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Hopeton, Model Plantation of the Antebellum South

BY JAMES M. CLIFTON

IN 1833, J. D. Legare, renowned editor of the *Southern Agriculturist*, wrote in his journal following a visit to Hopeton Plantation on the Altamaha River in Glynn County, Georgia:

We hesitate not to say Hopeton is decidedly the best plantation we have ever visited, and we doubt whether it can be equalled in the Southern States; and when we consider the extent of the crops, the variety of the same, and the number of operatives who have to be directed and managed, it will not be presumptive to say that it may fairly challenge comparison with any establishment of the United States, for the systematic arrangement of the whole, the regularity and precision with which each and all of the operations are carried out, and the perfect and daily accountability established in every department.¹

Too, Hopeton is probably the finest example among antebellum southern plantations of crop diversification, with three major staples—sea island cotton, sugar, and rice—being produced simultaneously and some years having approximately the same acreage devoted to each. Finally, the surviving Hopeton records are amazingly complete for virtually the entire antebellum era, thus providing for an in-depth analysis of crop production, operational procedures, slave management practices, and the plantation's profitability.

Hopeton was established in 1805 by John Couper and James Hamilton, who had come to Savannah together from Scotland in the fall of 1755 as teenage boys and subsequently remained close in both personal and business ties. The original two thousand acres were soon expanded to forty-five hundred. The 637 slaves,

¹J. D. Legare, "Account of an Agricultural Excursion Made into the South of Georgia in the Winter of 1832; by the Editor," *Southern Agriculturist and Register of Rural Affairs* 6 (June-August 1833), 359.

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many of direct African extraction, were purchased to prepare the fields, first for sea island cotton, then sugar, and finally rice as the principal crops of the plantation.² Records for Hopeton are very scanty until 1818, when James Hamilton Couper, John Couper's twenty-three year old son and Hamilton's namesake, became manager following his graduation from Yale; henceforth, there are complete crop reports to 1841 and financial records to the 1850s.³

The partnership of John Couper and James Hamilton ended in 1826. Over the years Couper fell victim to such vicissitudes as the burden of heavy borrowing (both to establish and sustain the plantation) at 8 percent compound interest, losses of profits from the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts before the War of 1812, and the loss of sixty prime slaves valued at fifteen thousand dollars at the hands of the British during the war, replaced only through more borrowed capital. Finally, the loss of two complete cotton crops, first in 1824 to a hurricane and then in 1825 to caterpillars, in conjunction with declining prices of cotton, slaves, and land, convinced him to sell his portion of the plantation and slaves to Hamilton. Hamilton, in turn, sold one-half interest in Hopeton along with 381 slaves to James Hamilton Couper for \$137,000 to be paid over a period of fifteen years at 6 percent interest. Couper was to receive half the profits of the plantation and two thousand dollars per annum as manager.⁴ James Hamilton died in 1829, but Couper continued to manage on the same basis for the Hamilton estate until 1841, when, to free himself from debt, he turned back his interest in the plantation to the estate. From 1841 to 1850, Couper, no longer entitled to half of Hopeton's profits,

²John Couper Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia; List of Slaves Belonging to James Hamilton and John Couper, January, 1806, Francis Porteus Corbin Papers, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; Memories of Charles Spalding Wylly, Mackay-Stiles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.; James C. Bonner, *The Georgia Story* (Oklahoma City, 1961), 164-69; George M. White, *Historical Collections of Georgia* (New York, 1855), 469.

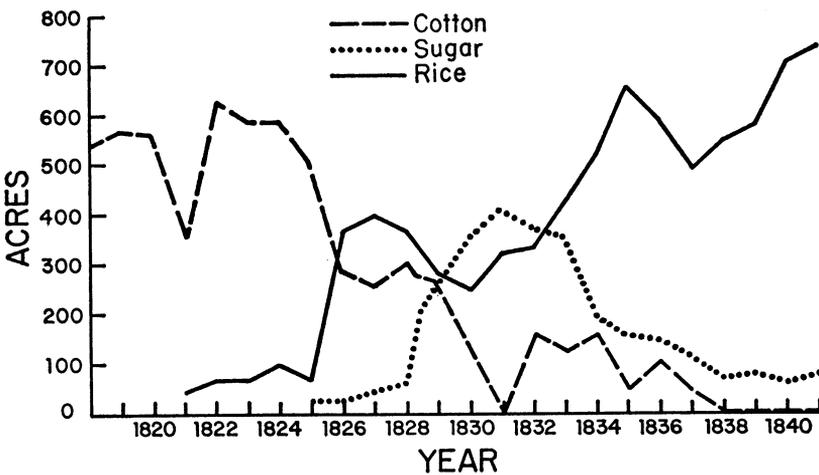
³The James Hamilton Couper Plantation Records (1818-1854) in the Southern Historical Collection consist of four volumes. The first two volumes are detailed plantation accounts; volume three gives a complete summary of the crops at Hopeton from 1818 to 1841; and volume four, entitled "Agricultural Notes," is a compilation of the observations of Couper as to the production and processing of the various crops.

⁴John Couper to James Couper, 24 May 1828, John Couper Papers, Southern Historical Collection; List of Slaves Belonging to James Hamilton Couper, 1826, Corbin Papers; Couper Plantation Records.

received a salary of five thousand dollars as manager, and for 1851 and 1852 (at which time the financial records cease), six thousand dollars.⁵ Francis Porteus Corbin, who had married Hamilton's only child and heiress of the plantation, joined Couper as co-manager of the plantation in 1856. From then until the Civil War Couper co-managed Hopeton on a half-interest partnership with Corbin.⁶ When James Hamilton Couper became manager in 1818, Hopeton's planted acreage was 544 acres; by 1841, 957 acres; and by 1857, 1,025 acres.⁷ The original slave population of 637 in 1806 had decreased by the mid-1840s to about 500 where it remained for the rest of the antebellum period.⁸

A quick survey of Hopeton's crop records from 1818 to 1841 (see Figures 1 and 2) indicates that Hopeton was initially a sea

Figure One
Hopeton Agricultural Trends Profile



SOURCE: Couper Plantation Records

⁵Couper Plantation Records; Charles Spalding Wyly, typescript concerning James Hamilton Couper's entry into planting, Mackay-Stiles Papers.

⁶Corbin Papers.

⁷Couper Plantation Records; James Hamilton Couper to Francis Porteus Corbin, 6 March 1857, Corbin Papers.

⁸List of Slaves Belonging to James Hamilton and John Couper, January, 1806, Corbin Papers; Charles Lyell, *Second Visit to North America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1849), 1: 261-62; Manuscript Census Returns, Schedule II, Glynn County, Georgia, 1850 and 1860.

FIGURE TWO
HOPETON PLANTATION CROP SUMMARY, 1818-1841

Year	Cotton		Cane		Rice		Corn		Sweet Potatoes		Peas	
	Acres	Lbs. Seed Cotton	Lbs. Sugar	Gal. Molasses	Acres	Number of Bushels Threshed	Acres	Bushels	Acres	Bushels	Acres	Bushels
1818	544 $\frac{1}{2}$	147,543										
1819	566	261,383							24			
1820	559	178,900			125 $\frac{1}{4}$				32			
1821	326 $\frac{1}{4}$	159,250	35		314							
1822	614 $\frac{1}{4}$	257,849	60 $\frac{1}{4}$		56 $\frac{1}{4}$							
1823	579 $\frac{1}{2}$	109,065	60 $\frac{1}{2}$		82 $\frac{1}{4}$				14 $\frac{3}{4}$			
1824	560 $\frac{1}{2}$	44,865	95 $\frac{1}{2}$		57				13 $\frac{1}{2}$			
Crop short due to hurricane which flooded the fields on 14 September.												
1825	516	91,498	41		124				13 $\frac{1}{4}$			
1826	286 $\frac{1}{4}$		338		72 $\frac{1}{4}$				17			
1827	240 $\frac{1}{2}$	112,149	351 $\frac{1}{2}$		50 $\frac{1}{4}$				41	2,197		531
1828	285 $\frac{1}{4}$	175,929	331 $\frac{1}{4}$	650	17,571			1,764 $\frac{3}{4}$	46	1,500		
1829	246 $\frac{1}{4}$	70,081	32,350	5,349	17,654			324	46			
1830	138 $\frac{1}{4}$	12,000	107,811	21,895	12,870			210	321 $\frac{1}{2}$			
1831			166,061	14,735	11,450			75	18			
1832	142 $\frac{1}{4}$	72,026	82,324	21,930	13,800			1,200	5 $\frac{1}{4}$			
1833	103 $\frac{1}{2}$	29,816	72,023	13,163	16,014			1,900	13	1,000		260
1834	140 $\frac{1}{2}$	17,794	92,389	11,632	21,196			910	131 $\frac{1}{2}$	900		650
1835	23 $\frac{1}{2}$	11,239	101,964	4,376	24,498			500	5	137		232
1836	113	18,114	49,334	6,055	33,243			1,000	7	120		300
1837	30	2,160	34,018	2,782	29,554			500	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	40		300
1838			14,985	2,782	27,172			580				578
1839	45	23,987	2,523	569	34,359			972	14	722		517
1840	30		1,600	684	36,394			2,420	281 $\frac{1}{2}$	2,420		1,008
1841	40			714				2,114	27	1,400		

SOURCE: Couper Plantation Records

island cotton plantation (all 544 planted acres in 1818 were in that crop). Then from 1826 to 1828 rice became the principal crop, only to give way to sugar from 1830 to 1832. Rice regained the ascendancy in 1833 for the remainder of the antebellum period. By 1838, rice had become the only commercial staple, with cotton discontinued entirely and only 40 acres planted in sugar cane, principally for molasses as provisions. The 1841 crop report shows 714 acres planted in rice;⁹ by 1857, rice covered 810 acres out of a total of 1,025 acres planted at Hopeton. The only other staple still to be planted, sugar cane, had been reduced to just 25 acres.¹⁰

Hopeton's crop record book shows a definite pattern of conversion from sea island cotton to sugar to rice. Such a pattern probably resulted from both pragmatic experimentation and a conscious conversion as a result of long-range planning. James Hamilton Couper early realized that if he prepared his fields so that any of the three crops could be grown separately or in rotation, he could easily shift from one to the other in accordance with which was then most profitable. Preparing the tidal swamplands to grow sea island cotton or sugar required the construction of a massive dam or levee to keep the tidal flows off the fields. Floodgates were installed in the levee to admit and remove tidal waters as needed for the irrigation of the crop. However, the fields would need to undergo additional improvements to grow rice. The land in the individual fields had to be leveled to insure a uniform water level during the various floodings of the growing season. Also, a more expansive system of canals and cross-ditches was needed to expedite the several flows. As a result, the progress toward rice did not really begin in earnest until the profitability of cotton and sugar had largely passed.¹¹

Two important facilities at Hopeton were the plantation canal and a portable railroad. The canal, three miles long, fifteen feet wide, and four and one-half feet deep, meandered in snake-like fashion from the Altamaha past the sugar and rice mills, the cotton

⁹Couper Plantation Records.

¹⁰James Hamilton Couper to Francis Porteus Corbin, 6 March 1857, Corbin Papers.

¹¹Couper Plantation Records; Robert F. W. Allston, "Rice," *De Bow's Review* 4 (December 1847), 506-11; Legare, "Account of Agricultural Excursion," 362-65.

gin, and Hopeton House itself and on through the fields back to the river. The canal served as both the main irrigation and transportation facility for the plantation. Massive floodgates were located at both ends of the canal, the one at the entrance being seventy-five feet long and twelve feet wide with four pairs of gates, and the one on the other end, thirty-five feet long and eleven feet wide with two pairs of gates. Flatboats, or "flats" as they were commonly called, up to forty-five feet long and eleven feet wide could easily negotiate the entrance gates and the canal. These flats were used as the principal conveyances on the plantation, especially in transporting the crop to the mill or gin and also in delivering the finished product to market and bringing supplies back to the plantation. The railroad, one of the earliest of its kind to be built on a plantation, had movable wooden rails and served mainly to transport the sugar cane and rice to the canal for delivery to the mill.¹²

While sea island cotton was apparently the only staple produced at Hopeton before 1821, no records exist of its planted acreage until 1818. In that year James Hamilton Couper planted $544\frac{1}{8}$ acres and produced 147,543 pounds of seed cotton, or $147\frac{1}{2}$ bales. The next year saw the largest crop ever at Hopeton, 261,383 pounds, from 566 acres. The peak planted acreage came in 1822, $614\frac{1}{4}$ acres, with a crop of 257,849 pounds. In 1825, the last year in which cotton was the principal crop, 516 acres were planted, but because of destruction by caterpillars, a very small crop of only 91,498 pounds was realized.¹³

Sea island cotton was developed in the Bahamas by a group of Georgia planters who moved there following the American Revolution. It was introduced into Georgia in 1786 and quickly became a crop of major importance along the immediate seacoast. The plants required a saline atmosphere and a certain temperature which existed only along the South Atlantic coast from Georgetown, South Carolina, to the St. Mary's River in Georgia. Sea island cotton thrived best in the islands along the coastline (hence its name), but it could be grown with commercial success fifteen

¹²Legare, "Account of Agricultural Excursion," 362-65; J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1953), 135.

¹³Couper Plantation Records.

to thirty miles inland.¹⁴ It had a much longer and more delicate fiber than upland short-staple cotton, was used primarily for making the fine cambric and laces of the wealthy as opposed to the multitudinous uses of the more plebeian short-fiber, and brought prices double that of the short-staple variety. However, its bulk yield was only about half that of short-staple cotton, and it was much more difficult to pick because the bolls did not always open fully and it matured so irregularly that sometimes ten to twelve pickings were required as compared to only three of short-staple. Too, the slave was expected to pick only about fifty pounds of sea island cotton per day as compared to 200 or more pounds of the short-staple. Finally, the seed of the long-staple cotton could be extracted much more easily from the fiber; consequently, devices to gin this variety were developed sooner than Eli Whitney's more famous saw gin (with iron combs called saws in addition to rollers), which gave birth to the major upland industry. The gin used by Couper at Hopeton was called Eve's Horse Gin, after Joseph Eve who invented the device in the Bahamas in the 1780s. It could be driven by wind, water, or horsepower, or attached to a rice mill, sawmill, or grist mill, and ginned about two hundred pounds per day.¹⁵

The rapid downfall of sea island cotton at Hopeton and largely along the entire South Atlantic coast was not caused by competition from the booming upland industry but rather a sharp decline in prices in 1825, which produced a severe cotton depression

¹⁴John Couper, "On the Origin of Sea Island Cotton," *Southern Agriculturist* 4 (May 1831), 242-45; Thomas Spalding, "Cotton—Its Introduction and Progress of its Culture in the United States," *Southern Agriculturist* 8 (January 1835), 45-46; Spalding, "On the Introduction of Sea Island Cotton into Georgia," *Southern Agriculturist* 4 (March 1831), 133-34; United States Department of Agriculture, "The Sea Island Cotton of the South, Its History, Characteristics, Cultivation, Etc.," *De Bow's Review, After the War Series* 3 (January 1867), 84; Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1933), 2: 731, 733.

¹⁵Robert F. W. Allston, "Sea Coast Crops of the South," *De Bow's Review* 16 (June 1854), 597; William Henry Capers, "On the Culture of Sea Island Cotton," *Southern Agriculturist* 8 (August 1835), 401-12; Savannah *Georgia Gazette*, 21 April 1796; Spalding, "Cotton," 42-43; E. Merton Coulter, *Thomas Spalding of Sapelo* (Baton Rouge, 1940), 63-64, 72-73, 161-62; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2: 702-3, 731; Basil Hall, *Travels in North America, 1827-1828*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1829), 3: 220; Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918), 154; Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), 91.

lasting until 1837. The immediate response at Hopeton was to cut the cotton acreage almost in half in 1826, to only 286¼ acres. With no relief from falling prices, Hopeton's cotton acreage continued to decline until the crop was discontinued entirely in 1838. At the same time, a sugar craze swept through the Georgia coast, with a number of planters shifting to that crop to combat the cotton depression. And while after 1821 Couper steadily shifted Hopeton's fields more and more toward rice, which immediately (1826-1828) replaced cotton as the principal crop, he too by 1830 joined his fellow Georgians in a major experimentation with sugar as Hopeton's principal crop for the next three years.¹⁶

In 1825, Couper experimented initially with sugar, cultivating a small crop of 5½ acres for molasses for home consumption. The next two years brought crops only a little larger. However, by 1828, Couper seems to have been convinced that sugar could be produced profitably. In that year he planted 48¼ acres, producing 5,411 pounds of sugar and 650 gallons of molasses. Apparently pleased with the success of the 1828 crop, Couper committed a sizable portion of Hopeton to sugar cane for the next several years. In 1829, 202½ acres were planted; in 1830, 303; in 1831, 376½; in 1832, 336; and in 1833, 311 acres. However, by 1834 Couper had shifted Hopeton primarily to rice; in that year only 165½ acres were planted in sugar, with succeeding years to have even less planted acreage. By 1838, Couper committed only 40 acres to sugar cane. After 1839 sugar cane was grown at Hopeton only to provide molasses as provisions for the slave force.

Couper's experimentation with sugar was far from successful. For the period in which sugar was a major crop at Hopeton, 1829-1839, the average yield per acre was only 374 pounds, with the highest, in 1835, just 718 pounds.¹⁷ This compares very poorly with the success of other Georgia planters. Collectively, a score of planters in the Altamaha area averaged 961 pounds per acre for the ten years from 1815 to 1824.¹⁸ And from 1820 to 1840, the

¹⁶Couper Plantation Records; Spalding, "Cotton," 40-41; James C. Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture, 1732-1860* (Athens, 1964), 56-57, 73, 83-84; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2: 697-98, 738.

¹⁷Couper Plantation Records.

¹⁸Roswell King, Jr., "On the Management of the Butler Estate and the Cultivation of Sugar Cane," *Southern Agriculturist* 1 (December 1828), 527; J. D. Legare, "On our Southern Agricultural Concerns," *Southern Agriculturist* 1 (October 1828),

average yield for Georgia planters was 850 pounds of sugar and 45 gallons of molasses per acre.¹⁹

The poor performance of sugar at Hopeton seems surprising in the light of Couper's elaborate efforts to produce it. Especially was this true in the construction of milling facilities. In preparation for the construction of a sugar mill, Couper corresponded with sugar makers in Louisiana, the West Indies, and Europe, and studied many drawings of different kinds of mills. Finally, by 1829, he had decided on a plan similar to other sugar works in Louisiana and the West Indies and began constructing the mill, which was completed in 1830 at a cost of \$21,984.67. The millhouse was quite large: 240 feet long, 39 feet wide, and 26 feet high.²⁰ The steam engine to power the sugar processing machinery was a Bolton and Watt product from Liverpool, England, of fifteen horsepower and could power the rice threshing and pounding mills when not grinding sugar.²¹ Hopeton's sugar mill was the only one on the South Atlantic coast to have three furnaces and two sets of kettles of six kettles each. The more typical Georgia sugar mill had only one furnace and one set of kettles, with only four kettles to the set. Even in Louisiana, the principal sugar producing area in the United States, a mill of the proportions of that of Hopeton would have been unusual. Also, Hopeton had a portable railroad to transport the sugar cane from the field to the mill. And in what may have been the first such use in the United States, Hopeton's sugar mill had movable rails to transport the granulated sugar from the cooling room into the curing room for drainage.²² Overall, the expenditures for the mill and machinery in the first six years of sugar production at Hopeton amounted to \$22,443.82.²³

American tariff policies largely brought the *coup de grace* to sugar production at Hopeton and elsewhere along the Georgia

448; Sitterson, *Sugar Country*, 32.

¹⁹D. G. Purse and W. C. Stubbs, *Cultivation of Sugar Cane . . . Part First. Sugar Cane: A Treatise of Its History, Botany and Agriculture . . . Part Second. Sugar Cane: Its History in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, 1767-1900 . . . Recollections of Hopeton Plantation. . .*; 2 vols. (Savannah, 1901), 2: 6.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 3-4, 24-25.

²¹James Hamilton Couper, "Account of, and Directions for Erecting a Sugar Establishment," *Southern Agriculturist* 4 (May 1831), 227; Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 267.

²²Couper, "Directions for Erecting a Sugar Establishment," 226-27; Sitterson, *Sugar Country*, 141-43.

²³Couper Plantation Records.

coast. The 1832 tariff reduced the protection on American-produced sugar from three cents to two and one-half cents per pound. Then the Compromise Tariff of 1833 began a graduated process of further reductions over the next several years. This, added to the unsuitability of the soil and climate of the Georgia coast for sugar production, spelled doom for the Georgia planters.²⁴ The reaction at Hopeton to the 1833 tariff was immediate. Whereas the 1833 planted acreage for sugar was 311 acres, that of 1834 was only 165½ acres, with succeeding years seeing much smaller acreages planted. The stage was finally set to make rice the only commercial staple produced at Hopeton.²⁵

Rice planting had been big business in South Carolina since the colonial era but had developed a comparable status in Georgia only in the antebellum period. This came about in large degree because of the migration of a number of South Carolina planters into the swamplands along the Georgia rivers.²⁶ By the mid-1830s along the Georgia coast sea island cotton was in a severe depression. Also, the sugar craze had largely run its course, thus paving the way for rice to enter its "golden age," which lasted to the Civil War. Couper early realized the practicality of rice for Hopeton and by the mid-1820s was making major preparation for the shift of the fields from sea island cotton to rice. The sharp drop in cotton prices in 1825 accelerated this process. In preparation for his shift to rice culture, Couper went to Holland in 1825 to study the system of water control there, which he applied upon return to his irrigation system at Hopeton. Hopeton's sophisticated system of levees, canals, drainage ditches, and floodgates was later described by Couper's father as "perhaps the only thing of its kind in America."²⁷ In his *Second Visit to North America*, Sir Charles Lyell, president of the British Royal Geological Society, who visited fellow society member Couper at Hopeton in January,

²⁴Sitterson, *Sugar Country*, 170-72, 175-77.

²⁵Couper Plantation Records.

²⁶For a detailed account of the evolution of the rice industry in South Carolina and Georgia, see James M. Clifton, "The Rice Industry in Colonial America," *Agricultural History*, 55 (July 1981), 266-83; and Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor on Argyle Island: Letters and Documents of a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833-1867* (Savannah, 1978), xvi-xvii.

²⁷Alfred W. Jones, "Altama: Then and Now," a privately published pamphlet of twenty-one pages (Sea Island, Georgia, n. d.), 3.

1846, described two "carpenters putting up sluices and a lock in a canal of a kind unknown in this part of the world." Lyell also mentioned floodgates being constructed at Hopeton based on Couper's observations in Holland.²⁸

By the antebellum period South Carolina rice planters were forced to adopt innovative methods of planting to compensate for declining yields from soils largely deteriorated because of continuous cropping for many decades. However, the lands at Hopeton were new enough to allow Couper to follow the traditional method of "dry culture," or covered planting.²⁹ Couper and Thomas Spalding of Sapelo Island, perhaps the two most scientific and skilled farmers in Georgia, did engage in a measure of innovation with extensive crop rotations, planting rice alternately with either cotton or sugar cane, or with such provision crops as oats and peas. This rotation produced much better rice crops and kept under control a troublesome pest for the rice planters, volunteer rice.³⁰ Also, Couper was very careful to erect at Hopeton the finest facilities available for both threshing and polishing the rice.

The first rice was planted at Hopeton in 1821. The thirty-five acres planted then were not sizably increased until 1826, when Couper planted 338 acres. The following two years 351½ and 331¼ acres were planted. In 1829 there was an almost equal distribution of acres planted in each of the three staples: 246¼ in cotton, 202½ in sugar, and 234¼ in rice. Sugar was the principal crop at Hopeton from 1830 to 1832. In 1833 rice became the main staple with 368¼ acres planted and would continue as the leading crop for the remainder of the period covered in the Hopeton crop reports to 1841, when 714 acres were planted in rice.

Rice proved to be much more successful at Hopeton than

²⁸Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 267.

²⁹See Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor*, xxii-xxiii, for a detailed discussion of the innovative methods of open planting and "water culture" used extensively in South Carolina, especially in the Georgetown area. Charles Manigault of Charleston, with two plantations on the Savannah, was using open planting entirely on approximately 650 acres by the mid-1850s (Clifton, ed., *Life and Labor*, *passim*). Apparently, he was about the only Georgia planter to use this method. No Georgia rice planter seems to have used water culture, which kept the fields flooded most of the growing season and involved much less cultivation than either dry culture or open planting, consequently, a sizable saving in labor.

³⁰Legare, "Account of Agricultural Excursion," 413-14; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 2: 729.

either sea island cotton or sugar. For the fourteen years for which production figures are given, 1827-1840, the average yield for all fields was 53.3 bushels per acre. The maximum yield came in 1839 with 60.4 bushels per acre and the minimum in 1830 with 49.8 bushels. The records show, however, that over the years some fields produced 60, 70, and even as many as 85 bushels per acre.³¹ When compared to an average of 45 bushels per acre in Georgia and only about 40 in South Carolina, Hopeton's production was very good indeed.³²

The exact rice acreage at Hopeton after 1841 is difficult to determine. The censuses of 1850 and 1860 reported only the acreages of improved land and the 1849 and 1859 crop productions with no indication as to how many acres had actually been planted. The only surviving bit of information as to rice acreage at Hopeton for this twenty-year period is a letter from Couper to Francis P. Corbin, co-manager of the plantation, in March, 1857, stating that he (Couper) intended to plant 810 acres of rice that year at Hopeton.³³ A reasonably safe assumption would be that from 700 to 800 acres of rice were planted annually at Hopeton for the last twenty years of the antebellum period. Only one other rice plantation in the entire South had more planted rice acreage, that of Governor William Aiken of South Carolina on Jehossee Island at the mouth of the Edisto River, which had 1,500 acres of riceland, of which 1,000 acres were normally planted in rice, with the remaining 500 acres rotated with provisions.³⁴ The average rice plantation had only about 300 acres planted in rice, with few exceeding 400 planted acres and very few, 500 acres.

Hopeton with a work force of about five hundred provided an excellent laboratory for slave management. It was in this area that the plantation was most renowned. Travelers, especially from Europe, constantly visited Hopeton to observe slavery first-hand and generally went away very much impressed with the humanity and skill with which James Hamilton Couper managed his slaves.

³¹Couper Plantation Records.

³²Albert Virgil House, "Labor Management Problems on Georgia Rice Plantations, 1840-1860," *Agricultural History* 28 (October 1954), 149-50.

³³Manuscript Census Returns, Schedule IV, Glynn County, Georgia, 1850 and 1860; James Hamilton Couper to Francis Porteus Corbin, 6 March 1857, Corbin Papers.

³⁴*American Agriculturist* 9 (June 1850), 187-88.

Mrs. Basil Hall, who visited Hopeton in March, 1828, with her husband, Captain Basil Hall of the British Royal Navy and their daughter, wrote to a friend concerning Couper: "It does you good to meet such a man, not to reconcile you to slavery on principle, but to show how much the evil which appears to be irremediable at present may be softened by proper management."³⁵ Sir Charles Lyell in 1846 described Couper as a benevolent slaveowner and discerned at Hopeton an hereditary regard and attachment between master and slave.³⁶ Fredrika Bremer characterized Couper in 1849 as a "disciplinarian, with great practical tact, and also some benevolence in the treatment of the Negroes."³⁷ No one was more impressed by Couper's skill in slave management than Miss Amelia Murray, lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria, who visited Hopeton in 1855 and after viewing the various establishments on the plantation became so committed to a defense of slavery that she horrified British public opinion and was dismissed from office.³⁸ In a letter to a friend in March, 1856, in which he denounced the dismissal of Miss Murray, Couper characterized her recent book on slavery as the best portrayal of the system that had ever "emanated from Northern or European mind."³⁹

Couper was especially careful to obtain the most qualified overseers to supervise the operations at Hopeton and oversee slave management. Overseers on the Rice Coast were generally superior to those on plantations elsewhere in the South, were paid higher wages, and enjoyed longer tenures.⁴⁰ Those at Hopeton had to be experienced not only in rice culture but also in that of sea island cotton and sugar as well. Too, the supervision of five hundred slaves required an overseer of superior qualities. While the tenure of overseers at Hopeton for the years for which there are records,

³⁵Una Pope-Hennessy, ed., *The Aristocratic Journey, Being the Letters of Mrs. Basil Hall Written During a Fourteen Month's Sojourn in America, 1827-1828* (New York, 1831), 231-32.

³⁶Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 261-63.

³⁷Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, translated by Mary Howitt, 2 vols. (New York, 1853), 2: 489.

³⁸Amelia Murray, *Letters from the United States, Cuba, and Canada* (New York, 1856), 226-29.

³⁹James Hamilton Couper to a friend, March 1856, in "Interstate Sugar Cane Growers Association Report, 1908," 65, Mackay-Stiles Papers.

⁴⁰William K. Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1966), 29, 39.

1827-1854, was only about average, 3.3 years as compared to 3.6 for the Rice Kingdom as a whole, three overseers—Daniel McDonald, Thomas Oden, and Baillie Forrester—were employed for terms of eight, seven, and six years respectively and were considered superb in both operating the plantation and managing the slaves.⁴¹ Couper paid his overseers well, an average of \$765 per year for the twenty-eight year period, with a high of one thousand dollars and a low of two hundred dollars. No information remains as to how much he paid his overseers at Hopeton for the years beyond 1854 when salaries increased appreciably. However, the surviving records show that Couper was paying his overseer at Hamilton Plantation on St. Simon's Island \$1,500 a year by the late 1850s.⁴² Since Hamilton was smaller than Hopeton, it seems reasonable to conclude that the overseer at Hopeton at the same time would have made as much or possibly more. The only recorded salary on a rice plantation higher than this was at William Aiken's Jehossee Island plantation, where the overseer was paid \$2,000 annually.⁴³

Couper seems to have been even more successful in securing suitable drivers at Hopeton. This was highly important, for the driver had the most immediate control over the slaves, both in directing the daily tasks of labor on the plantation and in supervising the decorum of the slaves in the quarters. From the few surviving records on drivers, it seems that Hopeton operated with less than the traditional number of drivers for a plantation of its size, probably indicative of the ability of the drivers there to manage large numbers of slaves. For example, the original slave force of 637 had only four drivers, an average of one for each 159 slaves, which was about three times the number generally supervised by drivers.⁴⁴ Also, Old Tom (or African Tom), the son of an African prince, who served Hopeton as head driver for the last

⁴¹Couper Plantation Records; Scarborough, *Overseer*, 39.

⁴²Couper Plantation Records. In addition to half-interest in Hopeton, Couper owned outright three other plantations—Barrett's Island on the Altamaha and Hamilton and Cannon's Point on St. Simon's Island. On these four plantations there were by 1860 2,600 acres of riceland and 1,142 slaves ("Rice Planter," typescript concerning Couper as rice planter, Mackay-Stiles Papers, n. p., n. d.).

⁴³*American Agriculturist*, 9 (June 1850), 188.

⁴⁴For an extensive treatment of the rice driver, see James M. Clifton, "The Rice Driver: His Role in Slave Management," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 82 (October 1981), 331-53.

twenty years of the antebellum period, was unquestionably one of the finest drivers anywhere in the Rice Kingdom and provided at Hopeton perhaps as sophisticated a level of slave management as existed on any rice plantation in the South.⁴⁵

Most of the labor performed at Hopeton, as was generally true on rice and sugar plantations, was under the task system. Under this format, each laborer (be he or she a full, three quarter, half, or quarter hand, such designations being based on what portion of a full task each could do) was assigned a certain portion of land to get over during the day according to what was then being done—planting, hoeing, harvesting, etc. These tasks were commonly designed to be accomplished by the “meanest full hand in nine hours;”⁴⁶ however, Sir Charles Lyell observed that Couper was so benevolent in his prescribed tasks that the Hopeton slaves, “when disposed to exert themselves, could finish the day’s task in five hours.”⁴⁷ This gave the slaves considerable leisure time in the afternoon to work in their gardens, look after their poultry and livestock, or go hunting or fishing. Also, Couper allowed slaves to cultivate their own crops on a portion of the plantation, and to sell them at market prices. Doubtless the opportunity to have much of the afternoon for these individual purposes encouraged most slaves to work diligently to finish their tasks early. Too, it no doubt improved the rapport between master and slave.⁴⁸ In addition, Hopeton slaves were given a number of holidays during the year—a full week at Christmas, Easter Monday, and the day before and after the harvest period. Only during the harvest of sugar cane was the task routine broken, with the slaves sometimes working as much as sixteen hours a day, for if the cane was not harvested quickly when ripe, it could easily be lost. The slaves at Hopeton apparently accepted this requirement, for in the words of Couper: “During that period the hands are cheerful, and at its termination they have improved in general appearance.

⁴⁵Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 266-67; Frances Leigh Butler, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (London, 1883), 56.

⁴⁶Arney R. Childs, ed., *Rice Planter and Sportsman: The Recollections of J. Motte Alston, 1821-1909* (Columbia, 1953), 47.

⁴⁷Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 263, 265 (quotation).

⁴⁸Couper Plantation Records; Hall, *Travels*, 3: 224-25; Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 263, 265, 268.

At no period of the year is there so little sickness, or disposition to avoid work."⁴⁹

Couper was very benevolent in the area of slave discipline at Hopeton. Especially was this true with respect to whipping, the standard mode of punishment on antebellum plantations. Couper set very low limits as to the number of lashes that could be given for ordinary infractions. The regular drivers could give no more than six lashes; the head driver, twelve; and the overseer, twenty-four lashes.⁵⁰ Neighboring planter Pierce Butler followed the more common rule of allowing the drivers twelve lashes; the head driver, thirty-six; and the overseer, fifty.⁵¹ Lyell observed that the discipline at Hopeton was lenient but firm and the lash was seldom used.⁵² Couper reasoned that such incentives as short work-days and the opportunity to make some money for themselves in their free time would produce much better discipline among the slaves than frequent use of the lash.

With respect to food, clothing, and shelter, the slaves at Hopeton fared very well. Lyell remarked that "their weekly rations are more than they can eat and they either return part of it to the overseer who makes them an allowance for it at the end of the week, or they keep it to feed their fowls."⁵³ Fredrika Bremer also commented that "the slaves were well fed."⁵⁴ The plantation records do not indicate the exact quantity of rations, but they do show the types and varieties of food distributed at Hopeton. In addition to the basics of cornmeal and pork, the slaves were given rice, beef, mutton, and molasses. They could also supplement their diet from their gardens, from poultry and livestock, and from hunting and fishing. Most of the slaves' clothing was made on the plantation by the seamstresses; for example, in 1828, \$1,023.25 was spent for cloth. Shoes and blankets were purchased ready-made. Hopeton's purchases of shoes in 1828 amounted to \$321.89 and blankets in the same year, to \$612.12. Male slaves re-

⁴⁹*Ibid.*; Legare, "Account of Agricultural Excursion," 527, 529 (quotation).

⁵⁰Legare, "Account of Agricultural Excursion," 576; Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 265-266.

⁵¹Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 271; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 175.

⁵²Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 265.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 264-65.

⁵⁴Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, 2: 491.

ceived two cotton shirts and trousers for the summer season and two woolen outfits for the winter. Women were given four dresses during the year. Shoes were distributed to all slaves twice yearly; blankets, every two to three years. Clothing for children was a one-piece cotton garment similar to a nightshirt.⁵⁵ The slave quarters at Hopeton were characterized by Lyell as “neat and comfortable cottages.”⁵⁶ They were located north of the plantation mansion in two long columns along a live oak-lined “street.” Each cabin was a single-family unit with a hall, fireplace, two sleeping rooms, and a loft for the children. In the backyard the slaves had their gardens and kept their poultry and livestock. The cabins were originally wood, but later additions were of tabby⁵⁷ construction, which, in addition to being neater in appearance, were doubtless more comfortable to the inhabitants.⁵⁸

Couper provided excellent medical services for the slaves at Hopeton. Kenneth Stampf observed in his *Peculiar Institution* that in the hospital at Hopeton, “ailing slaves received the best medical attention the South could provide.”⁵⁹ The hospital building was a large rectangular structure of tabby construction and served as both hospital for the sick and nursery for the infants. The hospital portion of the building was eighty by twenty-four feet in size, and contained four wards, an entrance room, an examining room, a medicine room, a kitchen and a bathing room. Two wards were for men; a third, for sick women; and a fourth, for “lying-in-women.” A head nurse with attendants supervised the operation of the hospital. Couper, as was common on antebellum plantations, contracted with local physicians to attend to the medical needs of the slaves. The nursery in the remaining portion of the building accommodated all children up to age twelve during the day. The entire building was steam-heated and well ventilated.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Couper Plantation Records.

⁵⁶Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 264-65.

⁵⁷Tabby was an outer wall covering unique to coastal areas, consisting of a mixture of crushed oyster shells and sand in lime solution.

⁵⁸Couper Plantation Records; Hall, *Travels*, 3: 224; Legare, “Account of Agricultural Excursion,” 167; Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 263-64.

⁵⁹Stampf, *Peculiar Institution*, 313.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*; Legare, “Account of Agricultural Excursion,” 573-74; Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 262-64.

Finally, the financial records at Hopeton provide the basis for an excellent case study of the profitability of a first-class plantation for most of the antebellum period. Couper kept elaborate records of all phases of plantation operations including detailed financial information concerning receipts and expenditures for the years from 1827 to 1852. From these records one can establish year by year the cost value of the investment in the plantation, the gross and net sales, expenditures, and net profit. Couper owned the plantation in partnership with James Hamilton from 1826 to 1829, and with the Hamilton estate to 1840. During this period he shared both expenses and profits with Hamilton or the estate; he also received an annual salary of two thousand dollars as manager. In 1841, Couper, to free himself from debt, turned back his interest in the plantation to the estate and consequently received a much larger annual salary as manager, five thousand dollars for the years 1841-1850, and six thousand dollars for 1851 and 1852. For our purposes we shall present a detailed analysis in both tabular and written form of the two periods.

Table 1 shows a wide range of profitability from a low of .8 percent in 1830 to a high of 11.9 percent in 1837. The low profits of the first several years may be charged principally to Couper's

TABLE 1

Year	Capital	Gross Sales	Net Sales	Expenses	Profit	Rate of Profit
1827	\$274,000.00	ns	\$ 4,367.19	\$12,239.56	\$ 7,872.37*	
1828	294,895.22	ns	15,043.50	6,924.93	8,118.57	2.7%
1829	298,014.40	ns	11,707.08	9,021.95	2,685.13	.9
1830	298,014.40	ns	15,235.55	12,730.26	2,505.29	.8
1831	298,046.40	ns	22,482.34	16,949.10	5,533.24	1.85
1832	300,126.65	ns	17,030.23	10,910.86	6,119.37	2
1833	302,617.07	ns	22,016.37	10,937.07	11,079.30	3.6
1834	302,617.07	ns	20,609.24	9,918.72	10,690.52	3.5
1835	302,617.07	ns	26,897.48	11,857.64	15,039.84	4.9
1836	302,617.07	ns	31,977.27	8,452.16	23,525.11	7.7
1837	302,617.07	ns	45,970.72	9,868.87	36,101.85	11.9
1838	302,617.07	ns	35,889.13	12,939.44	22,949.69	7.2
1839	302,617.07	\$38,484.06	36,199.90	10,022.71	26,177.19	8
1840	302,617.07	26,476.34	24,228.01	11,276.11	12,951.90	4.2

SOURCE: Couper Plantation Records

*Deficit

unsuccessful experimentation with sugar. For the years 1829-1834, he spent \$22,443.82 for a sugar mill and other machinery and diverted a sizable part of the labor force from other crops, with only minimal returns from his sugar crops. Couper's venture in sugar culture was certainly not foolhardy, for sugar planters in Louisiana in those same years were making considerable fortunes and even a number of Georgia planters were fairly successful. However, the sugar experiment seems to have been chiefly responsible for the low profits in the first few years. With the shift from sugar to rice as the principal crop at Hopeton after 1834, the rate of profit increased considerably. Also, Couper was able to hire out a number of slaves to the contractors building the Brunswick Canal for the years 1837-1839, which largely explains the high profits for those years. For the labor of these slaves he received in 1837, \$19,208.51; in 1838, \$15,010.75; and in 1839, \$7,250.49.⁶¹

A decided factor in the profitability at Hopeton would be the personal and household expenses of Couper and his family. No records of these expenses remain, but a reasonable guess seems to be that the amount may have been substantial. As part of his compensation for the management of the plantation, Couper had the use of house servants, horses, carriage and boats, as well as produce for his table. This would have constituted a considerable item according to the description of Sir Charles Lyell in 1846, when conditions were probably the same as between 1827 and 1840. Lyell found at Hopeton a three-storied mansion with twenty-four rooms and the finest furnishings, a library of over five thousand books containing "Audubon's Birds, Michaud's Forest Trees, and other costly works on natural history," and a lifestyle comparable to that of an English country gentleman.⁶² These were real profits and must be considered, even if a figure for them cannot be determined.

Another item that does not show in Hopeton's profitability was the increasing valuation of the plantation. When Couper turned back his half-interest in the plantation to the Hamilton estate on 1 January 1841, three commissioners were appointed

⁶¹Couper Plantation Records.

⁶²Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 260-61.

by the Superior Court of Glynn County to determine the value of the plantation. These commissioners estimated the value to be \$381,425, which would represent an increase over original cost and additional investment of \$78,807.93, or a gain in valuation of 26 percent or about 2 percent annually for the fourteen years from 1827 to 1840. However, Couper and the trustees of the estate decided this estimate was too high and made the actual transfer of title at a book value of \$342,481.88, or an increase in value of only \$39,864.81, a gain of 13 percent or about 1 percent annually.⁶³

After 1841 Couper received a salary as manager of five thousand dollars for ten years, and six thousand dollars for the last two years considered here. A more than doubling of his salary from the earlier period would certainly reduce the rate of profitability for the later years. The same arrangement seems to have continued with respect to household expenses and must be remembered in connection with the actual profit figures. And, the 1840s were probably the worst decade economically of the entire antebellum era for southern planters. Nevertheless, as Table 2 shows, Hopeton's profits were not much less for these years than in the earlier period.⁶⁴

The change in capital figures from year to year came largely

TABLE 2

Year	Capital	Gross Sales	Net Sales	Expenses	Profit	Rate of Profit
1841	\$342,481.88	\$30,470.58	\$27,974.83	\$16,821.98	\$11,152.85	3.2%
1842	344,681.88	18,905.86	17,232.27	15,752.97	1,479.30	.43
1843	344,681.88	23,392.47	20,770.26	13,240.05	7,530.21	2.2
1844	344,181.88	30,411.03	27,699.58	17,259.71	10,439.87	3
1845	344,181.88	26,370.14	24,436.28	13,120.11	11,316.17	3.3
1846	344,181.88	41,161.97	37,602.85	13,685.68	23,917.17	6.9
1847	343,617.56	29,893.75	27,335.05	14,914.55	12,420.50	3.6
1848	343,617.56	30,807.12	27,810.52	16,397.00	11,413.52	3.3
1849	340,017.56	36,988.17	33,280.75	15,341.87	17,938.88	5.3
1850	342,017.56	35,795.48	32,571.73	16,583.30	15,988.43	4.7
1851	349,474.60	29,587.54	26,603.62	17,627.43	8,976.19	2.6
1852	349,474.60	39,761.40	35,268.04	17,938.93	17,329.11	5

SOURCE: Couper Plantation Records

⁶³Couper Plantation Records.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

through the purchases and sales of land and slaves. Over the twenty-six year period, land worth \$8,789.58 was purchased and land worth \$2,057.56, sold. Seven slaves were bought and twenty sold. The Hopeton slave record has not been located; consequently, the number of slaves at any given time is difficult to determine. Sir Charles Lyell said there were five hundred slaves on the plantation in 1846.⁶⁵ If the 381 slaves sold to Couper in 1826 by James Hamilton were the full work force at that time, then the number of slaves at Hopeton had increased by 119 during the years considered here, certainly a major factor in the plantation's profitability. In the final analysis, one should remember that antebellum southern planters regarded planting as more a way of life than a matter of profit and loss. So long as they could maintain their accustomed style of living, they were not that much concerned about the actual rate of profit.

Hopeton was truly a model plantation in the antebellum South. Probably no other plantation saw a comparable degree of production in three major commercial staples. Nor was any other plantation perhaps as renowned for its benevolent and humane slave management practices. Hopeton's proprietor, James Hamilton Couper, was one of the most skilled and scientific farmers of his day. His gracious and courtly manner of living at Hopeton became the envy of planters near and afar. To Hopeton's door came constant travelers, especially from Europe, providing in their writings the kind of recognition enjoyed by probably no other plantation in the Old South.

⁶⁵Lyell, *Second Visit*, 1: 261-62.