

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- We're at Middleton Place outside of Charleston. And I'm with Bob Sherman, who is the cooper and the carpenter. Why was woodworking such an important part of life here?

- Well, of course, a huge part of the rice production. We know of the millions of pounds of rice shipped from Charleston, say for instance, 1775, almost 85 million pounds. A single barrel of rice, 500 pounds. So 500 into 85 million, it's a lot of barrels.

- A lot of barrels. And the barrels that you say was used for the rice was interesting because I think of barrels as having metal around them, these are different. No, well, of course, metal, a rare commodity sometimes, so cheap and simple and, Lord knows, lots of wood here. So they'd have wooden sapling staves, easy to build, easy to take apart as well. Really, these barrels, I like to call them the cardboard box of their day.

- So they were recyclable?

- Very much so. That's nothing new.

- And you've got this kind of horse thing you can sit on to work. So explain how to make a stave.

- Well, of course, you're starting out with timber that you're going to rive or split out. You have to shape it by hand. And you'd use what's called a shaved horse, where you sit on it like a horse, straddle it, and then you use your draw and knife to shape your stave. Because of course, a barrel has to be rounded.

And you just have bunches of square pieces.
It's just not going to work, so you have to round your sides and round the inner part of the barrel

and then fit it all together like a giant jigsaw puzzle to some degree. And using a little bit of heat and a little bit of wet and a little bit of good luck, you can drive it all together.

- You've got this funny little thing that looks like maybe a hand warmer for a cold day. How did that help you?

- That's what the coopers call a cresset.

- A cresset.

- A cresset. And it would be placed down. And once you and your barrel begun and once you have the puzzle half done, you would finish it, you would tighten it all down, of course, wood when it's wet and warm, it can be steamed and bent. And the cresset would supply the heat as you form it and fit it and tighten it all together. We think we're pretty crafty individuals but folks back in the day, they knew a few things too. So lots of interesting and odd sort of tools you find in coopering.

- Also I've learned about something called a piggin. And it sounds like an early measuring cup.

- Pretty much. Pretty much. We use words like bushel today pretty commonly. But they would have words like tunne or hogshead or pipe, which were all measured amounts that folks knew. And so a piggin-- and they had different kinds of piggins-- but they would be used much like a measuring cup but the handle built right in to give it extra strength and stability. And again, they just can't simply go out to the general store or the Home Depot, what have you, and pick up all these different tools. They'd have to make a lot of these things.

- All of this was here because of rice. And you would you have been involved in creating the trunks?

- Oh very much so. I mean, you've got millions of acres of rice

under cultivation. The whole water system, there's no PVC pipes so, of course, they'd be making these trunks. And they knew the properties of wood, like for instance, cypress, very rot resistant. So they can make a lot of these things using woods particular for those purposes.

And these slaves would be expert at pre-fabricating these trunks to pass water between rice fields and the river or the cypress swamps and the rice fields, putting them in, maintaining them. One historian has said the work it took to build the rice fields here in South Carolina before the 1750s is like taking the labor that built the Great Pyramids of Egypt and spreading it along the low country.

- And the grandeur that's here at Middleton Place, to me, is equal to that of the Great Pyramids.

- Very much so.

- Thank you for spending this time with us today.

- Oh, thank you.

- We're going to come back some time and go down and see those rice fields.

- Appreciate you coming out.

[MUSIC PLAYING]