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## **The Presbyterian Exception? The Illegal Education of Enslaved Blacks by South Carolina Presbyterian Churches, 1834-1865**

Margaret Bates

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THE PRESBYTERIAN EXCEPTION? THE ILLEGAL EDUCATION OF ENSLAVED  
BLACKS BY SOUTH CAROLINA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES, 1834-1865

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study of literacy among enslaved people in South Carolina is often limited to legal literature, enslaver and enslaved autobiographies, and Northern accounts of education from teachers sent to the South. The use of these types of sources to describe literacy and education of enslaved people leaves out a major contributor to the enslaved literacy movement, the churches. Using documentation from two Presbyterian churches in South Carolina, this thesis expands upon the enslaved literacy movements in South Carolina to look at the roles ministers, missionaries, and congregations played in teaching enslaved blacks how to read religious literature, why these institutions are often overlooked, and why their impact on the education of enslaved people was so important. Salem Black River Presbyterian Church kept meticulous records of their education and examination of enslaved blacks to admit them into the congregation, and The Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island provides material culture evidence of enslaved blacks in the congregation despite not mentioning them in their written records. This thesis also examines why anti-literacy laws were seldom followed in South Carolina and the minimal consequences for breaking various anti-literacy legislations.

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**CHAPTER 1**

**THE PRESBYTERIAN EXCEPTION? THE ILLEGAL EDUCATION  
OF ENSLAVED BLACKS BY SOUTH CAROLINA PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCHES, 1834-1865**

*The Deacons, be and are hereby directed to purchase for the use of the coloured members of the congregation (of those that can read) one dozen hymn books and one dozen testaments<sup>1</sup>*

Dated in May of 1852, well after anti-literacy laws for enslaved blacks had been passed, the records of the Salem Black River Presbyterian Church show that enslaved blacks were both active members of a white congregation and literate in a period they should not be, according to legal texts.

In the aftermath of Nat Turner's 1831 Rebellion, slave laws throughout the southeast became more stringent. In 1834, enslaved people in South Carolina lost their remaining literacy rights when it became illegal to teach any enslaved person to read or write.<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian ministers and missionaries balked at this new law, believing that people must be able to read the Bible and come to know God for themselves.<sup>3</sup> While Sunday Schools were already common among many congregations, this new law led

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<sup>1</sup> Salem Black River Presbyterian Church, "Salem Black River Presbyterian Church Records," 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Finkelman. *Statutes on Slavery: The Pamphlet Literature* (New York: Garland Pub., 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Carla Gardina Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World*. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). 207-8

ministers like Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian minister from Georgia, to release articles and books, such as his 1842 *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, in support of the religious instruction of enslaved people.<sup>4</sup>

The social and cultural history of South Carolina is often researched through newspapers, legal documents, and biographies of prominent families, but few historians have analyzed the culture of South Carolina from 1835 to 1865 through the churches. This is understandable. Prominent nineteenth century churches such as the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island are beautiful spaces perfect for architectural analysis, but the records are often sparse. Salem Black River Presbyterian has become a treasure trove of nineteenth century religious life because of their thorough records and careful conservation.

Historian Antonio Bly argues in his article “Pretends He Can Read: Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730-1766,” that, compared to Virginia and the New England states, South Carolina did not have a thriving population of literate slaves. Bly focuses his research using fugitive slave ads that indicate whether a slave was literate, and the works of various outside missionary sects, such as the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> By the nineteenth century, many actors participated in literacy and education movements for enslaved peoples. Although several denominations had

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<sup>4</sup> There is debate over how to refer to the Black men and women most respectfully in bondage in the Americas. This paper will use the terms enslaved black, slave, and bondsperson interchangeably. Likewise, slave owners will be referred to as slave holders, or enslavers.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio T. Bly, “‘Pretends He Can Read’: Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730-1776,” *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 261–94.



literacy missions to plantations or hosted Sunday Schools for enslaved people, the Presbyterians of South Carolina made enslaved literacy a community effort. Using Presbyterian doctrine, the evolution of literacy laws, synod minutes, and the records of Salem Black River Presbyterian (Brick Church), this thesis expands upon the interactions between these congregations and their enslaved blacks, and the greater Presbyterian literacy efforts. Works by Charles Colcock Jones, a leading minister in the literacy effort, Whitmarsh Seabrook, and the church congregations show a larger story of interactions, fear of insurrection, and a strained doctrine struggling to support conversion to Christianity and maintain the South's Peculiar Institution.

### **Defining Literacy**

There are several different types of literacy, for which the definitions are quite fluid. The literacy taught to enslaved blacks was most likely Bible literacy. Historian Janet Cornelius explains that "Bible literacy" was meant to be a passive form of literacy. It was taught as a recitation in which enslaved people would read the words on the page, but comprehension was not the goal.<sup>6</sup> Cornelius compares this to learning another language, one can recite a page of Latin or Greek text and memorize the words without ever understanding what they are saying.<sup>7</sup> The fear for most enslavers was not that an enslaved black would eventually comprehend what they were reading, but rather that they would miscomprehend, and thus misinterpret teachings from the Bible, which could, and did, lead to rebellions. Liberating literacy, on the other hand, was empowering. Northern

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). 3

<sup>7</sup> Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 4

missionaries used it to teach freedmen work skills, arithmetic, and practical reading and writing skills they could use in the work force.<sup>8</sup> Liberating literacy focused on comprehension by making connections between words, and forming cohesive sentences, freedmen learned to understand what they read. Enslaved blacks learned to read primarily with print sources such as Bibles, psalms, spellers, and hymns with clear, standard print manuscript letters. While this made the recognition of print letters easier, it also meant that enslaved blacks were not learning to read cursive handwritten sources, a distinction white enslavers used to their advantage to establish intellectual differences between themselves and their enslaved blacks.<sup>9</sup> The congregation of Salem Black River Presbyterian church exists in an area between pure Bible literacy, and pure Liberating literacy. All potential congregation members, including enslaved blacks, had to pass an oral exam before the minister, proving that they knew the catechism, and were able to understand the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

### **Historiographical Background**

Many historians have addressed the anti-literacy laws noting that, despite them, enslaved people became literate. Historian Lacy Ford holds that the purpose of the anti-literacy laws likely served as a convenient precedent for legislators to fall upon, but they were not often enforced. Most anti-literacy laws were put into place following rebellions by enslaved peoples. South Carolina's 1740 act followed the Stono Rebellion, and the 1835 act followed Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. These legislations were likely meant

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius. *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 4

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius. *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 71

<sup>10</sup> [All Years], "Records," Salem Black River Presbyterian Church.

to solidify the states' positions, but they were mostly written, not enacted. Still, most historians follow the legal codes, and few discuss how ministers, missionaries, and congregations served as educators. The Presbyterian Church and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in the southern states were strong proponents of religious education and, despite laws forbidding them, established Sunday schools and plantation missions to ensure enslaved people could read the Bible for themselves. The role of the church is not often discussed in the South's institution of slavery. This thesis will attempt to show how, despite fears of being outnumbered by enslaved people and knowing the consequences of literacy, white Presbyterian congregations in South Carolina still taught, and left records of their teaching enslaved people to read for the purpose of eternal salvation. Beyond the congregation, this thesis will also explore the wider literacy debate among South Carolinians, and the justifications shared for both the pros of increased literacy education, and the cons of enslaved blacks learning the "wrong" lessons.

Much work has already been done about literacy and education for enslaved blacks. However, these works focus on outside intervention, mainly the efforts of northern missionaries or southern religious radicals. For example, historians James Robert Hester's *A Yankee Scholar in Coastal South Carolina: William Francis Allen's Civil War Journals* and Ronald E. Butchart's *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876*, both describe the role of northern missionaries in education for free and enslaved blacks. However, these works do not consider the community of religious slaveholders and the practices within those communities. Their research is lacking a key player in literacy education that had already existed in the south, the church.

Historian Janet Cornelius' "We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865," further defines the difference between Bible literacy and Liberating literacy.<sup>11</sup> Cornelius uses the narratives of former enslaved peoples taken by the Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Works Progress Administration to explore how literacy was taught to enslaved blacks, and how they used it to form their own agency.<sup>12</sup> In addition to defining the different types of literacy, Cornelius divides educators into two categories, instigators, and teachers. Because of the nature of her sources, Cornelius' evidence of instigators and teachers vary greatly, those who gave interviews to the FWP named their white enslavers as instigators for their education, while those who wrote autobiographies named themselves as the instigator.<sup>13</sup> Almost all the teachers recorded were white, most were female adolescent children, but there were also several mentions of white mistresses leading education. There were fewer mentions of male enslavers taking on the teaching role.<sup>14</sup> The sources in this thesis are also lacking in this sense. Most of the accounts of education and the arguments in favor of enslaved literacy are written by white individuals. This can change the portrayal of enslaved literacy to be more in favor of the white teacher.<sup>15</sup>

Several former enslaved people identified themselves or other enslaved blacks as both instigators and teachers. If there were any literate enslaved people on a plantation,

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<sup>11</sup> Janet Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865," *Phylon* 44, no. 3 (1983): 171–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274930>.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 171.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 175-6.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 176.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, there are very few sources directly from enslaved blacks that are trustworthy and accessible, therefore the author has had to use sources from white individuals while keeping in mind that their portrayal may be different from the lived experience of enslaved blacks.

they would take up teaching the others to read, according to some enslaved narratives.<sup>16</sup>

Cornelius argues that, even though there were very real dangers of enslaved people learning to read and write, both for the enslaved and the enslaver in some cases, it was often the enslaved person's own agency that inspired their education, or continued their education when enslavers tried to set limits.<sup>17</sup>

Cornelius' 1991 work, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, is an expansion of her 1983 article and focuses more on the religious thinking behind educating enslaved peoples. Cornelius expands upon the importance of literacy movements in this work, arguing that, while literacy was a path to individual freedom, it was a communal act of resistance to oppression because literate blacks could disperse knowledge of the larger world, abolition movements, and other slave rebellions quickly throughout a plantation.<sup>18</sup> In addition to being an act of resistance, literacy also allowed enslaved blacks to create a "liberating religious consciousness within the slave community."<sup>19</sup> White enslavers tried to control enslaved people's access to the Bible and limit their comprehension to levels that encouraged obedience and piety, but discouraged disobedience. Although there was a minority of enslavers who believed in full literacy of the Bible and even encouraged enslaved black people to preach, most white enslavers wanted to use only certain passages from the Bible to enforce the enslaved person's position in society.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 178.

<sup>17</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 183-84.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 4-5. Some favorite Bible verses include: Ephesians 6:5- "servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ," And Colossians 3:22, "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as men pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God." KJV.

narrative of literacy and education being used as acts of resistance is one long-held by historians of slavery, and not one that I intend to argue, however, I wish to expand upon the purposes of literacy for the enslaved community. Individual agency has been pushed to the front of the narrative, while, according to several of my sources, many enslaved blacks could not start educating others, or themselves, until they had a starting point, which was Bible literacy.

Historian of slavery in early America, Heather Andrea Williams' *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Literacy* emphasizes enslaved blacks' own agency in teaching each other to read.<sup>21</sup> Williams argues against earlier scholars stating that it was Northern missionaries that encouraged freed people to learn to read and states that instead, freed blacks took their own agency and initiated the educational movement.<sup>22</sup> Williams follows Cornelius in saying that developing literacy was both an act of individual empowerment and rebellion against enslavers, Williams also adds that learning in secrecy subverted the enslaver-enslaved relationship and allowed an enslaved person to develop a private part of their life, away from their enslaver.<sup>23</sup> Although this may be true in many enslaver-enslaved relationships, church records show that sometimes literacy was initiated by the enslaver and practicing religion was an experience shared by

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<sup>21</sup> James Robert Hester, ed. *A Yankee Scholar in Coastal South Carolina: William Francis Allen's Civil War Journals* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 3-5. Accessed September 16, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central; Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 53 Accessed September 16, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>22</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15-16. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=880467>.

<sup>23</sup> Williams. *Self-Taught*. 17

both enslaver and enslaved. Williams moves quickly through the colonial and antebellum periods and focuses more intensely on the Civil War and its aftermath, which takes away from an important era of education for enslaved individuals. This thesis covers these periods and shows how the implementation, and subsequent ignoring, of enslaved literacy laws in the colonial and antebellum eras highlights a key moment of growth for enslaved education.

These works focus on outside missionary work to enslaved people, and highlight Anglican conversion efforts, not the role of Presbyterian congregations. South Carolina is unique among the original thirteen colonies because it was created with a freedom of religion clause. A 1710 estimate marks about 45% of the white population as Presbyterian, making it one of the strongest Presbyterian centers in the British North American colonies.<sup>24</sup> Because of this different environment, traditional Anglican narratives do not work for the experiences of enslaved blacks in South Carolina. Philip D. Morgan argues in *Slave Counterpoint* that Anglican ministers approached educating enslaved people with general apathy until the evangelical religions, including Presbyterianism, began to encourage Bible literacy as a means for conversion.<sup>25</sup> In *Protestant Empire*, Carla Gardina Pestana discusses Anglican citizens' fear that

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<sup>24</sup> Erskine Clarke. *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996,) 43. Accessed November 2, 2021, <https://web-p-ebscohost.com/pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzIxMDg1X19BTg2?sid=0ac33607-0b5d-43ba-a26b-b6824cd43783@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1#mainContentText>; It is difficult

to give an exact number of Presbyterians at the time because for this census Presbyterians, French Huguenots, and other Dissenters were all listed as Presbyterians

<sup>25</sup> Philip D. Morgan. *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 420-1.

evangelical missionaries were teaching literacy. She uses the example of Phillip Johns' attempted revolt in which he, a literate enslaved person, informed illiterate slaves that the Bible contained instructions for them to revolt.<sup>26</sup>

This thesis most closely follows, and expands upon the work of Lacy K. Ford, particularly his 2009 book, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South*, which includes discussion of the South Carolina elite's response to Nat Turner's Rebellion in Virginia. Ford explains that South Carolina planters in the Lowcountry tried several times to ban literacy education for both enslaved and free blacks.<sup>27</sup> They were ultimately only successful in banning the education of enslaved blacks.<sup>28</sup> The resulting law promised up to fifty lashes for any person of color, enslaved or free, caught teaching an enslaved person to read or write. There does not seem to have been a punishment for white ministers or enslavers.

Past histories of enslaved literacy have approached the topic from an Anglican point of view and have neglected to explore community actions involving literacy. South Carolina had more Presbyterian congregations than the average British colony, and later state, and these congregations took a different approach to teaching, literacy, and religious life. The combination of community focused individuals and high numbers of Presbyterian congregations, led to a different education experience for the enslaved population of South Carolina.

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<sup>26</sup> Pestana, *Protestant Empire*, 206.

<sup>27</sup> Lacy K. Ford. *Deliver Us From Evil* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 447.

<sup>28</sup> Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 462-464.



## Literacy Legislation

Although South Carolina Presbyterian congregations took different approaches to enslaved education, not everyone was happy with the possibility of a literate enslaved population. For South Carolina legislators, slave revolts were moments of realization to the danger of enslaved people learning beyond what white enslavers intended. From 1740 to 1835, a series of more restrictive literacy acts were passed on paper, to attempt to control the education of the enslaved population. However, in practice these laws did not seem to be nearly as effective.

In 1740, a law regulating the education of enslaved and free blacks was developed in the aftermath of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina. The 1740 legislation punished anyone specifically teaching an enslaved person how to write, or to employ them in a writing capacity. This law included a punishment for white enslavers, calling for a fine of “one-hundred pounds current money.”<sup>29</sup>

An 1800 South Carolina Act of Assembly prohibited the gathering of any persons of color for instructional or religious purposes, even with a white person present.<sup>30</sup> Here, there is no mention of a punishment for whites. Another part of this same act bans gatherings for religious purposes before sunrise and after sunset, but there does not seem to be a physical punishment accompanying this dispersion.<sup>31</sup> An 1803 amendment to this

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<sup>29</sup> Finkelman, *Statutes on Slavery*, 244.

<sup>30</sup> Finkelman, *Statutes on Slavery*, 245.

<sup>31</sup> Finkelman, *Statutes on Slavery*, 249.

act forbade anyone to break into religious meetings of majority whites before nine pm unless they had a warrant.<sup>32</sup>

The 1800 act's purpose was to prevent enslaved and free blacks from joining Sunday Schools, Bible Studies, and other possible enrichment activities led by the congregation. Most enslaved people worked from sun-up to late in the evening, had one or two hours for their own household upkeep, and any education had to be at night.<sup>33</sup> The 1803 amendment removes a bit of power from the enforcers to break up these gatherings if the majority of members are white, and the event occurs before nine pm. Again, the legislation fails to name a punishment for whites caught teaching enslaved and free blacks to read or write and, although the laws exist in the books, there does not appear to have been a white person accused of breaking them in court.

Whitmarsh Seabrook's and Edward Laurens's long fight for an anti-literacy act went through several iterations. In Laurens's 1834 draft, there is a punishment for whites teaching their bondsmen to read. Laurens' called for a free white person caught educating an enslaved black to pay a fine of up to one hundred dollars and face a prison sentence of up to six months.<sup>34</sup> Seabrook and Laurens introduced a law to the South Carolina government that would, for the first time in nearly one-hundred years, punish a white enslaver, for teaching their bondsmen and bondswomen to read and write. Seabrook and

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<sup>32</sup> Finkelman, *Statutes on Slavery*, 250.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Published by Thomas Purse, 1842).

<sup>34</sup> Edward R. Laurens and Pamphlet Collection, *A Letter to the Hon. Whitmarsh B. Seabrook, of St. John's Colleton* (Charleston: Observer Office Press, 1835), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009557615>. Library of Congress Hereafter cited as Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

Laurens also stipulated that, for a free black violator, punishment would “not exceed fifty lashes,” with a fine of not more than fifty dollars, at the discretion of the Court of Magistrates.<sup>35</sup> Enslaved blacks were also punished by no more than fifty lashes.<sup>36</sup>

Seabrook and Laurens also proposed that any white person “employing” enslaved blacks as clerks or salesmen, be fined and face a short imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> They also attempted to regulate distillery sales to enslaved blacks and end the unregulated selling and trading of enslaved blacks, while forbidding white people to play “games of chance” with any person of color, enslaved or free.<sup>38</sup> The law passed in 1834, despite its unpopularity.<sup>39</sup> Seabrook and Laurens had their own justifications for these extreme regulations, Laurens was against the education of enslaved people because he feared they would take away jobs from young white men, and that liquor was immoral and caused laziness and violence among enslaved blacks.<sup>40</sup>

Seabrook provided the religious reasoning behind not wanting to educate enslaved people. In an 1834 essay presented to the Agricultural Society of St. Johns Colleton, he questioned “Whether it be practicable to advance the interests of true religion by creating

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<sup>35</sup> Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

<sup>36</sup> Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

<sup>37</sup> Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

<sup>38</sup> Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

<sup>39</sup> Laurens defended several of his choices in similar language to those against immigration today. He argued against the hiring of free blacks because he believed that they would take the jobs away from young white men. Laurens also claimed that his clause regarding the unregulated sale of liquor to enslaved blacks was to benefit law abiding grocery stores and to punish stores that made much of their money off of “immoral sales.”

<sup>40</sup> Laurens and Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress).

a spirit of discontent?”<sup>41</sup> Seabrook did not specify Presbyterian missionaries, although there were active missionaries serving in St. Johns Parish at the time, but instead generalized all plantation missionaries and feared their passion for spreading Christianity may lead to a misinterpretation of the scripture by enslaved blacks, stating that their need to care for the enslaved population and their passion in preaching “may terminate in habits of irremediable insubordination.”<sup>42</sup> Seabrook’s perspective was a prime example of a paternalist ideology which posited that the enslaved person, as long as they knew no better, would be content to live in their conditions on the plantations. However, if enslaved people were educated in scripture and not carefully supervised, they may take away the “wrong” lessons and begin to feel discontent with their position, which could lead to rebellion. For Seabrook, who owned a rather large plantation, rebellion could be deadly.<sup>43</sup>

Critics of the 1834 legislation went beyond Presbyterian ministers to include people like John Belton O’Neill, a South Carolina judge.<sup>44</sup> O’Neill stated in his address to the State Agricultural Society of South Carolina, “When we reflect, *as Christians, how can we justify it that a slave is not permitted to read the Bible?* It is in vain to say there is

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<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Whitemarsh Seabrook and Agricultural Society of St. John's Colleton, *An essay on the management of slaves, and especially, on their religious instruction: read before the Agricultural [sic] Society of St. John's Colleton* (Charleston, SC: Printed by A.E. Miller, 1834), 14. *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926* (accessed March 2, 2022.)

<sup>42</sup> Seabrook, *An Essay on the Management of Slaves*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Seabrook, *An Essay on the Management of Slaves*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> This article covers religious thinking beginning in 1835, towards the end of the Second Great Awakening. Many denominations, not just Presbyterians, were growing a deeper appreciation for religious community and education. Although Presbyterianism was likely the most scholarly of the Second Great Awakening Denominations, many other Christian groups were also calling for the religious education of enslaved blacks.

danger in it. The best slaves in the State are those who can and do read the scriptures.”<sup>45</sup>

O’Neill was not Presbyterian, he was born a Quaker and later became a Baptist. His statements show that among many reformed South Carolina religions, literacy for enslaved blacks was important. He later argued that enslaved blacks often learned to read from their enslavers’ children or the enslavers themselves, thus, it was likely that they would eventually become literate.<sup>46</sup>

Many South Carolina Presbyterians met the 1834 Literacy Act with disobedience because their doctrine depended on scripture, everyone needed to read for their salvation. The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia formed a committee on the “Religious Instruction of the Negroes” at their annual meeting in 1834 and came to several agreements; it was their duty to teach enslaved blacks to read, the secular and religious conditions of people were separate, meaning that even if a person was enslaved, their soul was not, that they would be implementing an education plan in South Carolina and Georgia, and that religious instruction was “conducive to our interests for this world and for that which is to come.”<sup>47</sup>

The minutes of the Synod committee call for invited ministers to provide the number of blacks in their parish and tell which churches they belong to, the number of

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<sup>45</sup> John Belton O’Neill, *The Negro Law of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Published by J.G. Bowman, 1848), 23.

<sup>46</sup> O’Neill, *The Negro Law of South Carolina*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Elliott Huger, *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes: Together with the Report of the Committee, and the Address to the Public* (Charleston, SC: Published by B. Jenkins, 1845), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009595482>. Dr. Lacy Ford also mentions a petition submitted by citizens of Chester, SC against the 1834 legislation, however the author was not able to access the document before writing.

ministers and religious teachers who work with the black population and their denominations, the lesson plans and frequency of education, the number of children who are catechized, the difference in observance between those taught as children and those taught as adults, the “degree of benefits” the blacks receive from instruction, and the influence of religious instruction on discipline at the plantations.<sup>48</sup> Historian Anne Boylan explains that, despite their passion for Bible literacy, many whites hesitated to put the evidence of their actions in print.<sup>49</sup> Even prominent Presbyterian missionaries like Charles Colcock Jones encouraged oral instruction in their lectures and writings, but somehow, their enslaved blacks were literate, and they supported giving Bibles and other religious books to literate enslaved blacks.<sup>50</sup> Whatever the method of instruction, Presbyterian ministers made it clear that a key part of the Presbyterian doctrine was the ability to read the scripture.

Louisa Davis, formerly enslaved at Jackson Creek in Fairfield County, South Carolina, is a key example of this Presbyterian disobedience to the 1834 legislation. In her Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative, taken when she was supposedly 106 years old. Davis states “They was concerned ‘bout our soul’s salvation. Us went to church, learn de catechism; they was Presbyterians and read de Bible to us.”<sup>51</sup> Davis went on to become a Methodist after emancipation, but her identification of her former

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<sup>48</sup> Huger, *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, SC*.

<sup>49</sup> Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 116.

<sup>51</sup> Louis Davis, “Interview,” in Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1, Abrams-Durant, 304.

enslavers as Presbyterians is important because it implies that she was taught these things because of her enslavers' Presbyterian values.

### **Presbyterian Doctrine**

The Presbyterian Church was well established in South Carolina by the nineteenth century. The Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island is one of the oldest continuous congregations in operation in the United States, having been established in 1674. First Scots Presbyterian in Charleston was established in 1731, and Brick Church in Mayesville in 1759. Presbyterian doctrine, however, is much older than any of these congregations, stemming from the Calvinist religious theory developed in Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century. Scottish Calvinists moved up and down the South Carolina coast and along the Ashley River, settling in various towns, including Edisto Island, then owned by Lord Ashley Cooper.<sup>52</sup>

Presbyterian doctrine went through several changes from its Calvinist origins. Presbyterian historian Erskine Clarke argues that South Carolina's unique climatological and environmental challenges directly affected the practice of Presbyterianism in the Lowcountry.<sup>53</sup> From its founding, the colony of Carolina had conflicting religious sects, "dissenters" consisting of French Huguenots, German and Dutch Reformists, and Scots-Irish Presbyterians; and the Anglican elites.<sup>54</sup> The accompanying social divide and prejudices brought over from Europe created a political backdrop to South Carolina intertwined with religious belief. The combination of religions and politics, and the

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<sup>52</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 45-6.

resulting tensions, are a trend throughout South Carolina's history, and this tension is especially visible when church and court clash over things like Sunday Schools and religious education for enslaved and free blacks.

South Carolina's unique economic structure also allowed for a growing class of comfortably situated Presbyterian ministers. Even in the backcountry, Presbyterian ministers received substantial wages from their congregations, housing support, and usually a domestic slave or two.<sup>55</sup> Although nowhere near the riches of large plantation owners, by the end of the eighteenth century even small farmers were making roughly £1,400 a year (roughly \$226,083.06 in current USD) and congregations could afford to summon ministers with prestigious educations from universities such as St. Andrew's, Edinburgh, and Harvard.<sup>56</sup> The financial situation of South Carolina Presbyterian congregations, especially those in the Lowcountry, encouraged well-educated ministers to make the journey, more so than many Anglican congregations who relied on state funds and donations from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.<sup>57</sup> These educated ministers in turn encouraged educated congregations, leading to the formation of a scholarly Presbyterian community.

Because Presbyterianism is a reformed Calvinist religion, scripture reigns supreme for the ministers and members of the congregation. Although sanctuaries did eventually become more elaborate, traditional reformed sanctuaries were simple, usually

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<sup>55</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 53; "Currency Converter, Pounds Sterling to Dollars, 1264 to Present (Java)," accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 16.



painted white or blue, with clear glass, rectangular windows, and a tall, unadorned pulpit.<sup>58</sup> Pews were straight backed, with no cushion, and a plain table at the front was used for communion four times a year.<sup>59</sup> The method of communion has changed for the Presbyterian church throughout the decades, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most congregations likely sat around the table and passed bread and wine in an imitation of the last supper.<sup>60</sup> The galleries were meant for, depending on the population, servants, enslaved blacks, free blacks, poor whites, or some combination of the four. Rather than the elegant box pews on the main floor, the galleries featured long bench pews meant to expand capacity but were not comfortable.<sup>61</sup> Service did not include instruments, and the congregation sang psalms or songs based on Bible verses a cappella.

Black and white congregants likely celebrated communion at the same table in the nineteenth century, with whites being served first, and then black members. Although they ate from the same trays and drank from the same chalices, there were effectively two communion services, one for the white members, and then one for black members, both free and enslaved.<sup>62</sup> Only members of the congregation found to be “in good standing” were allowed to take communion, thus, enslaved blacks who took communion were not only members of the congregation but were able to pass theological and behavioral exams given by white clergy.<sup>63</sup> Erskine Clarke argues that congregations performed the

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<sup>58</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Modern Presbyterians practice intinction by dipping small pieces of bread into a cup of wine, which is now usually grape juice.

<sup>61</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 64.

<sup>62</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 66.

ritual this way to show spiritual equality, but a secular hierarchy, meaning that the order of communion still emphasized whites over blacks even if they ate from the same table.<sup>64</sup>

This distinction in the Communion ceremony is important to make, lest researchers confuse an enthusiasm for education with a desire for emancipation. Although some saw Christianization as a path toward emancipation, many Presbyterian ministers and congregations were comfortable with the status of their enslaved blacks and were not looking to change said status. However, a key part of Paternalism, as Lacy Ford mentions, is providing spiritual education for enslaved blacks.<sup>65</sup> The ritual organization of communion, with the separation of whites and blacks, but the use of the same materials, helped to enforce the mindset that whites were superior on Earth, but that all were equally vulnerable to God's power.

### **Columbia Theological Seminary**

Presbyterians were at the forefront of the religious debate over enslaved literacy owing to the centrality of scholarship to their religious practice. Ministers have college educations, train under established senior ministers, and are examined on their knowledge of the old and new testaments, the catechisms, and general topics such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Philosophy.<sup>66</sup> Historians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese declared Presbyterian ministers among Southern clergy to hold “pride of place as the best educated and most intellectually impressive of the denominational leaders.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 68.

<sup>65</sup> Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 474-475.

<sup>66</sup> Erskine Clarke, *To Count Our Day: A History of Columbia Theological Seminary* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 37.

<sup>67</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 39.

Nonetheless, their reasons for championing literacy did not challenge the continued institution of slavery.

Denominations including Episcopalians and Presbyterians began establishing specialized institutions of higher learning, called seminaries, as early as 1790 in response to anti-elite ministry fervor of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>68</sup> The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia elected to create a seminary for the southeast in 1829 and founded the Columbia Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina in 1830. Charles Colcock Jones, George Howe, and James Henley Thornwell were members of the faculty.

The seminary allowed for some of the strongest Presbyterian minds in the southeast to study important topics, including slavery. Supported by southern cotton money and, despite the individual sentiments of some of its faculty, the seminary never released any statements against slavery like northern seminaries did.<sup>69</sup> Charles Jones, professor of church history and polity, and “Apostle to the Slaves,” was a complex character for the seminary.<sup>70</sup> Although he had initially spoken against slavery and considered helping his own enslaved blacks journey to Liberia, he instead turned to missionary work and helped to educate enslaved blacks on plantations. Jones also inherited more enslaved blacks from Major Andrew Maybank and, although he claims to have done so humanely, participated in the horror of slave sales. He then used the money

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<sup>68</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 14. The Second Great Awakening began in Kentucky and lasted from 1790-1835

<sup>69</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 17.

to create the Maybank endowment, which helped to support the seminary.<sup>71</sup> William Seabrook, Whitmarsh Seabrook's Presbyterian relative, also supported the seminary with money from enslaved labor.<sup>72</sup> Pre-emancipation enslaved blacks also labored at the seminary, cooking, cleaning, gardening, and otherwise serving the faculty and students.<sup>73</sup>

Faculty of the seminary grew in prestige, drawing more learned men to the seminary as both faculty and students. The seminary's journal, *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, allowed faculty and other associated ministers to interact with complex political and societal issues, such as slavery. In 1857, Professors Adger and John Leighton Wilson both wrote against proposed legislation to reopen the Atlantic Slave Trade.<sup>74</sup> In 1851, Wilson, George Howe, and Thomas Smyth argued vehemently against scientific racism and the theory introduced by Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz in 1847 that blacks and whites were descended from different species.<sup>75</sup> Thornwell, Wilson, and Smyth also worked tirelessly to prove that enslaved and free blacks were perfectly capable of understanding the gospel and learning the Bible. Professors and ministers used emotional paternalism, hard theology, and logic to fight against ideals that would deny the gospel to anyone. It is important to note, however, that not many spoke against slavery, just the idea of the intellectual inferiority of black people. Columbia's theologians sat on a strange middle ground in the 1850s, they thought that slavery would come to an end at some point, when God willed it, and that it was their calling to care for the souls of enslaved and free blacks and to supervise their earthly education. But at the

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<sup>71</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 19.

<sup>73</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 54.

<sup>75</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 55.

same time, they believed that enslaved blacks were where they “belonged” that they should respect and obey their enslavers and wait patiently for God to decide that slavery was done.<sup>76</sup>

Many ministers’ and professors’ personal papers describe their conflict with, and ultimate commitment to, the institution of slavery. Thornwell’s papers from 1847 include the argument: “if the church is bound to abide by the authority of the Bible and that alone, she discharges her whole office in regard to slavery, when she declares what the Bible teaches, and enforces its laws by her own peculiar sanctions.”<sup>77</sup> Thornwell expressed a more paternalistic responsibility for enslaved blacks, and he believed that enslavers should be benevolent, but he did not appear to have an issue with the institution itself because it is not specifically frowned upon in the Bible. John B. Adger also states his paternalistic views in his writings: “God has committed the gospel to us as Christians, that we may preach it to all men, including the poor.”<sup>78</sup> Adger often referred to the enslaved blacks of Charleston as “the poor” in his writings. He also started work in 1847 to establish a separate, black church in Charleston, to minister specifically to urban enslaved and free blacks. In 1850, Thornwell gave the opening sermon for Adger’s black Anson Street Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He included the quote,

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<sup>76</sup> Clarke, *To Count Our Days*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> James Henley Thornwell and John B. Adger, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871), 385, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005772310>.

<sup>78</sup> John B. Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810-1899* (Richmond, VA.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899), 168, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008637497>.

“Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that you also have a master in Heaven.”<sup>79</sup>

The *Southern Presbyterian Review*, started by professors at the Columbia Theological Seminary, consistently refers to educating enslaved and free blacks from the first issue in 1847 to its last in 1862. Professors from the seminary and other Presbyterian ministers in the South Carolina and Georgia Synods used the journal to publish reviews of biblical research, summarize synod meetings, and to introduce new teaching methods, new audiences, and new catechisms to use for congregations. Many of these articles are a confusing mix of supporting the institution of slavery while also calling for admittance of enslaved blacks into congregations and supporting their reading of the Bible. An article entitled “The Baptism of Servants,” declares that

Nay, as is obvious to every reader of the scriptures, the duties of masters and servants are prescribed no less than the duties of parents and children, husbands and wives, and no more is said of the relation of the master being wrong, than of those necessary relations of the domestic state which result from the original constitution of human society.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Clarke. *To Count Our Days*. 55

<sup>80</sup> Synod of South Carolina, “The Baptism of Servants,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1, no. 1 (1847), <https://web-s-ebsohost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/ehost/archiveviewer/archive?vid=1&sid=e8bff8e1-9904-4b12-8f25-8995301dcfca%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#kw=true&acc=false&lpId=div1009&ppId=divp0078&twPV=&xOff=0&yOff=388.79998779296875&zm=3&fs=&rot=0&docMapOpen=true&pageMapOpen=true&AN=48398080&db=h9j>. Hereafter cited as Synod of South Carolina

This article, likely in response to white enslavers who feared that baptizing their enslaved peoples would encourage them to pursue equality, dives into the biblical history of slavery, the precedent of baptizing enslaved peoples into the Roman Church, and the reassurance that, historically, baptism and religious education did not encourage slave insurrections, but instead encouraged obedience.<sup>81</sup>

The *Southern Presbyterian Review* also included minister reviews of education pamphlets and new scientific publications, such as writings suggesting that different races originated from different species. The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review published “The Unity of the Human Race” in the *Review*’s 1851 edition, stating, “But when men infer from this diversity a separate origin for the different races, and adopt this as their theory to account for it, then they, and not the facts, —their inference—their theory, come in collision with the sacred record.”<sup>82</sup> This article admonished supporters of scientific racism, which used new evolutionary evidence such as Darwin’s *Origin of Species* to claim the inferiority of black people and Native Americans. The authors are careful to point out that they are not against scientific discovery, and in fact support new learning, however, the point Darwin makes goes against the story of Genesis, which states that all mankind is descended from Adam and Eve.<sup>83</sup> They do not support people

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<sup>81</sup> Synod of South Carolina.

<sup>82</sup> The Biblical Repertory and Biblical Review, “The Unity of the Human Race,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 3 (1851), 367, <https://web-p-ebshost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/ehost/archiveviewer/archive?vid=2&sid=99dae7bd-135d-47e0-ac63-45b7da59248b%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#kw=true&acc=false&lpId=divl006&ppId=divp0063&twPV=&xOff=0&yOff=385.6000061035156&zm=4&fs=&rot=0&docMapOpen=true&pageMapOpen=true&AN=48543978&db=h9j>. Hereafter cited as the Biblical Repertory and Biblical Review

<sup>83</sup> The Biblical Repertory and Biblical Review, 366.

using these scientific discoveries to form their own opinions, with no basis, that go against the Bible.<sup>84</sup> This article does not necessarily support the unity of races out of respect for black people, but instead supports the unity of races because it follows the Genesis creation story, which claims the human race has a single origin.

### **Salem Black River Presbyterian**

Salem Black River Presbyterian (Brick Church), in Mayesville, South Carolina, is a Presbyterian congregation that endeavored to teach enslaved blacks to read.<sup>85</sup> Founded in 1759 on the banks of the Black River, Brick Church served as the Presbyterian church to a small, agricultural community of English-speaking settlers who had moved to the Carolina backcountry in the 1740s.<sup>86</sup> Although records are spotty, members of the Brick Church Congregation likely owned fewer enslaved blacks than the large coastal plantations, but there still appeared to be a substantial enslaved community.<sup>87</sup> Salem Black River Presbyterian gets the nickname, Brick Church, because the 1846 brick structure replacing the original wooden structure, was one of the first brick church buildings in South Carolina.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The Biblical Repertory and Biblical Review, 367.

<sup>85</sup> Mayesville, SC is a small historic town just outside of Sumter, SC. Due to the name association to Salem, Massachusetts, Brick Church has suffered heavy damage to its historic graveyard and other parts of the property. The term “Salem” means peace, and “Black River” refers to the church’s location near the riverbank. The congregation would like to emphasize that there has never been, to their knowledge, paranormal activity on the premises.

<sup>86</sup> “History & Heritage,” City of Sumter, SC, August 4, 2018, <https://www.sumtersc.gov/community/history>.

<sup>87</sup> Salem Black River Presbyterian Church, “Salem Black River Presbyterian Church Records.,” 1974.

<sup>88</sup> “Salem Black River Presbyterian Church,” SC Picture Project, July 24, 2008, <https://www.scpictureproject.org/sumter-county/salem-black-river-church.html>.; An



Brick Church's records include a key section on how they expected all black people to behave during service. "The Regulation of the Negroes," called for enslaved and free blacks to have permission to attend church services, segregated seating in the sanctuary, supervised entry and exit from the worship service, and appointed regulators selected from white heads of family to enforce those directives.<sup>89</sup> To enforce attendance, the regulators appointed two doorkeepers, "one from below and the other from above the church to serve for twelve months and that they be allowed the sum of five dollars each for their services."<sup>90</sup> In addition to these rules, the Brick Church congregation also provided learning materials for black members, allocating funds in 1844 for the purchase of "two dozen copies of the small size hymn books for the supply of the coloured people of the congregation."<sup>91</sup> In 1852, the deacons purchased another dozen hymn books and an additional dozen testaments books "for the use of the coloured members of the congregation (of those that can read)."<sup>92</sup> Finally, in 1858, the deacons also paid for a "shed" for the pastor to use for Sunday School with black members of the congregation.<sup>93</sup>

Once such black congregants learned to read, they were examined on their biblical knowledge, baptized, and allowed into the congregation frequently. Carter, Mariah, and Phillis, enslaved by James English, all passed the exam and were welcomed into the congregation in 1835, allowing them to take communion, which they did with their enslavers, according to Nancy Wilson, a current Brick Church member, and a

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ancestor of the author, John Lomas, owned the architectural firm, J. Lomas & Co. in charge of some of the renovations in the sanctuary in the nineteenth century.

<sup>89</sup> See appendix for full list of regulations

<sup>90</sup> "The Regulations of the Negroes." Salem Black River Presbyterian Church

<sup>91</sup> 1844 Records, "Salem Black River Presbyterian Church," South Caroliniana Library.

<sup>92</sup> 1852 Records, "Salem Black River Presbyterian Church," South Caroliniana Library.

<sup>93</sup> 1858 Records, "Salem Black River Presbyterian Church," South Caroliniana Library.

descendent of previous white members.<sup>94</sup> Enslaved members also appeared to be dismissed from and restored to membership at a similar rate to white members.<sup>95</sup> Members were dismissed from the congregation for infractions such as public intoxication, adultery, failing to attend worship services or call on the services of the minister, and failure to “live by the scriptures.”<sup>96</sup> The records do not elaborate here on how infractions such as adultery occurred in a culture that did not officially recognize slave marriage. However, despite a marriage not being legally recognized, a minister could recognize a marriage between two enslaved individuals and thus, could likely also punish for adultery.<sup>97</sup>

Members could be readmitted after proving that they were aware of their actions, accepted a penalty, usually missing a communion, and were vouched for by members of the congregation. The necessity of being reexamined by the minister and having congregational support for reentering membership shows that enslaved blacks, regardless of their status outside the church, were considered regular members of the congregation, and deserving of all the rights and penalties as their enslavers.

At the end of the Civil War, formerly enslaved blacks remained with the white congregation for a few years, but in 1868, requested leave to form their own congregation. The congregations “parted in goodwill,” and Brick church member,

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<sup>94</sup> 1835 Records, “Salem Black River Presbyterian Church,”; Oral Interview, “Nancy Wilson,” Mayesville, SC, April 2021.

<sup>95</sup> 1835 Records, “Salem Black River Presbyterian Church.”

<sup>96</sup> [All Years] Records, “Salem Black River Presbyterian Church.” “Records,”

<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, the records here are very vague and only mention why the member was dismissed. In law, enslaved individuals could not marry or purchase liquor, but the records do not give a very in-depth examination of how the person committed the infraction.

Hamilton Gaillard Witherspoon, donated land for the new Goodwill Presbyterian and its associated Goodwill Parochial School.<sup>98</sup> Goodwill Presbyterian Church is located just down the street, within walking distance of Brick Church.<sup>99</sup>

### **Edisto Presbyterian Church**

The Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island's current structure was built in 1831 and, besides a few repairs, remains mostly the same. The church hosts a unique feature of southeastern coastal churches—the roof of the portico is painted a light blue, called “Haint Blue,” which was believed to ward off evil spirits.<sup>100</sup> The windows are made of plain, clear glass, and the sanctuary is without decorations in the traditional reformed style. The Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island also features a gallery to hold enslaved blacks during the service. Enslavers expected the enslaved to attend service with them on Sundays, but they did not want to sit on the same level. Therefore, white members of the congregation sat on the ground floor in box pews while the enslaved, and sometimes free

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<sup>98</sup> “Goodwill Parochial School,” South Carolina Picture Project, June 22, 2017, <https://www.scpictureproject.org/sumter-county/goodwill-parochial-school.html>. Hamilton Witherspoon was the owner of the nearby Coldstream Plantation; the two congregations still maintain cordial ties.

<sup>99</sup> This is an instance in which the records need to be examined carefully, although the white church claims they parted in goodwill, the separation did occur only a few years after the Civil War.

<sup>100</sup> Haint blue was originally mixed from indigo pigment cultivated in South Carolina and Georgia. The color follows the Gullah Geechee legend that evil spirits, Haints, were afraid of water, and would thus be driven off by the light blue color. Shoshi Parks, “What the Color ‘Haint Blue’ Means to the Descendants of Enslaved Africans,” Atlas Obscura, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/what-haint-blue-means-to-descendants-enslaved-africans>.

blacks, sat in the galleries upstairs. Depending on the church, sometimes the door to the gallery could be locked to prevent escapes during the service.<sup>101</sup>

The records of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island are not very thorough, they discuss very minute budgetary concerns, but they are silent on the status of enslaved congregation members and baptism records are lost from the nineteenth century. A summary of meeting minutes from 1835 mentions the need for a gallery in the new building, but it does not say why.<sup>102</sup> Written evidence of enslaved members of the church comes from other sources, like George Howe's *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* in which he does mention enslaved blacks being sent to the church to serve the minister and congregation.<sup>103</sup> Material culture evidence built into the sanctuary also provides proof that enslaved members once worshipped with the congregation. Silence in the written records, but evidence of the attendance of enslaved people built into the architecture of the building suggest that there was likely some form of education of and engagement with the enslaved black population, but it was not put into the congregation's official record.

Edisto Island was also the home of several prominent slaveholding families, including the Seabrooks. William Seabrook was an elder of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island and held a prominent role in the congregation's "corporation," or council.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Laurie F Maffly-Kipp, "The Burdens of Church History," *Church History* 82, no. 2 (2013): 353–67, doi:10.1017/S0009640713000115.

<sup>102</sup> 1790-1996 Records, "Edisto Island Presbyterian Church."

<sup>103</sup> George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Duffie & Chapman, 1870), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008699297>.

<sup>104</sup> William Seabrook was also distantly related to Whitmarsh Seabrook, who was not a member of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island but was a key figure in getting anti-literacy legislature passed. Another member of the Seabrook family, Rev. Joseph

Edisto Island was, in the nineteenth century, part of St. Johns Colleton Parish, consisting of John's Island, Wadmalaw Island, Edisto Island, and other sea islands south of Colleton (Charleston) County.<sup>105</sup> The sea islands were home to large rice, cotton, and indigo plantations and the slave-holding families were vastly outnumbered by the black population.<sup>106</sup> It is possible that, coming from Edisto Island, where a slave revolt would likely have been fatal to many white enslavers, inspired some of Benjamin Whitmarsh and Edward Laurens' fervor in preventing the increased literacy of enslaved blacks. Previous rebellions like Stono, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner had sparked fear among white enslavers that enslaved blacks could better spread ideas of liberty and strategies for resistance through the written word.

Despite Seabrook's extreme support for the separatists, the political party that supported leaving the Union, the Sea Islands of South Carolina were among the first of the Confederacy to fall during the Civil War in 1861, after the Battle of Port Royal. Most white inhabitants fled their plantations and the islands, moving inland first to Charleston, and later to cities like Columbia.<sup>107</sup> Edisto Island was among the islands occupied by the Union and when the white congregation members of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto

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Baynard Seabrook, served as an episcopalian minister serving a primarily black population; Mabel L. Webber, "Early Generations of the Seabrook Family (Continued)," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 17, no. 2 (1916), 58–72.

<sup>105</sup> "St. Johns Colleton Parish, South Carolina," FamilySearch Wiki, accessed December 8, 2021,

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/St.\\_Johns\\_Colleton\\_Parish,\\_South\\_Carolina](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/St._Johns_Colleton_Parish,_South_Carolina).

<sup>106</sup> Federal Census Records. St. Johns Colleton Parish. 1840. Ancestry.com

[https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/imageviewer/collections/8057/images/4410785\\_00999?usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=TBC75&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=2951600](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/imageviewer/collections/8057/images/4410785_00999?usePUB=true&_phsrc=TBC75&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=2951600)

<sup>107</sup> James Robert Hester, *A Yankee Scholar in Coastal South Carolina: William Francis Allen's Civil War Journals*. Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 2015, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=2074981>.

Island fled inland, their formerly enslaved black congregation members took over the church space to use as their own.<sup>108</sup> Missionaries from the North descended upon the island churches to educate newly freed blacks and help them establish their own congregations.<sup>109</sup> About two years after the war, the white members successfully petitioned the occupying federal government for the return of the church building, and the new black congregation moved down the road. Recollections of this event are mixed, but there does not appear to have been bloodshed.<sup>110</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The end of the Civil War brought many changes to South Carolina. As the Southeast entered the age of Reconstruction, Northern missionaries both white and black arrived to raise new congregations and teach new skills for an emancipated work force. Like Goodwill, formerly enslaved blacks elected to separate and form their own churches. Some did so peacefully and with the blessing of their former enslavers, like members of Goodwill Presbyterian. And some created their congregations during the war, like the Edisto Presbyterian Church.<sup>111</sup> Literacy provided these new congregations with a key advantage to their formation. Goodwill Parochial School, established shortly

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<sup>108</sup> [n.a.], *A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island*, (Edisto Island, SC: N.P. n.d.)

<sup>109</sup> Hester, *A Yankee Scholar in Coastal South Carolina*, 3-4. Three of these missionaries from Massachusetts are buried in the churchyard of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island after having drowned in the river on Christmas Day.

<sup>110</sup> [n.a.], *A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island*, (Edisto Island, SC: [n.p.], 1933)

<sup>111</sup> The Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island is the name of the original, seventeenth century Presbyterian church, Edisto Presbyterian is the African American Presbyterian church formed after the Civil War.

after Goodwill Presbyterian, continued the scholarly tradition, training black Presbyterian preachers, even before seminaries officially integrated.

Many scholars of the early United States tend to write off the nineteenth century southeast as immoral and irreligious, and enslaved blacks as illiterate. In fact, South Carolina hosted a thriving religious scene for many denominations, but especially the Presbyterians. The Columbia Theological Seminary brought many bright minds to South Carolina. Their teachings influenced other ministers who brought new ideas to their congregations. Bible literacy [although passive] paved the way for enslaved black's expanded knowledge.

Although most Presbyterian ministers did not join the abolitionist cause, or publicly share their literacy efforts, evidence from congregations like Salem Black River Presbyterian Church in Mayesville, provide proof that South Carolina had a strong religious community with highly educated minds prepared to debate all manner of political and societal issues in the context of the church. Material culture provides evidence of the relationship between free whites and enslaved blacks. Slave galleries emphasized a societal and cultural separation of races, yet all members took communion at the same table. While the relationships between white and black members of Southern Presbyterian congregations were complex, Presbyterian ideologies on education and the desire for enslaved blacks to learn to read played a major role in antebellum literacy efforts.

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## **APPENDIX A:**

### **SALEM BLACK RIVER PRESBYTERIAN SLAVE RULES**

“Reg. 1<sup>st</sup>- Every negro not belonging to a member of the church, shall not be permitted to attend at the church on Sundays without special leave from the regulators

Reg. 2<sup>nd</sup>- A part of the yard, shall be allotted them remote from the walks of the whites, whilst out of church; this part of the yard they must occupy and no other, at no time of the day; the same being provided with a watering place

Reg. 3<sup>rd</sup>- They shall go into church and take their seats immediately after the minister goes in, and as soon as the gentlemen come out of church, they shall come out and immediately retire.

Reg. 4<sup>th</sup>- No one shall be permitted to go up into the galleries after service commences, and, if through necessity, any one may come down, he or she shall not return during services; and four negroes, such as can be depended upon, shall be appointed by the different regulators to watch the behaviour of the rest while in and about the church.

Reg. 5<sup>th</sup>- Should more attend than the galleries can contain, they must be prevented from standing about the doors and windows or walking about the yard- waiters and nurses excepted.

Reg. 6<sup>th</sup>- No negro shall fetch a stick or dog to the church, except the old, decrepit or infirm, who may bring their staff, under the penalty of stripes at the discretion of the regulators

Reg. 7<sup>th</sup>- No negro woman shall be allowed to carry her child into the church under 10 years of age

Reg. 8<sup>th</sup>- Whenever service is over and they are at liberty to leave their seats, they shall immediately take the road home

Reg. 9<sup>th</sup>- All the negroes from below the meeting house branch to occupy the south gallery and all from above to occupy the north gallery, and that the use of tobacco in the gallery to be entirely prohibited

Reg. 10<sup>th</sup>- Two of our number being heads of families, shall for the space of twelve months attend to the blacks and see that the above regulations are strictly enforced”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Records. “The Regulations of the Negroes,” Salem Black River Presbyterian Church. South Caroliniana Library. 1844.

**APPENDIX B:**  
**SALEM BLACK RIVER PRESBYTERIAN**



Figure B.1: Front elevation of the Salem Black River Presbyterian Church depicting four columns, two side doors, and a center window. Note the red brick, a unique feature for South Carolina Churches during the nineteenth century.



Figure B.2: Interior of Salem Black River Presbyterian. Note the plain walls, windows, and simple floor plan. The Slave gallery extends on three sides and is supported by columns. The Box Pews are also unique to Presbyterian churches, many of which have switched to row pews.

**APPENDIX C:**  
**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ON EDISTO ISLAND**



Figure C.1: Front elevation of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island. Note again the columns and two side doors framing a central window.



Figure C.2: The Slave Galleries of the Presbyterian Church on Edisto Island.