In January 1932, journalist James Derieux informed the readers of *Country Life* magazine of developments reshaping the coastal region of South Carolina. “The visible and noble remnants of America’s most colorful agrarian civilization,” he announced, “are being saved by winter residents from almost total disappearance.” For years, plantations all along the coast had lain in ruins, slowly succumbing to the ravages of time. Now, however, a great many had “been bought and rejuvenated by non-residents, most of them Northerners.” “Scores” had been turned into winter homes and hunting retreats. Derieux admitted that “sentimentally, such a state of affairs is not perfect,” but he still thought it beneficial for all involved. “Better for the grand remains of ancient glory to be saved by outsiders,” he opined, “than that they be not saved at all.”

The phenomenon Derieux described had long since become familiar to lowcountry people. For more than a decade, residents of the region had watched northern bankers, businessmen, and heirs of industrial fortunes spend huge sums turning old plantations into country estates. From the beginning, the newcomers’ inclinations had tended toward grandeur. Large houses, elaborate gardens, and extensive landscaping quickly become common. Over time, northerners grew more ambitious. By the early 1930s, the size and opulence of some estates stunned observers. “Very few of these gentlemen have less than a thousand acres,” Derieux reported. “Most of them have several thousand,” he

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noted. Some had even more. “Mr. Baruch,” Derieux observed, “is master of twenty thousand.”²

As the “renaissance” had grown in scale, so too had the lowcountry’s popularity as a seasonal destination for the wealthy. By the early 1930s, sportsmen and sportswomen came annually to shoot ducks, deer, and other game. As part of the seasonal migration from the North, the visitors arrived in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, the traditional beginning of duck-hunting season, and stayed for weeks or months at a time. Local newspapers announced northerners’ arrival and described preparations made in advance. In Georgetown, the port town on the Sampit River north of Charleston, crowds gathered to watch northerners’ private Pullman coaches arrive. Throughout the winter months, news about wealthy socialites, millionaire bankers, and celebrities circulated through rural communities at dizzying speed. The “winter colonists” had become a spectacle, an annually recurring drama in a region more familiar with stagnation and isolation than the antics of a social elite.³

Wealth, status, and enthusiasm for recreational hunting united the men and women who wintered in the region. Any of them could have chosen to spend their time elsewhere, but they instead selected the Carolina lowcountry. Even as Florida resorts had become enormously popular, some members of the upper classes opted for the Carolina coast. According to Derieux, the winter colonists found “the hunting, climate, traditions, and scenery” virtually irresistible. They succumbed to what he called “the lure of the Low Country.” All came to enjoy “a winter climate of rare luxury, and a charm that is unsurpassed.”⁴

Derieux’s article draws back the curtain on events that attracted widespread attention at the time but have since been all but forgotten. By the late 1930s, wealthy sportsmen and sportswomen owned seventy-six “plantations” on the Carolina coast. In locations between northern

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Georgetown County and the Savannah River, wealthy sporting enthusiasts – variously called “northerners,” “Yankees,” and “winter colonists” by lowcountry people – wintered at handsome estates. Alongside their holdings lay others that served somewhat similar purposes. Hunting clubs controlled tens of thousands of acres. Sportsmen also owned retreats and preserves, most with smaller acreages. At virtually every turn, well-to-do people from afar had created recreational domains for their exclusive use (see Figure 0.1).5

The estates that northerners created are well known to lowcountry people. For decades they have been celebrated as part of the “Second Yankee Invasion,” a decades-long land-buying spree that saw wealthy outsiders acquire huge expanses of territory. Recalled as elegant retreats where monied plutocrats hunted, relaxed, and socialized in idyllic circumstances, the new estates quickly became symbols of renewal. Before the Civil War, the lowcountry had ranked among the most powerful plantation districts in the South. Its planter class had wielded exceptional economic and political strength; Charleston stood as a center of trade and culture. Throughout the region, plantations produced large quantities of staple crops. As the sectional conflict escalated, the lowcountry elite committed itself to the dream of a southern nation. For a time, it appeared as though their ambition might come true. When Confederate artillery began firing on Fort Sumter during the early morning hours of April 12, 1861, planters and merchants had cheered, confident in their cause. Initially, the course of the war provided cause for optimism. Soon, however, the tide turned against the Confederacy and suffering arrived in earnest. Union forces seized control of Port Royal Sound in November 1861 and besieged Charleston in August 1863. Raiding parties struck plantations all along the coast, leading to a breakdown of authority and new assertiveness among slaves. By the time General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox in April 1865, the lowcountry lay in ruins, its productive capacities shattered and its ruling elite in disarray.6

6 On the colonial and antebellum lowcountry, see especially Walter Edgar, South Carolina: A History (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), chaps. 3–17; Walter J. Fraser, Jr., Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), chaps. 1–5; Rogers, History of Georgetown County,
“A New Map Showing the Principal Plantations on the South Carolina Coast,” 1932. See p.5 for key. Published by Elliman and Mullally, a real estate firm specializing in “plantations, shooting properties, and townhouses,” this map shows most of the estates developed by wealthy northerners. By the mid-1930s, “plantation” more often denoted a private sporting estate than a site of agricultural production in the Carolina lowcountry.

From the manuscript collections of the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC.
In the aftermath of the war, lowcountry planters, yeomen, and freedpeople struggled to rebuild. Ultimately, planters managed to restart agricultural production, but only on a greatly reduced scale. Rice, the principal export crop grown in the region, reached a postwar peak of about 52 million pounds in 1879 and then tracked downward. By the early twentieth century it became economically marginal. Sea Island cotton, the other major staple grown in the lowcountry, fared better, but not by much. The arrival of the boll weevil in 1916 signaled its doom. Meanwhile, attempts to bring industry to the region either proved short-lived or failed to offset the agricultural downturn. Phosphate mining fueled an economic rebound during the 1870s and 1880s but declined rapidly after a devastating hurricane in August 1893. By the 1910s, only limited mining operations and several fertilizer factories on the Charleston Neck remained.7


By the World War I era, many commentators saw the coastal region as virtually lifeless. Once prosperous plantations lay ruined and abandoned. Large stretches of countryside lay virtually dormant, punctuated intermittently by timber camps and small farms but otherwise domains of flora and fauna. Historians have tended to portray the lowcountry of the early twentieth century as contemporaries saw it: economically depressed and socially and culturally isolated. As Peter A. Coclanis has written, “the area’s lifeblood drained to the last. Without rice the low-country became what it was before rice: a desolate wasteland.” To be sure, economic statistics and contemporary accounts support such a view. At the same time, the emphasis on decay and stagnation overlooks important developments. Throughout the region, investors had established new enterprises, and people had begun using coastal lands for new purposes. Northerners’ “plantations” figured at the center of the latter trend. By adapting formerly productive tracts for leisure, wealthy sporting enthusiasts introduced new social and economic relations, new

land-management practices, and new forms of activity. All demonstrated the potential of outdoor recreation at a crucial moment in time.9

Despite the interest northerners’ estates attracted in their heyday, historians have paid them little attention. In the late 1960s, scholars such as George Brown Tindall and George C. Rogers, Jr., surveyed the origins of the new estates and the activities northerners came to the region to enjoy. Tindall saw the new “plantations” as the product of “Yankee millionaires looking for playgrounds.” Noting that sportsmen sought lands where they could enjoy their favorite pastimes and avoid the chill of winter, he characterized the lowcountry as one of several southern havens where “the idle rich deported themselves in or out of season.” Rogers investigated the phenomenon more thoroughly. He devoted a chapter of his History of Georgetown County, South Carolina, to the estate-making process. Seeing northerners’ love of old plantations as inspired by yearnings for legitimacy, he highlighted the social benefits of plantation ownership. “Northern industrialists were rich and in search of status,” wrote Rogers. Some married European nobles; others collected great works of art. Still others bought southern plantations. Demand for the latter, Rogers contended, typified an era “when new families were searching for old roots.” “Rich Yankees” eagerly bought plantations with “historic pasts” and “appropriate settings for their gentlemanly sports.”10

More than four decades later, Rogers’s account remains the most detailed investigation of the phenomenon. Other scholars have recently shown interest in the topic and several studies have chronicled the creation of individual “plantations.” These investigations offer insight into owners’ motivations, northerners’ activities, and the goals of architects and landscape architects who worked on owners’ behalf. Memoirs by members of estate-owning families and plantation superintendents have also illuminated the rise of the new estates and the rhythms of the


lowcountry sporting scene. Yet even as knowledge about the new “plantations” has grown, critical analyses have remained elusive. In general, historians have tended to take the new estates for granted, as though they scarcely demand explanation. One historian has characterized them as a near-predictable use of coastal lands in an era of agricultural decline; others have seen them simply as old plantations repurposed as private shooting retreats. Still another has erroneously identified estate owners as the wealthiest echelon of the tourists who came to see Charleston as its popularity surged during the 1920s and 1930s. These interpretations are not only inaccurate but fail to explain northerners’ motivations and actions. Moreover, they overlook fundamental reasons for the development of the new estates. By linking northerners to tangential events, these views mislead more than they reveal.11

The failure to probe the origins of northerners’ plantations has left a dramatic sequence of activity unexplored. Northerners did not simply buy old plantations; they refurged architecture, landscape, and space. Owners rehabilitated select buildings, restored others, demolished some, and erected new structures. Landscapes and gardens received similar treatment. Owners unearthed, revived, and enlarged old gardens, added new

plantings, and removed features they considered undesirable. Forests and fields became recreational domains, managed specifically for leisure. All told, northerners transformed the environments they acquired, altering existing remains for new purposes. Although the results varied, the overriding approach lay in retaining elements of earlier periods, adding liberally to them, and creating the appearance of a coherent whole. In this manner, owners refashioned places historically devoted to large-scale commodity production for recreation and domestic use.

Behind the process of material change lay profound cultural and intellectual transformations. Northerners and other people of the era did not retain the term “plantation” simply for the sake of convenience or out of habit. Nor did they continue using it because of respect for tradition. Laden with meaning, it anchored views of what plantations had been and what many had become. It merged past and present within a singular idiom, emphasizing continuities and marginalizing radical disjunctions. Owners and others saw the new estates as rooted in well-established practices. All who commented on northerners’ activities saw evolutionary development, not a sharp break with the past. Use of terms such as “restoration” and “renewal” made this clear. Moreover, people of the era saw commonalities between northerners’ estates and plantations devoted to agriculture. Contemporaries recognized the new estates as “plantations” not because of what they had been but for what they had become.12

Race and class played a crucial role in fostering such judgments. Onlookers saw the new estates as restoring traditional social hierarchies. With white elites as landowners and landless African Americans as laborers, the new estates seemed to reconstitute relationships that emancipation had overturned. Popular and scholarly views of the past also played a role. Most Americans of the era looked back on slavery through a haze of romance and nostalgia. In this perspective, white authority and black servitude seemed inherent to plantations, part of a seemingly “natural” social order. Those who recognized the violence and oppression of slavery found their voices marginalized by the rigidly exclusionary public culture of Jim Crow. Among historians, the patently racist interpretations of