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INTRODUCTION

THE DECADES preceding and following the American Revolution constituted a revolutionary period for the black and white communities of the American South. The era involved two separate but related processes. The first, the actual conflict of the 1760s–1780s, was a period of prolonged crisis marked by social and economic upheaval and loosening of the fabric of community life. The lingering state of crisis and anxiety that followed the end of hostilities produced a second, or quiet, revolution that continued through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Together, the two revolutions produced a great torrent of historical change: the destruction of the old colonial empire and the emergence of a new political order; the shift of the population center, and hence, of political gravity; the collapse of the old economic system and the gradual rise of a new staple crop economy and new patterns of labor use; the end of slavery in the North and of the transatlantic slave trade, and the formulation of a new ideological basis for the domination of slaves in the South and the developing Southwest; the decline of the old Anglican church establishment and the emergence of a new religious configuration. When the rushing waters of change subsided at last, community life in the South flowed in two streams: a white slaveholders' stream and a black slaves' stream, each with its own values, its separate way of life.

When analyzing the causes of the revolutionary war and assessing its consequences, most historical studies emphasize the seminal role of slavery. Few recognize the vital role played by slaves in the entire series of events that made up the great drama. Research in British military records made it clear to me that slave resistance during the revolutionary conflict was far more extensive than had hitherto been recognized and that significant aspects of that resistance remained essentially unexplored. Building and expanding upon the earlier works of Herbert Aptheker and Benjamin Quarles, I began to focus my attention on slave resistance and to ask of the sources, both British and American, public and private, a number of questions. What forms did slave resistance take? Was it individual more than collective? Was it gender specific? What were the conditions affecting slave resistance? What were the sources of resistance? Was there a connection between the ideology of equality and freedom and slave resistance? Were there continuities or adaptations of African patterns of resistance? Did the British army create slave resistance or was resistance already there? Was there, perhaps, a dialectical relationship between slave resistance and Britain's Southern strategy and between slave resistance and the white inde-

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pendence movement in the South? Did wartime slave resistance alter the environment of slavery? Did it endanger slavery?

Although the black liberation movement did not achieve its revolutionary goals, it did exert deep pressure on the slave system, which required energetic response or adjustment in the postwar period. The postwar period seemed to me to be a time of transition from an older prewar world of values and structures to a new, objectively different situation, which provided the framework for the subsequent development of a mature plantation society. In attempting to understand the direction and dynamics of change, I singled out three spheres of life in which the transformations seemed especially significant—the economy, the law, and religion. To them I addressed a second set of questions. Were the social and economic structures of postwar slave society significantly different from the prewar period? What was the precipitating force behind the emergence of a durable ethos of racial superiority? Did the revolutionary war experience alter the nature and scale of black resistance? Did ideology influence slave resistance in a manner that was different from that in earlier periods? Did the spread of evangelical religion in the postwar period produce changes in the character of slavery, or major qualitative changes in the lives of slaves, or in the patterns of race relations? What did Christianity mean to slaves? What did it do to them and for them? What was the social function of religion in the black community?

As I began to map overall patterns, two major themes emerged: a black liberation movement was central to the revolutionary struggle in the South, and the failure of that movement did not dissipate the black revolutionary potential, which reemerged in the postwar period as a struggle for cultural power. It is to these subjects that *Water from the Rock* seeks to contribute.

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