

By the Rivers of Georgia

A history of a Southern rice region, from the mirage of Sherman's 40 acres to segregation.

BY KEVIN BOYLE

THE pestilent marshlands of Georgia's barrier islands hardly seem like fertile soil for revolution. But that's precisely what happened there in the early months of 1865, as the Confederacy crumbled beneath the Union's relentless assault. From his villa in recently captured Savannah, William Tecumseh Sherman ordered the great rice plantations that dominated the coast to be turned over to the slaves his troops had liberated,

SAVING SAVANNAH

The City and the Civil War.
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with each family receiving "not more than 40 acres of tillable ground." Immediately, thousands of African-Americans poured into the area, hoping to build homesteads, churches, schools — the foundations of freedom — on the sodden land where slavery had flourished. America's promise of liberty finally fulfilled. The world turned upside down.

The moment proved to be far too brief, Jacqueline Jones shows in "Saving Savannah," her meticulous recreation of the Civil War in Georgia's rice kingdom. The region was built on egregious inequalities. Before the war, planters, slave traders and merchants lived in the sybaritic comfort of Savannah's elegant central district, surrounded by ramshackle neighborhoods reserved for the city's working-class majority. Just beyond Savannah lay some of the South's largest plantations, where most of the nation's rice crop was grown, and where small armies of slaves spent their days knee-deep in the stagnant water of the paddies, churning out the profits that made their masters spectacularly wealthy. Little wonder that when Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 seemed to threaten the slave system, Savannah's grandees raced off to war.

Jones devotes surprisingly little space to the war itself, probably because the rice kingdom never became a battleground. In the spring of 1862, Union troops captured the fort that sat at the mouth of the Savannah River, a move that gave them control of most of the plantations. Rather than take the city, though, Northern forces simply shut it off, slowly squeezing it into deprivation. Not until December 1864 was Savannah finally threatened with invasion. It was a terrifying moment: 62,000 of Sherman's men marching south from the ruins of Atlanta. Rather than face de-



Slaves plowing a rice field near Savannah, circa 1855.

struction, the city's fathers chose to surrender. Sherman entered Savannah three days before Christmas, bringing with him grand hopes of a new world about to be born.

The latter half of "Saving Savannah" details the struggle to define the meaning of freedom in the rice kingdom. Above all else, Jones says, African-Americans wanted self-determination: the right to control their labor, reconstruct their families, teach their children and shape their communities as they saw fit. They also understood that to secure those rights they had to have a full and equal voice in the political process. For its part, Savannah's planter class desperately wanted to hold on to as much of its power as possible. For the first few years after the Civil War the two sides pitted their visions against each other in a series of running battles. African-Americans claimed plots of land; plantation owners took them back. Planters agreed to hire former slaves desperate for work, but only under the most onerous terms. Come harvest time freedmen went on strike to insist on better conditions. African-Americans demanded the vote; whites threatened violence when they tried to use it.

Freedmen had a fighting chance as long as they could count on the support of the federal government. But Washington's commitment to racial justice, always tenuous, quickly faded. In the process, revolution gave way to restoration. By the early 1870s African-Americans had been driven out of Savannah's political life. In the surrounding countryside blacks had been reduced to a largely landless peas-

antry, eking out meager livings on tiny parcels of rented land. And all along the Georgia coast local officials began to impose systematic segregation, the legalized humiliation that would culminate in Jim Crow.

Jones, who teaches history at the University of Texas at Austin, traces this tragic story with the thoroughness and sophistication that have marked her distinguished career. But she doesn't employ her imposing scholarship in ways that might have made the rice kingdom come alive. For a book so rooted in a particular locale, "Saving Savannah" has very little sense of place: there are no evocative descriptions of the city's graceful streets, the islands' fetid swamps. More fundamentally, Jones rarely evokes the passions that such extraordinary events must have stirred. She makes us understand the burdens of cultivating rice, but she doesn't make us see the slave standing hour after hour in muck, his bent back blistering under the summer sun. She describes Sherman's remarkable offer of free land in the first few days of freedom, carefully noting the political calculation that lay behind it, but we don't feel the unbounded joy of a freedman walking through his former master's fields and claiming them as his own.

And when the promise of liberty collapses, Jones makes sure that we grasp the meaning of that terrible loss, for both the victims of the oppression to come and the nation that still bears the weight of its racial past. But she doesn't demand that we feel it in our bones, feel a betrayal so bitter it can barely be endured. □

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