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Item Type	Article
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Download date	2026-05-21 17:25:52
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/1334



December 2010 Newsletter

The Old Plantation Painting at Colonial Williamsburg: New Findings and Some Observations

By Jerome S. Handler¹

Arguably the best known visual depiction of African American life during the eighteenth century, this small (approx. 12" x 18") watercolor, owned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF), poses a number of questions of interpretation and identification (Figure 1).²



Figure 1. *The Old Plantation*, ca. 1785-1790 (see Shames 2010: 6). Original painting in Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia (slide courtesy CWF). Image Reference 'NW0159,' as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH) and the University of Virginia Library (UVL).

The artist did not name the painting, which gives a unique visual perspective on early African American life, but former owners gave it the arbitrary title “The Old Plantation,” by which it is now commonly known. The painting, which is unsigned, undated and not given a provenience, depicts what are presumed to be plantation slaves dancing and playing musical instruments within a rural setting.

The history of how this painting came to be known and ultimately owned by CWF is well documented in a recently published work by Susan Shames, the decorative arts librarian with CWF (Shames 2010). Most importantly, her meticulous genealogical and historical research has identified the artist for the first time, and has also refined earlier speculations on the probable locale of the painting and the approximate date at which it was made.

In 1968 an analysis of the watermark on the paper (by the Institute of Paper Chemistry, Appleton, Wisconsin) indicated that the painting was done on handmade paper manufactured between 1777 and 1794 -- absolutely key information for dating the painting.³ With these years in mind, but supplemented by her own research, Shames suggests the painting was made before 1795 and, in consultation with several of her colleagues at CW, she assigns a probable date of 1785-1790. She identifies the artist as John Rose (born ca. 1752, place of birth unknown; deceased in Charleston, 1820) who during the 1780s owned a plantation in the area of Beaufort, South Carolina, somewhere on the Coosaw river -- the probable setting of the painting (Shames 2010: *ibid.*, pers. comm., 18 December 2010).⁴ The artist left no diary and there is no contemporary documentation on the painting, so its interpretation is left to conjecture.

During the period when the painting was probably made, about 107,000 enslaved people lived in South Carolina (Bureau of the Census 1908). As of the 1770s, perhaps over the following decades as well, approximately 52 percent lived on plantations with 50 or more slaves and another 19 percent on units with slave contingents numbering between 30 and 49 (Morgan 1998:40; cf. Edelson 2006:116). During the period 1790 to 1800, John Rose owned between 49 and 51 slaves (Shames 2010: 55; pers. comm., 18 December 2010). Many enslaved South Carolinians were creoles, but over the period 1760-1790, perhaps an average of about one-third had been born in Africa (Morgan (1998:61). Between 1760 and 1790, close to 53,000 captive Africans are estimated to have been imported into South Carolina, although the actual figure was

probably larger (www.slaveryvoyages.org; David Eltis to Handler, pers. comm., 12 December 2010) (Figure 2). Some of these Africans may have inhabited the plantation depicted in the painting, but there are no data on the number or proportion of Africans among John Rose's slaves.

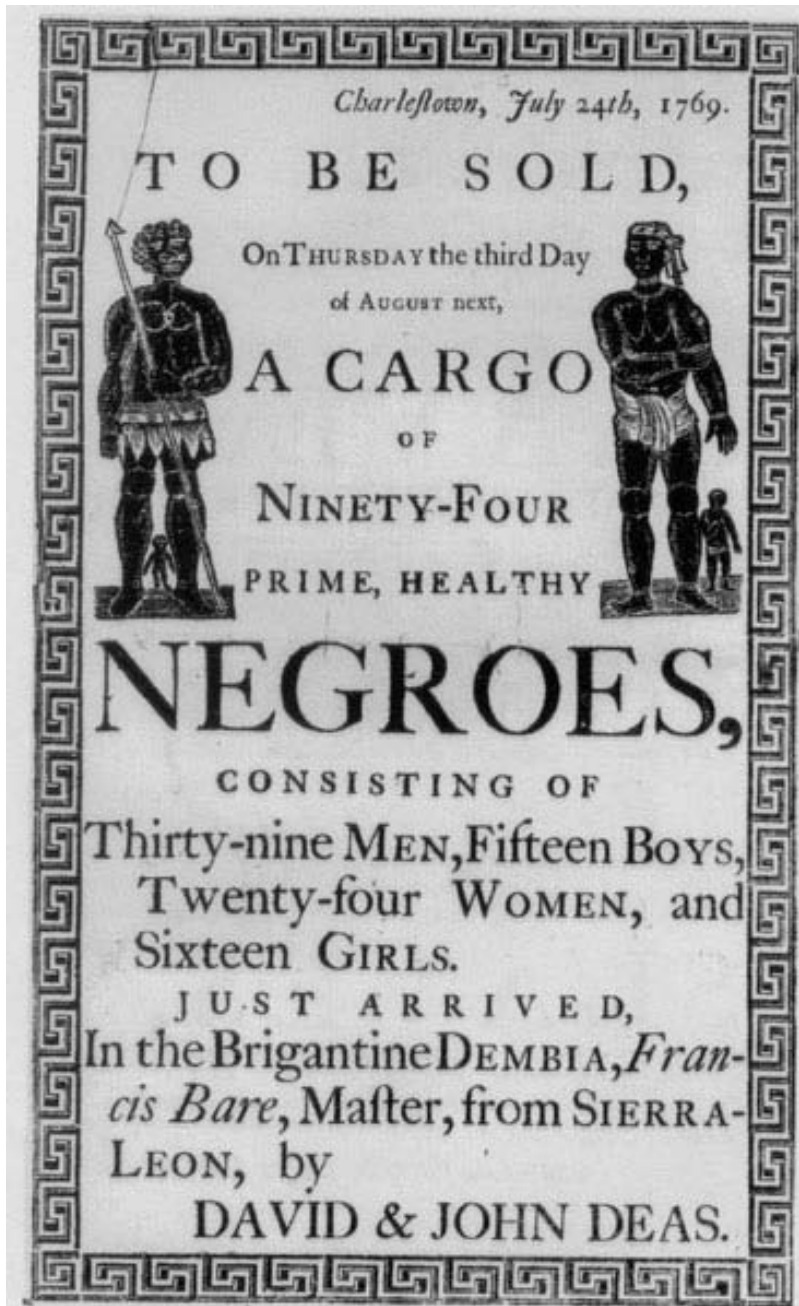


Figure 2. Poster advertising 1789 sale in Charleston of newly arrived enslaved Africans from Sierra Leone. Image Reference 'tobesold,' as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the VFH and UVL.

The central male figure in the *Old Plantation* painting holds a long, perhaps carved, staff or walking cane (Figure 1). The two women in the center are dancing with what appear to be scarves or bandanas. These may be, in fact, African musical instruments -- gourd rattles enclosed in a net into which hard objects such as shells or bones have been woven; such improvised instruments “strike against the gourd when the net is shaken, creating a percussive noise” (Shames 2010:12).⁵ On the right, a man plays a four-stringed banjo,⁶ with a body that may consist of a hollow gourd or calabash.⁷ The banjo appears similar to one of the stringed instruments shown in Hans Sloane’s published account of his travels to the New World. Sloane lived in Jamaica for 18 months in the late 1680s and his account contains illustrations of “lutes of the Indies and Negros constructed from various gourds, their hollows covered by hides/skins”; the smaller banjo-like instrument shown on the left in Figure 3 (no. 2 is identified with the “Negros,” while the larger instrument on the right (no. 1) is from the “Indies” (i.e., Southeast Asia), apparently shown for comparative purposes.⁸ Another male musician in the *Old Plantation* painting uses sticks or bones to play a small drum held between his thighs; the drum may be an inverted earthenware vessel or a gourd /calabash.⁹

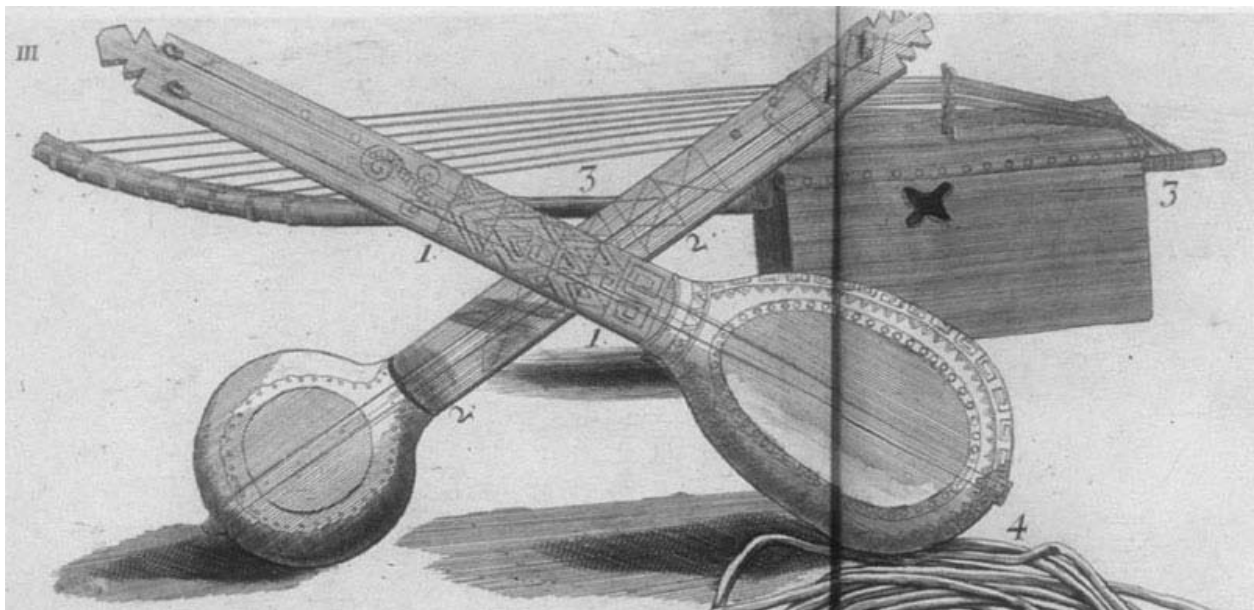


Figure 3. Detail, stringed instruments made from gourds/calabashes covered with leather, from Sloane (1707). No. 2 is identified with “Negros” (probably Jamaica), while no. 1 is labeled from the “Indies” (i.e., Southeast Asia). For the full image, see Hans Sloane, *A voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, . . . and islands of America* (London, 1707), vol. 1. Image Reference ‘Sloane2,’ as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the VFH and UVL.

The women in the *Old Plantation* painting wear head ties/head wraps (head kerchiefs), and gowns with fitted bodices and long, full skirts (Figure 1). A couple of the men also wear what appear to be head ties, while the banjo player wears a round flat brimmed hat. Except for the head ties and bare feet, the male and female clothing, including breeches on the men, conforms to late eighteenth-century working class styles, regardless of “racial” group. The people shown in this painting are, perhaps, wearing their “best” clothes rather than everyday wear, although the artist probably intentionally “sanitized” clothing that more realistically would have appeared worn, tattered, and shabby. On the other hand, the people depicted may have been household slaves (domestic servants) and artisans who had access to “better” clothing than field people. Whatever the case, many South Carolinian slaves -- particularly, but not solely, field hands -- went barefoot (Morgan 1998:129-130). Some of the men in Figure 1 are shown with earrings, common items of jewelry among enslaved South Carolinians, and several seem to be depicted with beards, also regularly found among the African-born as well as creoles (Morgan 1998:606-607).

Three containers in the lower right foreground of the painting include a brown jug, probable stoneware, and a glass (wine?) bottle; the third object could be an English white salt-glazed stoneware jug or an English cream ware jug. Whether all of these items would have been found at an actual dance and placed in this manner is problematical.

The background of the painting shows a river (the Coosaw river?)¹⁰ with two apparent canoes (not uncommon items on South Carolina plantations [Morgan 1998: 55-56]), and a group of larger buildings (the “yard”), including the manor or mansion house, outbuildings, probably including stables, and what appear to be a line or row of seven slave cabins at a short distance from the main plantation area.¹¹ The cabins appear to have wooden or clay chimneys, features that sometimes appeared on slave houses on larger South Carolina plantations in the later eighteenth century (Morgan 1998:110). Those structures appear to be framed and not made of logs, and two cabins are also shown on either side of the foreground -- suggesting the scene represents a dance in the slave quarter. A male on the extreme left appears to have his hand over the breast of the female sitting next to him, and a man on the right (behind the banjo player) may be “leering” at the adjacent woman (Figure 1).

Nothing can be said with certainty about what was in the artist's mind when he painted this scene, including the apparent sexual references noted above.¹² Although there has been a great deal of speculation as to what the scene is supposed to represent, any interpretation is merely conjectural. For example, whether it was a customary weekend dance, a secular festival such as the Harvest Home, or a dance with some spiritual significance is unknown. What is likely, however, is that the scene depicts a composite view of activities, behaviors, and objects the artist had observed from time to time. Perhaps the most far-fetched interpretation given the painting is that it represents a slave wedding and the custom of "jumping the broom."¹³ Aside from the generalized West African influences depicted in, for example, the musical instruments, aspects of clothing styles, and dance movements, there is no way of telling from the painting if the persons depicted were African-born and/or creole. Moreover, attempting to identify African ethnicity or specific African ethnic influences, particularly on the dance movements or even musical instruments (with the probable exception of the rattle), would seem to be a fruitless undertaking. What is shown probably represents what has been referred to as "inter-African syncretisms" (Bilby 1985:3) or, as Morgan has suggested, a "syncretism among a variety of musical cultures," as occurred in other New World slave societies (1998:586; cf. Handler and Frisbie 1972). In any case, the picture of slave life conveyed in this painting is bucolic and idyllic, surely masking the grim, severe, and often brutal life of plantation slaves in eighteenth-century South Carolina, a state that was to hold the country's largest enslaved population on the eve of the Civil War (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Five generations of an unidentified family on a plantation owned by J.J. Smith, Beaufort, as photographed by Timothy H. O’Sullivan in 1862. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Image Reference ‘NW0243,’ as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the VFH and UVL.

Notes

1. Senior Scholar, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Charlottesville. For comments on a draft of this article, I thank Max Edelson, Lisa Randle and, particularly Susan Shames. For earlier help in interpreting the painting my thanks to Barbara Luck, Linda Baumgarten, and Suzanne Hood of the CWF. I am particularly grateful to Barbara Luck for making CW’s large file on this painting (Folk Art Center Collection, #1935.301.3) accessible to me in May 2008 and to Eunice Glosson for her assistance in dealing with the file. The CWF provided a slide of the painting, a high-resolution copy of which is shown on www.slaveryimages.org, image reference NW0159.

2. Visual depictions of African American life in eighteenth-century North America are very rare; see, for example, www.slaveryimages.org image references NW0048, NW0132 and Morgan 1998: passim.
3. A. Grummer to Peter Brown, 11 April 1968 (CW, Folk Art Center, #35-301-3, folder 2).
4. In the late eighteenth-century, the town of Beaufort was a minor secondary port, mostly for trans-shipping goods to Charleston, South Carolina. Beaufort was too small to support an extensive provisions farming hinterland like the one around Charleston. Up the rivers, particularly in the tidal areas about 30 miles from the town, this was very much a rice-growing region (Max Edelson to Handler, pers. comm., 13 December 2010).
5. This can be more clearly seen when the “scarves” are magnified (see Shames 2010:9; Figure 4, detail; and www.slaveryimages.org, image reference NW0159). The identification of this item was originally proposed to CWF by the anthropologist Joseph Opala in a 1987 letter written while doing fieldwork in Sierra Leone. He suggested that the two female figures were “playing a kind of rattle used in [Sierra Leone] almost exclusively by women, and played in precisely the same position in which the women are standing in the painting” (Opala to Curator, 25 September 1987 [CW, Folk Art Center, # 35-301-3, folder 3]). Elsewhere, Opala has identified the instrument as a *shegureh*, a woman’s rattle found among the Mende and neighboring groups (e.g., Opala n.d.). As far as I am aware no authority has challenged Opala’s identification.
6. The banjo was the most common instrument among enslaved African Americans in the Lowcountry during the last half of the eighteenth century (Morgan 1998:583).
7. The two terms are often used interchangeably, but these are two different plants: the gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), also called the “bottle gourd,” is a vine-grown plant of tropical African origin, while the calabash (*Crescentia cujete*) is the fruit of a tree native to the Americas. Both plants were apparently present in South Carolina.
8. Thanks to Zachary Matus for his translation of the Latin inscription and to Laurent Dubois for clarifying the differences between the two instruments (pers. comm., 13 December 2010).
9. Pottery vessels used as idiophone drums are known from other areas of British America (e.g., Handler and Frisbie 1972:18).
10. Rivers were a “key visual element in landscape paintings” in South Carolina. “Above all,” Edelson (2006:150) has observed, “landowners prized ‘delightful’ and ‘beautiful’ prospects ‘up and down the River.’”
11. According to Morgan (1998:120), “most” slave villages in the late eighteenth century Lowcountry were located “two hundred yards or more from the master’s dwelling.”

12. Franklin (1997:234) offers the view that “the overt sexuality [of the painting] simply supported the image commonly held by whites that blacks were lusty and immoral.”

13. This interpretation seems to have been first raised, albeit very hesitatingly, by Melville Herskovits when he saw a photo of the painting; he raised this “as just a possibility” (Herskovits to Nina Fletcher Little, 3 October 1955 [CW, Folk Art Center, # 35-301-3, folder 2]). Since then other authors have followed with this interpretation. Franklin (1997:233), however, writing before the artist was identified and apparently without consulting CW’s files or discussions with its curators, feels that the artist is portraying the slaves’ “attempts to communicate with spirits”; based on available data, I find this interpretation as far fetched as “jumping the broom.”

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