



Sea Island Cotton ~1880

Craig Barrow Family Papers, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia.

Sea Island cotton was Wormsloe's main agricultural crop from the late eighteenth century until the 1880s. This coastal variety of cotton produced a longer, silkier floss than the upland cotton that grew throughout much of the rest of the South, and as a result the fiber brought a high price on domestic and foreign markets. As its name implies, only plantations situated close to the ocean could produce high-quality Sea Island cotton, as the plant demanded salty air. The work of raising, harvesting, cleaning, and packing cotton on the plantation fell to African Americans. Slaves worked the fields prior to the Civil War, and, following Emancipation, freedpeople toiled on Wormsloe as wage laborers, sharecroppers, and renters.

Sea Island cotton cultivation along the Georgia coast withered and died during Reconstruction, as increased foreign competition and freedpeoples' rejection of agricultural wage labor made the crop less profitable. While Wormsloe's residents raised cotton, the crop dominated the daily rhythms of plantation life. Life on Wormsloe was regimented by the task system of labor management, in which laborers performed a given task - be it planting, hoeing, or picking - on a predetermined piece of ground, and were free to garden, hunt, fish, or socialize once the task was complete.