Carolina Rice: An Agricultural Legacy of Enslaved Peoples

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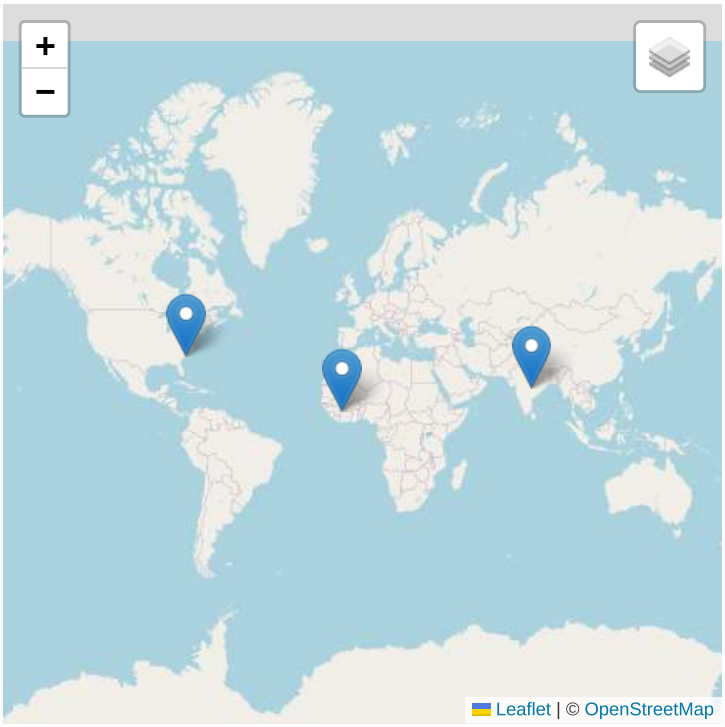
The Comeback Kid

Carolina rice, the “heritage grain” lost to history in the Reconstruction era, has come back in a major way. Indeed, in a 2017 article, *Eater* declared that “The Grain Revolution Is Here,” describing one company’s attempt to bring back the historical strain of *Oryza sativa*. Varieties of Carolina rice, in particular, “Carolina Gold,” have been attracting the attention of niche cooking websites and standard news sources alike, with outlets from *Serious Eats* to the *New York Times* spotlighting the grain.

Illustration of Rice and the Rice-Bird in the Carolin...

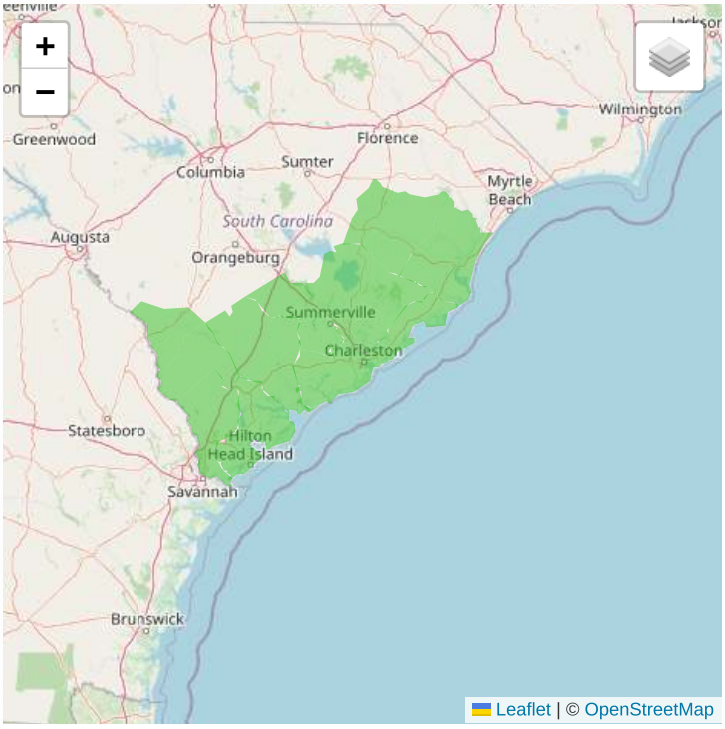
Yet behind Carolina Rice (which Serious Eats refers to in part as “the Best Rice You’ve Never Tasted”) is a long and fraught history, which manifests stories of settler colonialism, slavery, and famine. Its story spans the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, crisscrossing the globe from West Africa to the eponymous American colony to India. Its history demonstrates how the British Empire and the newly independent America were built on the labor and knowledge of enslaved people. It was this very knowledge that changed cultivation patterns and foodways across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, resulting in today’s global food system.



Different Areas of Carolina Rice Cultivation

What—and from Where—Is Carolina Rice?

Carolina rice typically refers to the type of *Oryza sativa*, or Asian rice, that was grown in the Carolina Lowcountry during the colonial and antebellum periods. There were two different varietals, Carolina White rice and Carolina Gold rice, distinguishable by the color of their husks. An 1892 work on the different types of rice describes the seed of Carolina White as a "white, flinty grain … which has given Carolina Rice a world-wide reputation." By contrast, in the author's estimation, the Carolina Gold seed was "a large plump grain, heavy yielder, but apt to shatter and deteriorate." This type of rice, according to eighteenth-century naturalist Mark Catesby, was grown in trenches in soil that was "usually two feet under water, at least two months of the year."

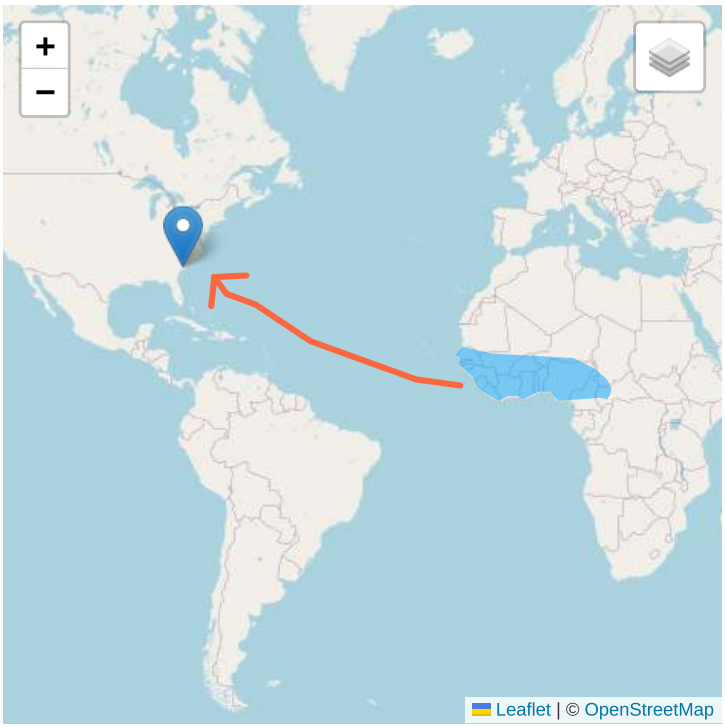


The Carolina Lowcountry

Recently, however, scholars have noted types of *Oryza glaberrima*—African rice—also growing in Carolina. Evidence of this red, nutty rice can be found in descriptions of plantations from the eighteenth century. In the 1731 pamphlet *The Importance of the British Plantations in America to this Kingdom…*,—which is, according to historian A.S. Salley, the "first published account that the writer has been able to find of the beginning of rice culture in South Carolina"—the pamphleteer describes a "Red Rice in Contradistinction to the White, from the Redness of the inner Husk or Rind of this Sort, tho' they both clean and become white alike."[1]

The Origins of Carolina Rice

How did these two types of rice make it across the oceans to Carolina? During the violent Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, European slave-traders relied on African rice crops, as well as transplanted higher-yielding varieties of Asian rice, to keep the newly enslaved peoples and their captors fed on the journey.[2] Rice, then, most likely came from West Africa, an unintended consequence of the Middle Passage. Contemporary sources suggest as much. Guillaume Thomas Raynal, a French thinker of the Enlightenment, wrote in an English edition of a work published in 1798, "Opinions differ about the manner in which rice hath been naturalized in Carolina. But whether the province may have acquired it by shipwreck, or whether it may have been carried there with slaves, or whether it be sent from England, it is certain the soil is favourable for it." Scholars such as Peter Wood have declared that Raynal's middle hypothesis was the correct one, as no European group living in the Carolina colony had experience cultivating the crop.[3]



The Middle Passage

Growing Rice in Carolina

But it was not enough merely to bring the seed to Carolina. Rather, tidal-basin cultivation, as Catesby documents occurring in Carolina, was a specialized form of cultivation unknown at the time in England. This fact is highlighted in natural histories of the period. Consider Catesby's discussion of the wetland cultivation of rice in colonial America: "In March and April it is sown in shallow trenches made by the Hough, and good Crops have been made without any further Culture than dropping the seeds on the bare ground and covering it with the Earth, or in little Holes made to receive it without any further management." Catesby uses the passive voice, which is not uncommon in his agricultural descriptions. And yet, this seemingly innocuous construction in fact erases the essential contributions and knowledge of enslaved people, without which Carolina rice would not have come to America and the crop in general could not have been cultivated in the wetlands.

Late 19th-Century Drawing of the Rice Planting...

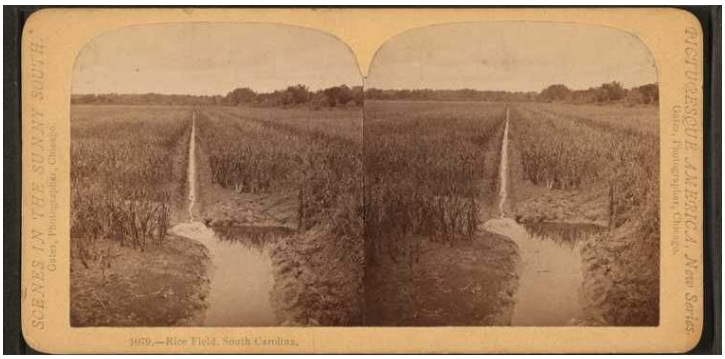
Catesby makes the role of enslaved people in rice cultivation implicitly known through his reference to the “Hough,” which makes “shallow trenches” in the land. The hoe was not a prominent tool in European agriculture at the time, “which relied principally on draft animal traction”; such metal tools were not used by the local Native American population either. In colonial-era West Africa, however, the hoe was the primary tool used for field preparation.[4] Catesby’s reference to the “Hough” thus belies a long history of West African knowledge being used in the Carolinas.

1913 Drawing by Rice Planter Elizabeth Pringle

In the penultimate sentence of his description of rice, Catesby finally acknowledges the role of enslaved peoples in the crop’s production, writing, “they use a Hand-Mill, yet there remains an inner Film which clouds the Brightness of the grain, to get off which it is beat in large wooden Mortars, and Pestles of the same, by Negro Slaves, which is very laborious and tedious.” This mortar and pestle tool, another technology used in West Africa, was employed almost exclusively by women, demonstrating the gendered aspect of rice cultivation.

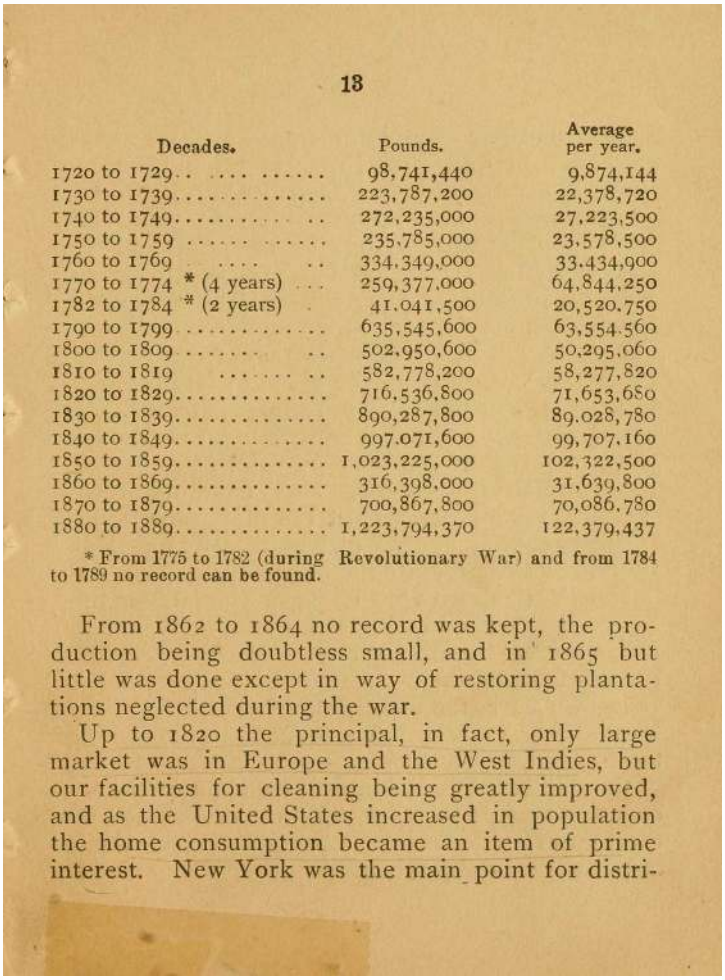
1913 Drawing by Rice Planter Elizabeth Pringle

Any doubt that enslaved people brought wetland rice cultivation to Carolina has been put to rest by geographer Judith Carney. In her path-breaking work *Black Rice*, Carney details how the "preparation of tidal floodplains for rice cultivation followed principles remarkably similar to those of the mangrove rice system [in West Africa]."[5] This was an incredibly intricate system, which required embankments, ditches, drainage valves, and more. As Carney explains, it was only with the knowledge of mangroves in West Africa that such systems could have been built in Carolina.



Photograph of a Wetland-Cultivated Carolina Rice...

As a result of the cultivation knowledge of enslaved people, particularly women, rice quickly became a popular cash crop grown in the American colonies. According to an 1892 work on the history of rice by "Dan Talmage's Sons," annual rice production in the 1720s averaged about 10 million pounds; in just two decades, that number more than doubled to over 25 million pounds per year. Indeed, Carolina rice was the "region's dominant export," and a major player in the Western European market for rice.[6]



18

Decades.	Pounds.	Average per year.
1720 to 1729	98,741,440	9,874,144
1730 to 1739	223,787,200	22,378,720
1740 to 1749	272,235,000	27,223,500
1750 to 1759	235,785,000	23,578,500
1760 to 1769	334,349,000	33,434,900
1770 to 1774 * (4 years)	259,377,000	64,844,250
1782 to 1784 * (2 years)	41,041,500	20,520,750
1790 to 1799	635,545,600	63,554,560
1800 to 1809	502,950,600	50,295,060
1810 to 1819	582,778,200	58,277,820
1820 to 1829	716,536,800	71,653,680
1830 to 1839	890,287,800	89,028,780
1840 to 1849	997,071,600	99,707,160
1850 to 1859	1,023,225,000	102,322,500
1860 to 1869	316,398,000	31,639,800
1870 to 1879	700,867,800	70,086,780
1880 to 1889	1,223,794,370	122,379,437

* From 1775 to 1782 (during Revolutionary War) and from 1784 to 1789 no record can be found.

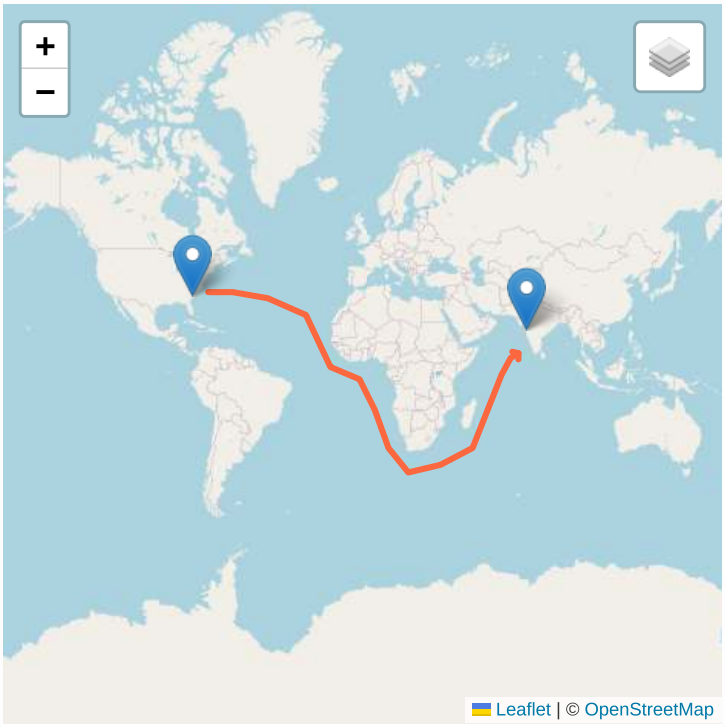
From 1862 to 1864 no record was kept, the production being doubtless small, and in 1865 but little was done except in way of restoring plantations neglected during the war.

Up to 1820 the principal, in fact, only large market was in Europe and the West Indies, but our facilities for cleaning being greatly improved, and as the United States increased in population the home consumption became an item of prime interest. New York was the main point for distri-

Production of Rice in America from 1720-1889

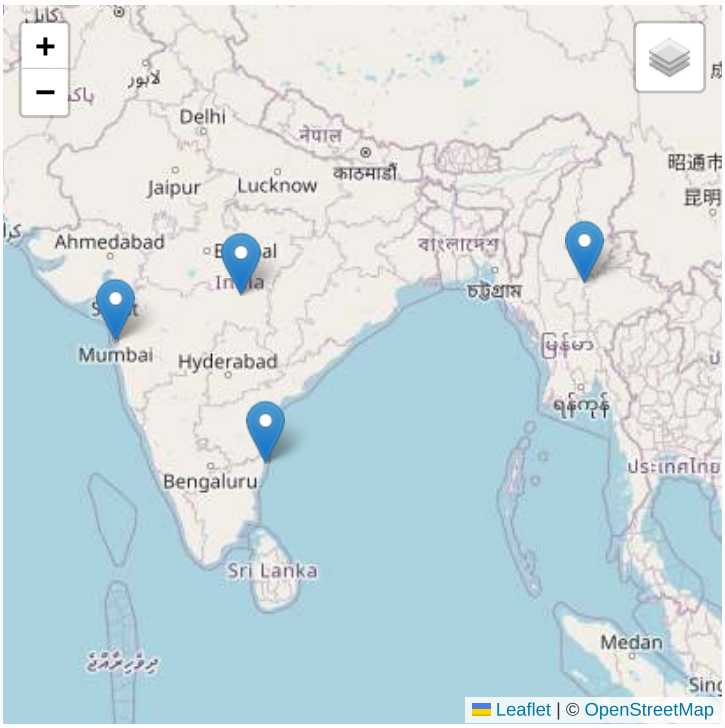
Carolina Rice Beyond Carolina

Enslaved people's knowledge of rice cultivation techniques did not only influence American agricultural systems—this knowledge spread throughout the British Empire, concomitant with the transfer of seeds. One clear example can be found in the attempted introduction of Carolina rice to India in the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British food distribution policies, exacerbated by droughts that caused the failure of the rice crop, killed millions of locals; scholar Mike Davis famously referred to these famines as "Late Victorian Holocausts."[7]



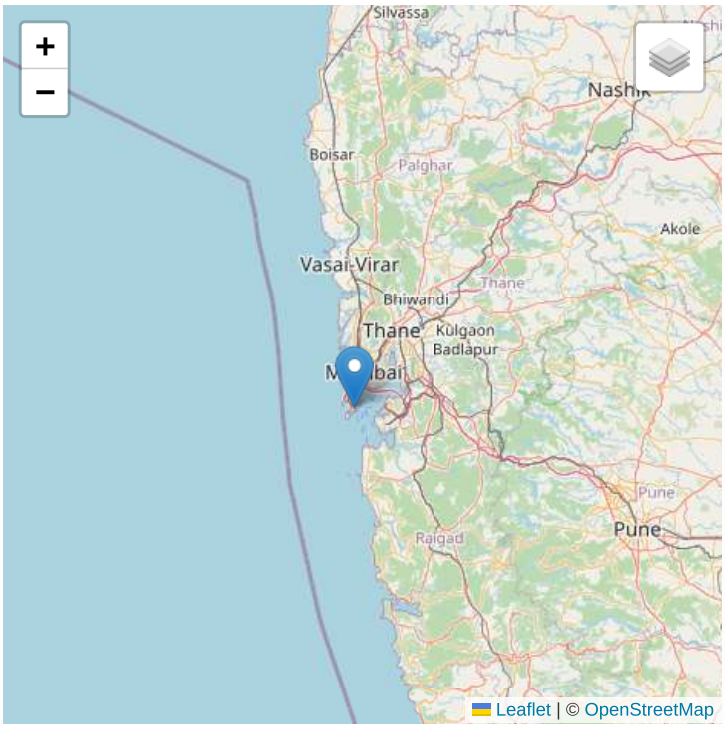
The Transfer of Carolina Rice to India

By the 1860s, British imperialists believed something had to be done to justify their rule in India, which the horrors of famine were undermining. What was thought to be the panacea for these famines? Carolina rice (most likely of the Gold varietal), whose distinct cultivation conditions were understood, according to an 1880 memorandum by L. Liotard published in Calcutta, to be "much superior to that of the ordinary paddy," and thus better able to withstand environmental factors. As a result, Liotard wrote, in 1868, "ten tons of Carolina rice seed, for experimental cultivation in India, were obtained by the Secretary of State." The seeds were then packed in 200 barrels, of which 120 were sent to Madras, 45 to Burma, 15 to Bombay, 5 to the Central Provinces; 15 barrels were reserved for the Government of India.



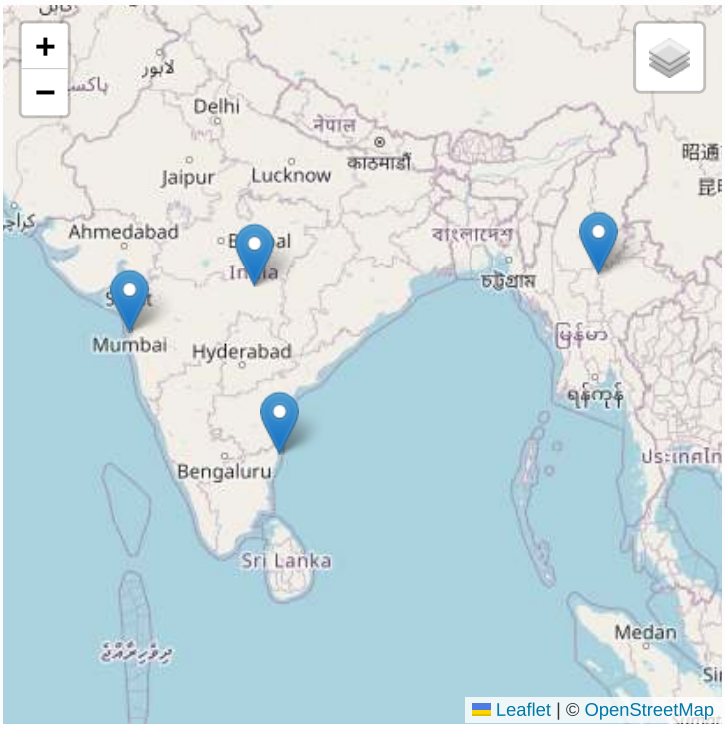
Where Carolina Rice was Grown Throughout Britis...

With the rice came enslaved people's rice cultivation knowledge, codified and amplified through travel across the continents and in the memoranda and instructions of the British imperialists. According to a memorandum by the American consul in Bombay (quoted in Liotard), "Rice is sown in long drills made by hoes (machinery does not work well) about one foot deep." While hoe-farming had long been present in Southern Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, the parenthetical note that "machinery does not work well" suggests that Carolina rice necessitated a set of tools different from those used for the typical rice grown in South Asia. The knowledge of the enslaved people on the beneficial use of hoes in farming Carolina rice spread from West Africa to Carolina to India, demonstrating the reach as well as significance of such knowledge.



Bombay

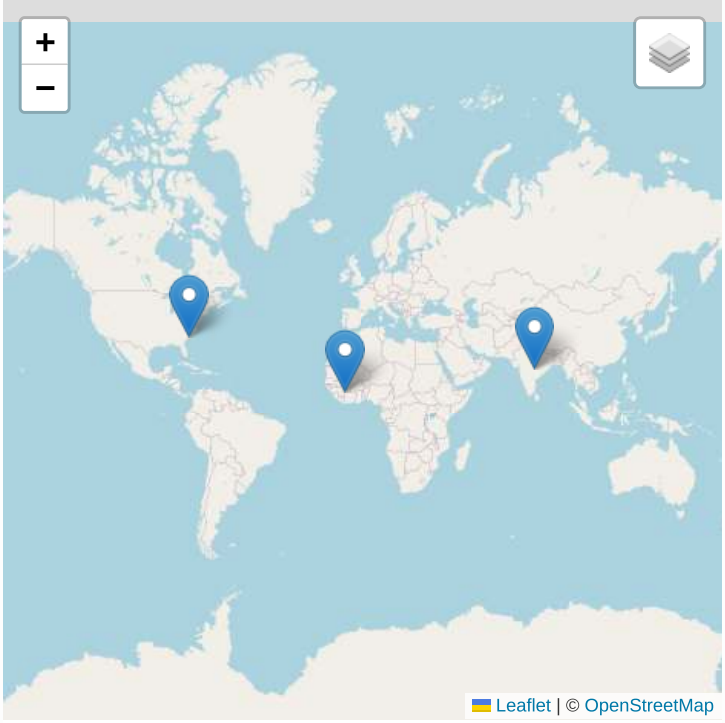
In the end, the Carolina rice experiments in India were considered a failure by the British imperial government due to "floods, excessive rains, or drought, birds, insects," as well as the "carelessness and indifference with which the experiments were conducted." Historian Utsa Ray has deemed this reasoning part of the "Colonial discourse of 'rational' agriculture…based on cultural stereotyping."[8] While Carolina rice did not succeed in India, its story in India reveals the stark contrast of empire, in which British imperialists horrifically exploited a group of people considered to be sub-human, but used their specialized knowledge and labor to profit and maintain colonies half a world away.



Where Carolina Rice was Grown Throughout Britis...

An Agricultural Legacy of Enslaved People

Through the complex history of Carolina rice, we not only see how rice was explicitly integrated into the imperial policies of the British government, but also how its consumption—from America to Britain—was predicated not only on the toil of enslaved people, but also on their cultivation knowledge, brought to America on the violent Middle Passage. This interconnected history of the movements of plants and people suggests the ways in which enslaved people influenced the food systems not only of the American colonies, but of the British Empire at large.



The Varied Geographies of Carolina Rice

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6. R.C. Nash, “South Carolina and the Atlantic Economy in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *The Economic History Review,* New Series, 45, no. 4 (1992): 679–681. ↩
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8. Utsa Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-class* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 50. ↩