

South Carolina's Story

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The making of a state

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What has been termed "the first strike in South Carolina labor history" occurred near the banks of the Stono River in 1739. A group of planters, tired of the restrictions of travel by water only, had pooled their slave labor to build a road. The slaves revolted, managing to organize and overpower their guards.

The Stono Rebellion was eventually crushed, but not without bloodshed. A number escaped to St. Augustine where Spanish authorities freed the rebels.

Such rebellions occurred at intervals throughout the colonial period, often enough for the planters to apply caution but not often enough for them to abandon slave labor. Slave labor was more stable than free labor. Slaves could not control their work conditions, walk away from their assigned tasks, or be granted homesteads in the wilderness.

The work patters of slave labor varied. In the lowcountry there was much use of the "task system." Slaves on the rice and sea-island cotton plantations were assigned a certain amount of work each day. A hard worker might finish his

task by 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The "gang system" was used on the tobacco and short - staple cotton plantations. Overseers worked the field hands from sunrise to sunset with a two - hour midday rest.

rest. Slaves who did not keep a lively pace were frequently whipped.

On small farms there might be only one or two slaves. The slave owner worked alongside the slave. Work conditions varied greatly in this situation.

Not all of the black population were slaves. Charleston had a considerable number of free black and mulatto artisans.

In 1790, free blacks in Charleston organized the Brown Fellowship Society. The Society supervised the apprenticeships of the children of the members and also insured their own economic security by providing sick pay and death benefits. They maintained their own cemetery. Over a span of 54 years, the membership numbered 131.

Charleston's mulatto artisans formed a similar body with the same basic purposes. Their organiza-

tion, called the Humane Brotherhood, was composed of tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, butchers, hairdressers, tavern keepers, etc.

In the post - Civil War period the first black unionization, in the modern sense, occurred. During Reconstruction, the Longshoremen's Union was organized in Charleston. The union lasted from 1869 until 1902. In 1881, there was black membership in the Bricklayers' Union Number One of South Carolina.

There were occasional industrial strikes, all unsuccessful. Pacific Guano Company workers in Beaufort failed in their strike. The Belton Cooperative Cotton Seed Oilmill workers struck over the issue of their wages being reduced from 75 cents to 60 cents per day. The strike leaders were arrested.

Almost all of South Carolina's black labor was agricultural labor. When the federal troops were removed from the state in 1877, many blacks saw agricultural labor unions as the only way to prevent a return to economic slavery.

As a countermeasure to the growing number of

black unions, the South Carolina Legislature, in 1886, passed an act making it a misdemeanor for any organization to interfere in agricultural contracts between tenants, or share croppers, and landlords. This killed black unions.

Blacks saw cooperatives as their only recourse. The Cooperative Workers of America was a black cooperative designed to end dependence on rural merchants. For that reason, it was called "the KKK in reverse."

The largest cooperative was the Colored Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union, which was organized by T. E. Pratt of Cheraw in 1888. In the following two years the membership rose spectacularly to more than 30,000. Then W. J. Grant attempted to organize a cotton pickers' strike across the South. Most of the blacks dropped their membership in the Alliance out of fear of the consequences.

The 1888 Alliance effort was the last significant attempt to unionize South Carolina blacks until the past two decades.