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“To and Fro by Canoo and Boat”: How Enslaved Workers Created the Transport Canals That Launched South Carolina’s Export Economy, 1690–1740

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South Carolina’s colonizers exploited the labor and knowledge of enslaved Africans to raise cattle, clear forests, drain swamps, and plant rice. But historians have overlooked one key element in that Lowcountry saga. Black workers also created numerous navigable canals, or “cuts,” to enable safe, rapid river transportation. These narrow connecting channels made possible six shipping corridors linking remote plantations to the emerging port of Charleston. This transport network moved the colony beyond subsistence, enabling a profitable export economy. To construct these cuts, planners coopted muddy “haulovers” long used by Indigenous travelers dragging dugout canoes between adjacent rivers. After 1690, when officials ordered the excavation of channels to link meandering Lowcountry streams, unfree work crews began to convert Indigenous portage footpaths into navigable transit routes. By 1720, isolated gangs of conscripted Black workers had shaped a viable inland transport network, mapped here for the first time. As planters moved heavy cargoes to market by boat without having to risk longer, more dangerous ocean-facing routes, their profits rose and additional cuts were ordered. But savvy Africans used these waterways to escape to Spanish Florida, and in 1739 harsh conditions on one Stono River public works project sparked the largest rebellion of enslaved people in colonial North America.