in 1670, where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers come together to form the Atlantic Ocean (a local joke), had a huge influence on the history of the South and the United States. The Carolina lowcountry became the wealthiest region in late colonial North

¹ Charleston was officially called “Charles Town” from 1670 until 1783, but for convenience and to avoid confusion, I have generally used “Charleston” throughout the book except in quotations. It should also be noted here that the name “Carolina” originally referred to both South and North Carolina. The two did not become fully separate colonies until the 1720s.

² Joyce Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730–1815* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies in the Formation of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

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America. It also became the unhealthiest, and the book argues that the two were intimately connected. *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* examines how the lowcountry became such an unhealthy place; how people tried to cope with the suffering it caused; and how their actions, experiences, and responses affected a culture that enormously influenced the development of the South and the United States.

Writing this tale would have been impossible without the path-breaking work of many other historians. My indebtedness to them will become abundantly clear from the notes, but a few works related to this one should be mentioned here. In the 1960s, Joseph Waring produced two volumes on medicine in South Carolina between 1670 and 1900 that remain an essential starting point for anyone exploring the historical epidemiology of the state and region. This is also true of John Duffy's *Epidemics in Colonial America*, written in the 1950s. Another old work, by St. Julien Ravenel Childs, *Malaria and Colonization in the Carolina Low Country, 1526–1696*, is a goldmine of information on the early history of that disease in the region. Albert Cowdrey's more recent *This Land, This South* contains a seminal chapter on the relationship between the southern environment and southern diseases. Cowdrey stressed the mixing of European and African microbes and the friendliness of the southern climate and topography to diseases of tropical origins. Two books in particular helped inspire and inform the present volume: Peter Wood's *Black Majority* and Peter Coclanis's *Shadow of a Dream* – both remarkable for their path-breaking scholarship and engaging style. Other authors whose works proved invaluable to me along the way include Joyce Chaplin, Margaret Humphreys, Todd Savitt, William Dusinger, Sharla Fett, Philip Morgan, Judith Carney, Daniel Littlefield, Max Edelson, and Elizabeth Fenn. A book published just after I completed the manuscript, but in time for me to incorporate some of its information and insights, is J. R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empires*. It focuses on the relationship between war, yellow fever, and malaria in the Caribbean region and includes a chapter on the lowcountry. Prior to its appearance, I had benefited greatly from McNeill's earlier articles on yellow fever.³ The present work builds on and complements but does not replicate any of these works.

³ Joseph I. Waring, *A History of Medicine in South Carolina, 1670–1825* (Charleston: Medical Society of South Carolina, 1964) and *A History of Medicine in South Carolina, 1825–1900* (Charleston: Medical Society of South Carolina, 1967); John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953); St. Julien Ravenel Childs, *Malaria and Colonization in the Carolina Low Country, 1526–1696* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940); Albert E. Cowdrey, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History*, Revised Edition (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Peter A. Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670–1920* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*; Todd Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Margaret Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Margaret Humphreys, *Malaria: Poverty, Race, and Public Health in*

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It is not a history of medicine, but medical theories, practice, and personnel form an important part of the story. It is a history not of epidemics but of the impact of infectious diseases – especially those of tropical origin – on the region. It is not an environmental history, but the epidemiological reality described here cannot be fully understood without discussing its connection to both the natural environment and human interventions in it. It is not a study of the lowcountry economy, but discussion of its effects is essential to the book's overall argument.

Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry is divided into two parts of seven chapters each. Part I, Talk about Suffering, looks at the disease environment and its human impact. It focuses on differing perceptions of the environment and tries to assess the reality by looking at the effects of disease and the experiences of individuals, ethnic and professional groups, residents and newcomers. Part II, Combating Pestilence, focuses on therapeutic, preventive, and restorative measures people used to reduce the impact of disease. Specific chapters deal with healers and the arts of healing, regular and irregular; religious and other forms of prophylactics including inoculation and vaccination for smallpox; quarantine and sanitary measures; and the migratory strategies elites used to avoid local fevers.

The evidence used for this study derives almost entirely from contemporary documents and accounts written by residents, travelers, and visitors. Inevitably, the book is somewhat skewed toward the experiences, actions, and ideas of white elites – planters, merchants, officials, and physicians – because they produced the bulk of the sources. The voices of African Americans – who were a majority of the population during much of the period covered by this volume – and poor whites are more muted and filtered through the elite's writings than I would like. The letters and other writings of the wealthy planters, merchants, officials, and doctors – along with accounts of travelers and immigrants – reveal much about the sufferings of Africans and poor whites, often unintentionally. The elite generally overlooked or looked away from those sufferings. In 1880, the Charleston city yearbook listed the names of every citizen who had died between 1808 and 1880 who allegedly had lived at least eighty years. The aim was a familiar one in the history of the lowcountry: to

the United States (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 28; William Dusbierre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); S. Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Judith Carney, *Black Rice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Elizabeth Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–1782* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1640–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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counter charges that people rarely lived long there. The authors added that the list was surely incomplete: “many have doubtless escaped notice, especially among the colored population.”⁴ That was surely true and the admission is significant. Many things happened among that population that escaped the notice of the white elite, among them blacks’ massive suffering from disease. Many things have undoubtedly escaped my notice as well. Despite the limitations of the sources, I have tried to re-create the human encounter with these diseases and its broader impact to the best of my ability. The reader must judge how well I have succeeded.

Note on Capitalization, Punctuation, and Spelling

For consistency and ease of reading I have modernized capitalization, punctuation, and sometimes spelling in quotations from original sources.

⁴ City of Charleston, *Yearbook*, 1880.

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Acknowledgments

Books of this sort can never have just one author. Many people contributed to its germination and fruition. Some know how they helped; others are probably unaware of their contribution or have forgotten it (if not me), so long did it take me to get this far. At various points in the saga, conversations and exchanges with other scholars, friends, and family helped me enormously. Among those I would like to thank for their encouragement, advice, thoughts, insights, and shared information are Chris Boucher, David Brown, Jason Coy, William Dalrymple, Max Edelson, Walter Edgar, Elizabeth Fenn, Gerald Grob, Margaret Humphreys, John McNeill, Ron Numbers, Bill Olejniczak, Todd Savitt, Lester Stephens, John Tone, and Maarten Ultee. Student assistants Jason Farr and Chris Willoughby unearthed some highly useful information. Sheridan Hough, Alastair McCandless, and Colin McCandless read the original shaky manuscript with great care and, beside pointing out many mistakes and making excellent suggestions for improvement, convinced me that I wasn't entirely crazy to write it. Lew Bateman, senior editor for history and political science at Cambridge University Press in New York, was highly supportive from the first, as was his editorial assistant, Anne Lovering Rounds. The Press's readers and David Moltke-Hansen, coeditor of this series, saved me from some egregious mistakes as well as helped and encouraged me to make the book more broadly relevant. I am also greatly indebted to the copyediting team at PETT Fox, Inc., for their careful work on the manuscript. Any remaining errors are mine.

The research and writing of this book were greatly aided by two summer fellowships from the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina and several grants from the College of Charleston Research and Development Fund. Archivists and librarians could not have been nicer to this often bumbling researcher. The staff of the College of Charleston Library, particularly at Reference, Interlibrary Loans, and Special Collections, was unfailingly helpful over the many years of this project. I received enormous help at the Waring Historical Library at the Medical University of South Carolina, South Carolina Historical Society, South Carolina Department of Archives

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and History, and the Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. The same is true of the National Archives of the United Kingdom at Kew, Wellcome Library, British Library, Edinburgh University Special Collections, National Archives of Scotland (formerly Scottish Record Office), and Aberdeen Library Special Collections. I would like to extend particular thanks to Jane Brown, Kay Carter, Henry Fulmer, Susan Hoffius, Chuck Lesser, and Mike Phillips for their assistance. Above all, I want to thank Nalan for her love, patience, and support.

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List of Abbreviations Used in Notes

BPRO/SC	British Public Record Office, Records re South Carolina
CO	Colonial Office Records, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
COCSC	College of Charleston Special Collections
FP	Family Papers
<i>HLP</i>	<i>The Papers of Henry Laurens</i>
JCHA	Journals of the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina (manuscript)
<i>JCHA</i>	<i>Journals of the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina</i> (printed)
MSM	Medical Society of South Carolina, Minutes, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston
<i>NGP</i>	<i>The Papers of Nathanael Greene</i>
PRO	Public Record Office, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
SCDAH	South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia
<i>SCG</i>	<i>South Carolina Gazette</i>
<i>SCHM</i>	<i>South Carolina Historical Magazine</i>
SCHS	South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston
SCL	South Caroliniana Library, Columbia
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill
SPG	Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, London
SRO	Scottish Record Office (National Archives of Scotland), Edinburgh
<i>Stats.</i>	<i>Statutes at Large of South Carolina</i>
WHL	Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston
WO	War Office Records, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom

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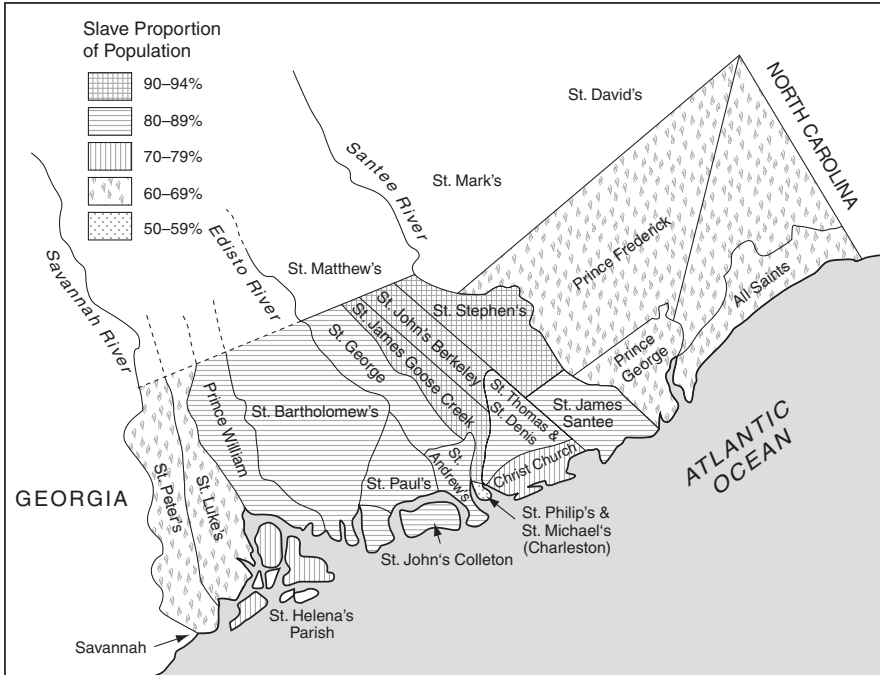
MAP I. The Lowcountry, Charleston, and the Caribbean region.

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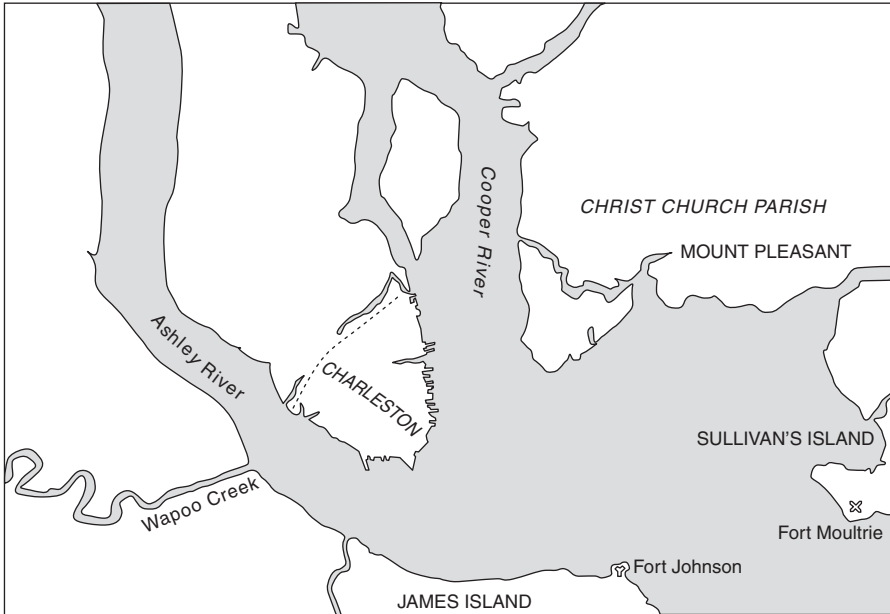
MAP 2. The South Carolina lowcountry, showing Anglican parishes and slave proportion of population, c. 1760s.

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MAP 3. Charleston Harbor, based on a British map, c. 1780.

Source: Based on a contemporary map published in London.



MAP 4. The Revolutionary War in the South.