

## Prosperity – Sea Island Cotton (1790 – 1920)

“Prosperity” is the inspirational theme for week 8 of the *52 Sams in 52 Weeks* challenge. For the Sams of Datha Island (19th century name), there is a particular source of their prosperity; Sea Island cotton.



Figure 1 - Köhler, Franz Eugen, Botanical illustration of *Gossypium barbadense* plant (extra-long staple cotton, Sea Island cotton), 1897

*“By 1850, his two sons had amassed a fortune well in excess of four hundred thousand dollars.”*

Rowland, et al, page 372.

The authors were referring to Lewis Reeve Sams (1784 - 1856) and Barnwell Sams (1787 - 1855), who owned their respective plantations on Datha and elsewhere in Beaufort County for about 50 years in the 1800s. They were the sons of William Sams and Elizabeth Hext Sams. Their fortune in 1850 was the equivalent today of over thirteen million dollars. Such was the prosperity derived from the cultivation and sale of Sea Island cotton in the Lowcountry of South Carolina in the first half of the nineteenth century.

However, the genuinely awful side of this story is that Sea Island Cotton, like all cotton, was only profitable in the antebellum era when enabled by slavery. Though it generated enormous wealth for a few, it required great suffering by many.

### Demand for Cotton

Cotton has been cultivated in North America since the earliest days of European exploration in the 17th century. But several factors converged in the 18th and 19th centuries to form the catalyst for cotton's explosion onto the fields of the South.

Under King Charles II in the mid-1600s, policies were implemented to encourage English wealthy planters to settle in North America. Plantations with forced labor flourished, cultivating tobacco in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland and rice in Carolina Colony. But a lesson learned in the British West Indies was that dependency on one crop was not financially healthy. Weather and market fluctuations could and did destroy many plantation owners' futures. In the last half of the 18th century, the two money crops in Beaufort District were rice and indigo. But indigo was exported to England for dyeing their Royal Navy uniforms. Once "the shot heard round the world" was fired in Concord, Massachusetts, in April of 1775, the British were not so keen on buying indigo from their upstart colonies anymore. When the war ended in 1783, William Sams looked south from the Charleston area to a more friendly political environment and purchased Datha Island from his cousin Sarah Reeve Gibbes. William's father, uncle, and cousin were all indigo plantation owners, and it's likely he started (or continued) with indigo on Datha. In any case his timing was fortunate, primarily due to events occurring on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The French aristocratic taste for fashion was peaking, just as the Industrial Revolution was forever changing the textile industry in Lancashire, England. The British demand for raw cotton to weave into fine cloth for France encouraged

innovations in powering spindles and looms for making the cloth. Soon the French Revolution freed their citizenry to seek clothing made out of comfortable fabric rather than traditional hemp. This demand further pushed the acceleration of what became the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the mechanization of looms to produce fine cloth cheaply. By 1860, 440,000 people were employed in 2,650 cotton mills with 350,000 power looms, focused in the region around Lancashire. And throughout this time, the source of cotton to those British looms was the nascent United States.

By 1860, 88% of British cotton imports came from America; that is 1,230,607,000 pounds of cotton. Yes, 1.2 billion pounds! The southern United States cotton belt from the Carolinas over to Texas produced two-thirds of the world's cotton in 1860. And a portion of this was a particularly fine grade of cotton called Sea Island cotton.

*“By all accounts, it was the finest quality of cotton ever grown – anywhere or at anytime.”*

Porcher

### Sea Island Cotton

These figures represent all cotton, not just Sea Island cotton. But the Sea Island cotton was unique. Back to William Sams and his sons and good fortune. The only kind of cotton that would grow on the sea islands of our Lowcountry in South Carolina was also the most in-demand, world-wide. None of this was known to William Sams when he bought Datha in 1783. He was stepping into a declining indigo operation. By 1795 Sea Island cotton had arrived in Hilton Head. By 1810, nearly all the land suitable for growing Sea Island cotton was no longer available.

On the map below, I've drawn in red those areas where Sea Island cotton was grown.

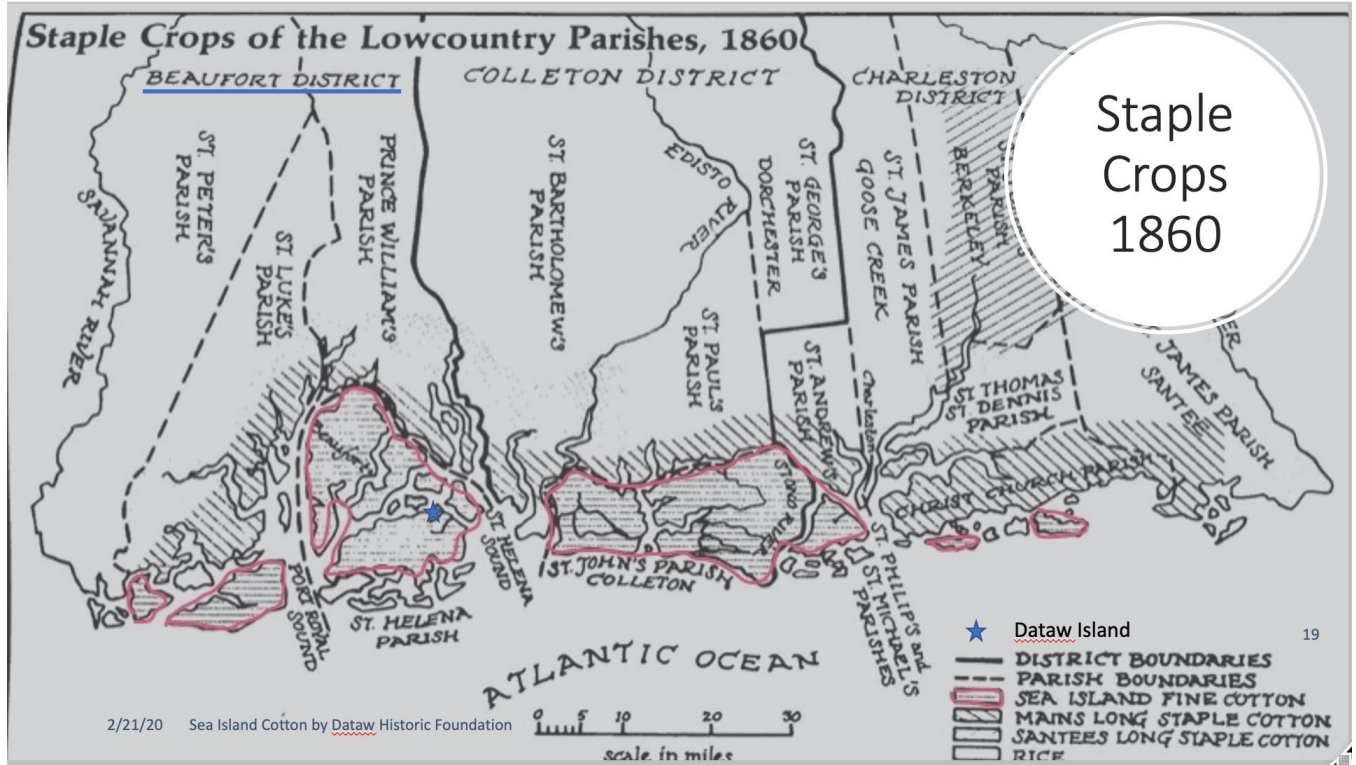


Figure 2 - Rosengarten, Theodore -Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter, 1986

## Cotton & the Sams

In 1805 and 1808, respectively, the Sams brothers we know and love (Lewis Reeve and Berners Barnwell) came of age (i.e., 21) and inherited their plantations from their mother. For the next 55 years, they, and their heirs, reaped the benefits. In 1840, Lewis Reeve Sams had 1,467 acres and 154 slaves on Datha. Berners Barnwell Sams had plantations covering 2,097 acres on Datha & Ladys Island - and 140 slaves. And there were other plantation owners in the family then, most notably Dr. L.R. Sams, Jr. (L.R.'s son) - the man who took his family 'so far away' after the war. He owned three plantations in the immediate area, Polowana, Oakland, and The Parsonage.

The map below shows the locations of Sea Island cotton plantations on St. Helena Island and the immediate vicinity. The upper five red circles denote locations of Sams' family plantations.

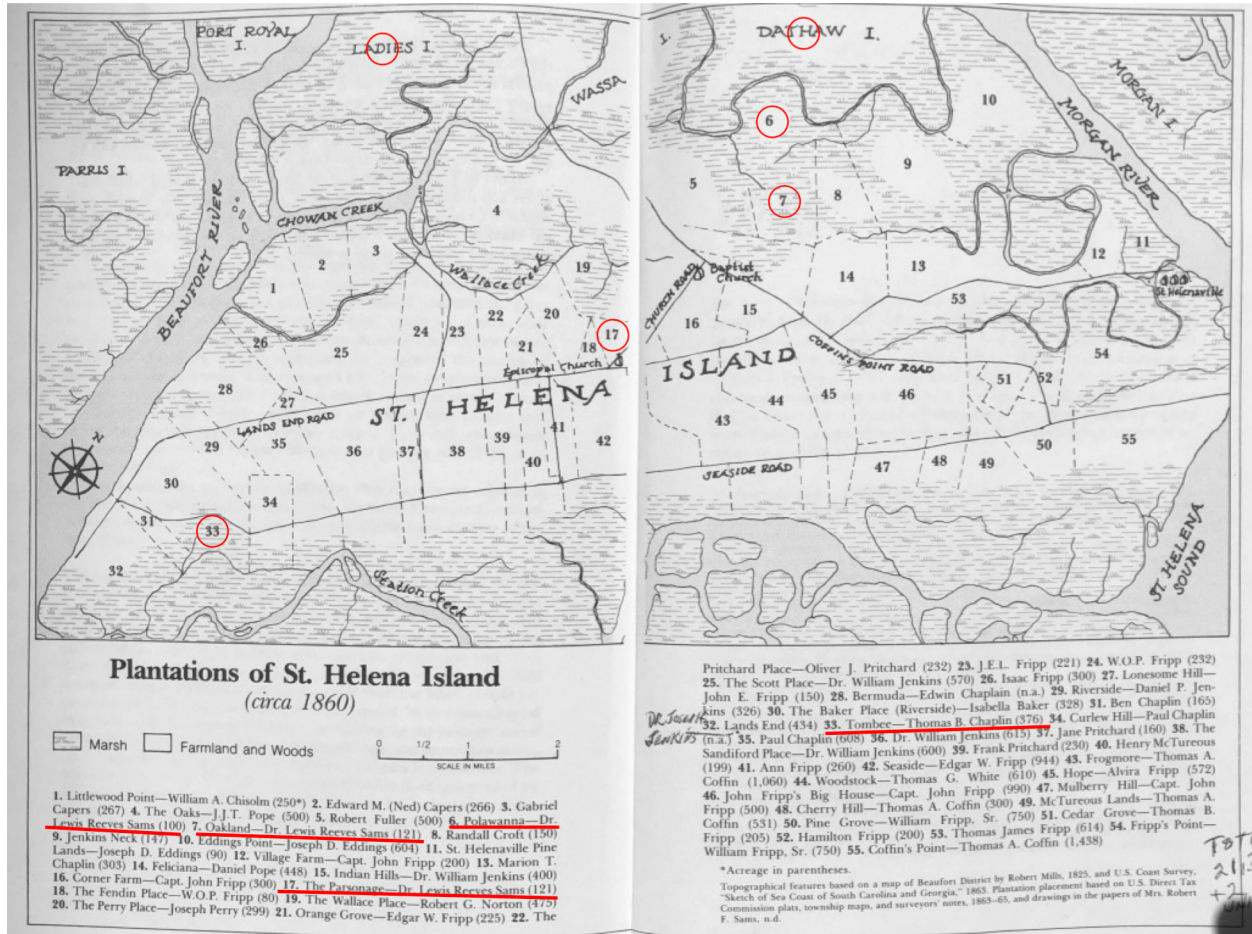


Figure 3 - Rosengarten, Theodore -Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter, 1986

Sea Island cotton was produced by about 350 plantations spread from Hilton Head up the South Carolina coast to Bull Island. Much of the cultivation was done on St. Helena and Edisto Islands. To more fully appreciate Beaufort in the antebellum era, consider this fact. From 1805 to 1860, about 500 million pounds of Sea Island cotton were exported from Charleston, most to England, some to New England. This amount of Sea Island cotton would be worth \$3.6 billion in 2018 dollars. Prosperity, but at a price. All cotton was cultivated and prepared for market by slaves.

### More about Sea Island cotton

My presentation back in the Fall of 2019 provided details about the who, what, where, when, and how aspects of Sea Island cotton. You can find a link to my presentation at the bottom of this article. In that presentation you can drill down into the cultivation of Sea Island cotton and find the answer to questions like these.

- Why did we have plantations? (Headright system + agricultural exports + slave labor)
- Why did growing cotton require so much labor? (Large scale farming + preparing product for market)
- Why did people in the South believe 'Cotton is King'? (The South supplied 88% of England's raw cotton)
- Why did the best cotton in the world grow on the Sea Islands of SC? (Environment + annual seed selection)
- Why was Sea Island cotton so valuable? (Longest, most durable, finest fiber + Industrial Revolution in England + French Revolution)
- Why did Sea Island Cotton disappear? (Civil War + Emancipation + boll weevil)

## Education

From a plantation owner perspective, the enduring benefit of the antebellum lifestyle was the ability to afford advanced educations for the men. As Professor Rowland reports, "Before the Civil War, no fewer than twenty-five men from the small town attended Harvard." He was referring to Beaufort. Many others went to the South Carolina College, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and West Point. The Sams were in this educated mix. Even after the Sams lost everything in the Civil War, it was this education that lifted many of them up to carry on and prosper another day.

*[Cotton was] a 'map-maker, trouble-maker, and history-maker.'*

David Cohn, in book by Dattel

## Sources

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#52 Sams Week 8