



Rice Fields

Photography of African-American history would not be complete without recording the remnants of plantation rice fields. Rice cultivation was fundamental to Lowcountry plantation life starting in the 1700s, and it would have been impossible without the engineering skills, knowledge and labor of slaves. Slaves from western Africa brought with them experience in rice cultivation. The resulting rice fields can be found throughout the Lowcountry.

One easily accessible location is the **Caw Caw Interpretive Center**, south of Charleston on **Highway 17**. There, you can view old rice fields, dikes and gates (“trunks”), which regulated the flow of water in and out of the fields. Find a vantage point where you can capture in one frame a gate and/or wild rice stalks in the foreground with a rice field in



the background. You'll need much depth of field to keep it all in focus.

Further south on **Highway 17** is the **ACE Basin**, filled with old rice fields, now plantation hunting reserves. This area includes the inland coastal marshes surrounding the **Ashepoo, Combahee** and **Edisto Rivers**, considered the largest undisturbed coastal marsh in the States. They are flat, wide and teeming with wildlife. The best views can be found from the many back roads south of **Highway 17**, e.g. **Bears Bluff Road**. At dawn and dusk, the views are especially rich and colorful. I've caught them with sunsets and full moons, and I invite you to do the same.

Depth of Field – Making the Foreground Soft and the Background Sharp

If you want the azaleas in soft focus and the houses to be sharp, focus on the houses and shoot with a relatively large, open aperture (e.g. f-4 or lower). On the other hand, if you want the azaleas as sharp as the houses, then use a smaller aperture (f-16 or up) for greater depth of field. Try shooting it both ways and compare the results later. In either case, set your aperture first, then adjust the speed of the shutter to accommodate the aperture setting. Use the tripod to steady the camera at speeds slower than 1/60 of a second. And if you have a “depth of field” preview function, use it before shooting to preview the difference in how the blossoms appear.

Another location, and it’s a day trip for nature lovers, is on the east branch of the **Cooper River**. Rent a kayak or canoe, put in at the **Huger Public Park** up **Highway 41**, and paddle down the river. You will find plenty of old rice fields and the aged pilings from earlier docks. The river itself, brackish water producing mirror-like reflections, will leave you wondering which is top and which is bottom in your final photographs. The earlier in the morning you can make the trip, the better.

Sample photographs of old rice fields can be found in my book *The Plantations of St. Bartholomew’s Parish*.





Sweetgrass Basket Weavers

The African-American sweetgrass basket makers of the Lowcountry maintain a cultural tradition that harkens back to their makers' pre-slavery roots in Sierra Leone. It remains a unique art form, passed down through the generations, practiced exclusively along the American southeastern coast. Sweetgrass baskets and the women who make them have become almost an iconic symbol of Charleston. You'll find the ladies selling their sweetgrass baskets at **Meeting and Broad** streets, in the **City Market**, and at roadside stands along **Highway 17** north (leaving Mt. Pleasant). But the right approach is essential. Many of these African-American basket makers are reluctant to have their photographs taken, unless you make a purchase first and kindly ask permission. If you do neither, you're likely to receive a scowl, even a hand or towel raised to cover their faces. These ladies are dedicated artists, and they deserve to be respected.

"The most important thing is not clicking the shutter... it is clicking with the subject."

– Alfred Eisenstaedt