Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America
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Lots of slaves what was brung over from Africa could fly. There was a crowd of them working in that field. They don’t like it here and they think they go back to Africa. One by one they fly and all fly off and gone back to Africa.
– Jack Tattnall, from oral history collected from former slaves, 1930s; included in Drums and Shadows, 1940.

The African Negro, introduced as a slave into Virginia in 1619, had been a part of the plantation life of the older colonies of America for more than a century before the Colony of Georgia was founded in 1733. Almost two decades passed before the Trustees of Georgia legalized Negro slavery. Thus it was the middle of the eighteenth century before Georgia became an open market for slaves.

By this time certain land restrictions had been removed and the consequent development of large plantations, for which the Negro was an economic necessity, greatly stimulated the slave market. During these early years the plantations that developed in the tidewater regions of coastal Georgia planted principally rice, a wet culture necessitating a high percentage of Negro laborers. Later, as additional acres of adjoining higher ground were planted in sugar cane and cotton, the demand for slaves persisted.

For more than a hundred years (1750-1858) this demand steadily increased, and it was the common habit to dump from 300 to 400 “prime Africans” on the Savannah market. Under these conditions Georgia, and more particularly the coastal region, was being supplied with Africans when much of older America was already sufficiently supplied or oversupplied with native born slaves bred for the domestic trade. Thus in many regions the long period of white contact was beginning to obscure tribal customs when Africans were being brought in great numbers to Georgia soil.

Although in 1798 the Georgia Constitution prohibited slave importation directly from Africa and in 1808 the Federal Constitution made the African slave trade unlawful, the favorable topography of the Georgia coast encouraged smuggling. The tidewater coastline and large navigable rivers penetrating for miles into the interior facilitated the landing of cargo. Consequently illegal slave traffic flourished in this region until 1858, when the slave ship Wanderer landed its cargo on Georgia soil.

-Introduction excerpt, Drums and Shadows

When ex-slaves were interviewed by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s, the subject of suicide rarely surfaced. Exceptions to this silence about slave self-destruction came from the particular region of the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands where ex-slaves and their children related stories similar to the one quoted above by Jack Tattnall. Stories focused on Africans who literally had the power to fly, escaping enslavement. The flying African folktale has historical roots in an 1803 collective suicide by newly imported slaves. A group of Middle Passage survivors, Ebos from Nigeria, were sold in Savannah to families living on the nearby island of St. Simon. While on a boat bound for St. Simon’s Island, the Africans overtook many of their captors, throwing them overboard where they drowned. The Africans then drowne themselves in what is believed to be a deliberate, collective suicide. When they reached land, the Ebo chief began chanting, “The Sea brought me and the Sea will bring me home.” There was no questioning the chief’s decisions. They all began chanting together. Chained one to the other, they refused to walk into a life of slavery and instead turned and followed their chief into the water. The site of their fatal immersion is named Ebos Landing.