

TWO AMERICAS • CONTRIBUTION • ERA I • ENTRY 6B

What They Carried

African Knowledge, Culture, and Identity Across the Atlantic

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Contribution Track • ERA I • Fayetteville, North Carolina

What the Ship Could Not Take

The Middle Passage was engineered to strip away everything: names, languages, families, status, religion, the ordinary textures of a life. It did not succeed. What enslaved Africans carried across the Atlantic — not in cargo holds but in memory and muscle — became some of the foundational technical and cultural knowledge of the American South. Rice cultivation is the clearest case: West Africans from the Senegambian coast and further south had grown rice for centuries using sophisticated tidal-irrigation and milling techniques unknown to European colonists. Historian Judith Carney's research established that enslaved Africans, not European planters, supplied the agronomic knowledge that made Carolina and Georgia lowcountry rice cultivation possible — planters actively sought captives from rice-growing regions of West Africa specifically because of that expertise, a preference documented in the trading records themselves.

Knowledge as Property, Knowledge as Survival

The same pattern repeated across skills the historical record rarely credits by name: ironworking traditions from West and Central Africa; herbal and midwifery knowledge that shaped healing practices across the enslaved South; boatbuilding and river navigation skill that built and ran the vessels moving goods along rivers like the Cape Fear; basket weaving, textile dyeing, and indigo processing techniques refined over generations before a single ship crossed the Atlantic. Enslavers extracted the economic value of this knowledge while denying its African origin, but the knowledge itself remained the possession of the people who carried it, passed hand to hand and generation to generation even as the law denied them the right to own anything at all.

"They took the ship. They could not take what he knew."

What Survived in Cumberland County

In the Cape Fear region, that carried knowledge became the literal foundation of the local economy. Enslaved Senegambian people brought the wet-rice cultivation and indigo-processing techniques that turned Cumberland County's river-bottom land into productive plantation acreage — the same wealth that built Cross Creek and Campbellton into Fayetteville. Naming traditions, oral history practices, and spiritual and musical forms carried across the Atlantic persisted alongside that agricultural knowledge, surfacing in the names recorded — however imperfectly — in colonial deed books and estate records, the same records genealogists use today to trace family lines the trade tried to erase.

NC Local Lens • Cumberland County

The rice and indigo economy that made Fayetteville a regional commercial center ran on knowledge enslaved Senegambian people carried across the Atlantic, not on knowledge colonial planters possessed themselves. Cumberland County's colonial-era estate records and deed books, held today by the Cumberland County Register of Deeds, preserve the names of enslaved people whose technical knowledge built the plantation economy of Cross Creek and Campbellton — records that remain a direct genealogical resource for descendant families.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style.

1. Carney, Judith Ann. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
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3. Littlefield, Daniel C. *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.
4. Opala, Joseph A. *The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection*. Freetown: United States Information Service, 1987.

Paired persecution entry: The Triangular Trade — the system that carried this knowledge across the Atlantic by force.