### Lesson 4 *The Southern Colonies*

Forced Labor and Carolina Rice Plantations

Background Information

You know the word *labor* means “work,” but to an economist, the word has a different meaning. To an economist, *labor* is “the total human effort used to produce a good or service.”

In colonial South Carolina, the most important good was rice. And almost all of the labor that produced that rice was slave labor.

Slaves were kidnapped in Africa, often by members of rival tribes. Slave traders would sail to Africa and buy the enslaved people. The traders would then chain them into slave ships for a long, miserable journey to America. There, the enslaved Africans were sold again—to plantation owners to work on the rice plantations.

The value of the labor provided by the enslaved Africans was enormous. Rice required a great deal of labor to grow. Fields had to be cleared. Elaborate irrigation systems had to be constructed and maintained. Only then could the rice be planted, tended, harvested, and processed. The whole process of producing a crop of rice involved huge amounts of human labor.

Moreover, the slaves from Africa provided the *knowledge* of all of these steps. Most South Carolina plantation owners had no idea how to grow rice properly. But certain groups from the rice-growing areas of Africa did. Thus, enslaved people from Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa were especially prized. In fact, the area from which they were kidnapped was known as the “Rice Coast.”

Rice growing in South Carolina started in about 1700. Within ten years, the population of African slaves *exceeded* the population of Europeans there. Half the total wealth of the colony’s white settlers was measured in slaves. One historian has calculated that, on average, each slave on rice plantations created about $1,000 of income a year. That amount of money in the 1700s would be worth about 30 times that amount today.

Most of South Carolina's rice exports went to England. Rice brought in a great deal of money, and it made South Carolina one of the wealthiest colonies. The city of Charleston (then Charles Town) was a rich and fashionable city. It was also a bustling seaport. Ships loaded with rice for sale in England set sail from Charleston. Ships loaded with an altogether different cargo—kidnapped human beings—sailed to Charleston from Africa. These enslaved Africans were cruelly treated, and they were forced into a lifetime of using their knowledge and their labor to fill the outbound ships with the source of wealth for the slaveholders.



**Directions:**Answer the following questions.

**1. Defining**According to economists, what is “labor”?

**2. Identifying**Who supplied the labor for South Carolina’srice plantations?

**Critical Thinking**

**3. Evaluating**Do you think South Carolina could havebecome prosperous and successful without slave labor?