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# Sumptuary Synergy: British Imperialism Through the Tartan and Slave Trades


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## Sumptuary Synergy: British Imperialism Through the Tartan and Slave Trades

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### Introduction

Sumptuary laws have been a useful tool for various national powers in regulating subjects and to promote class differentiation and business interests.<sup>1</sup> The genesis of this study was one such law, entitled the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735, stipulating that slave garments could only be made of low-quality textiles. These fabrics were reflective of slaves living in chattel environments, thus also representing a slave's status in society. This law forbade slaves from wearing "any sort of garment or apparel whatsoever, finer, other or of greater value than Negro cloth, duffels, coarse kerseys, osnabrigs, blue linen, check linen, or coarse garlix, or calicoes, checked cottons or Scottish plaids."<sup>2</sup> As most of the textiles listed in the law were somewhat generic and manufactured in several places, it was interesting to the authors that those who crafted the law were more specific to incorporate "Scottish plaids" as one of the acceptable textiles for slave clothing.

Textiles were one of the pillars of England and colonial America's slave trading economy.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the American Colonies had become one of England's greatest customers, as they represented a distinct piece of what has been termed the "Triangular Trade." Gold bullion and manufactured goods left England bound for India's textile manufacturing centers and also to Western Africa's slave trading centers. These economic inputs provided the fuel necessary to procure goods, such as, inexpensive Indian Madras textiles and humans/slaves, which would then leave India and Africa bound for the plantations of the United States and Caribbean islands.<sup>4</sup> Ships returning from the Americas to England would then supply raw materials, such as sugar and cotton, to fuel English industries, thus completing the cycle. By 1773, America would consume approximately one quarter of products that were made in England.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ruthann Robson. "Beyond Sumptuary: Constitutionalism, Clothes, and Bodies in Anglo-American Law, 1215-1789," *Brit. J. Am. Legal Stud.* 2 (2013): 477.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 265.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ruthann Robson. "Beyond Sumptuary: Constitutionalism, Clothes, and Bodies in Anglo-American Law, 1215-1789," *Brit. J. Am. Legal Stud.* 2 (2013): 503.

Potential for disruption of the chain of production and consumption, due to revolution in the American colonies, was a real concern in the years preceding America's break from its English rulers.<sup>6</sup> In 1769, Virginia politician and plantation owner George Mason wrote to George Washington to express his concern over the delicate and symbiotic balance of trade between England and the American colonies:

Our supplying our Mother-Country with gross materials, and taking her manufactures in return is the true chain of connection between us; these are the bands, which, if not broken by oppressions, must long hold us together, by maintaining a constant reciprocation of interest.<sup>7</sup>

However, Mason was not the only individual concerned with the continuation of trade with England. Disputes between the American colonies and England gave rise to the possibility that they may become separate entities, which would lead to disruption or discontinuation of trade. Americans who relied on slave labor as a means to run plantations expressed specific concern over cessation of the textile trade. While writing to South Carolina plantation owner Henry Laurens, colonial politician Ralph Izzard noted, "[should] our disputes with England continue, which I am inclined to think, they will" [it would become] "necessary for us to think of the means of clothing our negroes."<sup>8</sup> Mr. Laurens may have had a vested interest in such matters, as he was close associates with Scotsman Richard Oswald, who was the owner of The Royal African Company, one of the major slave-trading institutions in West Africa.<sup>9</sup>

#### Scotland's Role in the Trade

Scotland served an important role in the United Kingdom's Triangular Trade. Coulter's paper *The Import Trade of Colonial Virginia* details Scotland's production of both tartan and osnaburg fabrics for consumption in the American colonies for both consumers and slaves. Osnaburgs that were manufactured in Glasgow were less expensive than German varieties, and these were used as slave clothing in warmer weather.<sup>10</sup> Faiers delves deeper into Scotland's role in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 504.

<sup>8</sup> White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave clothing and African-American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Past & present* 148 (1995): 165.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 274.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin B. Coulter "The import trade of colonial Virginia," *The William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History* (1945): 298.

transatlantic trade by making note of those individuals who were involved in the exchange textiles for slaves.<sup>11</sup>

The Royal African Company, based on Bance Island in Sierra Leone represented one such endeavor. The company was founded in 1672 and was the recipient of a royal charter that granted it complete control of Britain's trading of slaves between Africa and the Americas. Despite its monopoly, the company was riddled with inefficiencies.<sup>12</sup> In 1748, Scotsman Richard Oswald, along with Londoners Alexander Grant, and Augustus Boyd, purchased the Royal African Company and as a result slave and textile trade activities intensified.<sup>13</sup>

A person traveling to Bance Island detailed how the Scot's involvement in trading of slaves and textiles were outwardly signified when he noted that he knew "that he was amongst a parcel of slave traders, for besides they're cursing and swearing, they all had on checked shirts, a black handkerchief from the neck and another around the waist, all insignia of the bloody traffic in human flesh."<sup>14</sup> In fact, these checked fabrics were observed on both the slavers and the slaves. Faiers notes that it is likely that the "check shirts" mentioned were in fact tartan, which provides evidence that slave traders used tartan fabrics to clothe both themselves and their slaves.

Documentation supports the possible link between traditional Scottish textiles and slave dress. Escaped slave notices have been utilized by researchers in the past to generate an account of slaves' appearance, as there are no surviving archival slave garments to reference.<sup>15</sup> An escaped slave advertisement quoted in White, et al. that was posted in the Virginia Gazette proclaimed:<sup>16</sup>

"new Negroe Man . . . imported this Summer", and unable to tell "who he belongs to," had on, when he went away, "a new strong Oznabrig Shirt, a blue Pennystone Waistcoat, sew'd up the Sides, the whole Breadth of the Cloth, and a new Scotch Bonnet"

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 274.

<sup>12</sup> Ann M. Carlos and Jamie Brown Kruse. "The decline of the Royal African Company: fringe firms and the role of the charter1," *The Economic History Review* 49, no. 2 (1996): 291.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 274.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>15</sup> Eulanda A. Sanders. "The Politics of Textiles Used in African American Slave Clothing," (2012). Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings. Paper 740: 269.

<sup>16</sup> White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave clothing and African-American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Past & present* 148 (1995): 151.

As researchers, we were compelled to analyze the link between Scots operating in the Triangular Trade and the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735, due to our discovery of the following: (a) documentation that Scottish slavers and slaves may have worn items made of tartan, (b) sumptuary laws that were used by the British to promote industries and subjugate particular groups, and (c) the South Carolina Negro Act's specific mention of Scottish plaids. Our primary research questions were: (a) Who were the key players in the British slave trade?, (b) What were the prominent British and Scottish shipping routes for trading in textiles and slaves?, and (c) Is there a positive correlation between the number of slaves traded and the amount of textiles imported to the United States by the British and Scots?

### Sumptuary Laws

In order to understand the reasons for utilizing tartan to support imperialism through commercial activities, one must first define the usage of clothing, created from textiles, as a form of subjugation, which usually manifests itself in terms of sumptuary laws.<sup>17</sup> Such laws are usually framed in terms of supporting moral ideals, and subsequently the definition of what is moral tends to vary depending on social class and rank. However, the simple definition of sumptuary laws is that they relegate dress in order to forward a political or social agenda.

England has a long tradition supporting sumptuary laws. Such laws originated in 1215 with the Magna Carta that regulated types and widths of cloth available to consumers, and stated "There shall also be a standard width of dyed cloth, susset, and haberject, namely two ells within the selvedges."<sup>18</sup> As a society's economics interrelates with politics, such laws can be used to support and protect trade. In 1333, under King Edward III, English Parliament passed a law to ban imports of textiles, and to encourage industrial workers with skills to immigrate to England in order to promote and fortify the domestic textile trade.<sup>19</sup>

During the period of 1514 to 1533, English Parliament passed a number of sumptuary laws that worked toward differentiating class status within English society. Most notably, these laws related to fur and color usage, as purple was the color of royalty and fur was indicative of elevated social status. A group of broad sweeping laws was passed by Elizabeth I in 1580, and was dubbed The Laws Enforcing Statutes of the Apparel.<sup>20</sup> The purposeful enactment of such laws by the British government is quite apparent in the period 1735 to 1745, as both The South Carolina Negro Act and the Disarming Act in Scotland were put into place in order to assert dominance over groups that were perceived as less than.

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<sup>17</sup> Ruthann Robson. "Beyond Sumptuary: Constitutionalism, Clothes, and Bodies in Anglo-American Law, 1215-1789," *Brit. J. Am. Legal Stud.* 2 (2013): 478.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

In their paper entitled *Slave Clothing and African American Culture*, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, White et al. note that the creators of the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 were attempting to address slaves who wore “clothes a notch above the conditions of slaves, for the procuring where of the use sinister and evil methods.”<sup>21</sup> Much like the earlier laws cited, it is apparent that the 1735 South Carolina Law was aimed directly towards reinforcing the mindset that slaves know their place in society, and dress was an outward indicator of social class and rank.<sup>22</sup>

A decade later, on the other side of the Atlantic, the British enforced the Disarming Act, which was a reaction to the 1745 Jacobite uprising in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> The Act stipulated that all articles of Highland dress, including kilt and tartan, were not to be donned in any form. The only exceptions to the Law were the Highland Regiments who were engaged in imperial conflicts for Britain.<sup>24</sup> The British saw the Highlanders in Scotland as subhuman, and the 1745 Jacobite uprising was the last straw in a series of conflicts. Through the act, Britain stripped away Highlanders’ last vestige of culture and dignity. This act was rolled out simultaneously with ethnic cleansings and mass deportations from the Highland areas of Scotland.

Researchers admit that the enforcement of sumptuary laws is quite problematic, as such laws were not viewed as a priority to officials responsible for following through them.<sup>25</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, engaging in the wearing of illegal dress items was seen as a method of usurping tyrannical laws and asserting the wearer’s status in society or continuation of compliance with traditions. Through analysis of various archival data, Hamilton noted that clerics and others that were assigned to the Scottish Highlands in various capacities observed Highlanders continuing to wear kilt and tartan after the enforcement of the Disarming Act.<sup>26</sup> White et al. note very similar occurrences after the enforcement of the 1735 South Carolina Negro Act. In White et al.’s

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<sup>21</sup> White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave clothing and African-American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Past & present* 148 (1995): 159.

<sup>22</sup> Eulanda A. Sanders. "The Politics of Textiles Used in African American Slave Clothing," (2012). Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings. Paper 740: 269.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Martin. "Transmutations Of The Tartan: Attributed Meanings To Tartan Design," Proceedings of the First Symposium of the Textile Society of America, Minneapolis, MN, September 16-18, 1988: 53.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 259.

<sup>25</sup> Jean A. Hamilton. "Mass fashion as threat in context and concept," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (1991): 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

analysis of slave escape notices, it became apparent that slaves were resolute in their contestation of the Act, which involved wearing textile and apparel items that were out of compliance.<sup>27</sup>

### Method

Data for the present study were generated utilizing the Emory University database *www.slavevoyages.org*, which provides an interactive resource to search slave trading voyages and cargo, and is compiled from documentary sources, newspapers, published sources, and private notes and collections. The database provides granular detail on specific flag sailed under, ship names, ship owners, ship captains, cargo, numbers of slaves carried, and departure and arrival locations. A search utilizing the database was conducted with the following criteria: (a) ships that sailed under the British flag, and (b) ships sailing during the years 1735-1833 (as we realized that the British transatlantic slave trade did not exist after 1833). The data set was then sub-sorted to determine which port in the American colonies was the most prevalent for these ships as a port-of-call. It was established that 755 ships landed in the American colonies, and that 58% of these ships landed in South Carolina. Once it was determined that South Carolina was the main destination for ships meeting the above criteria, these ships' data was extracted and sub-sorted once again to verify ship owners.

As East India Company ships were chartered from private owners for specific voyages, it is virtually impossible to parse out which missions would have been linked to the slave trade. However, the database of Port Cities Bristol notes that the most well known of all of the East India Company ships was *The Africa*. In 1774, *The Africa* carried textiles from India to Africa in exchange for slaves, and also made a call in Britain to sell Indian checked fabrics. According to the Emory database, the ship made a total of 9 landings in the Port of Charleston during the years 1744-1772. Subsequently, an ad in the South Carolina Gazette announced a variety of Indian goods to be sold, and documentation from *The Africa*'s log book verifies that there were Indian textiles brought to South Carolina for sale, which would most likely have been in conjunction with a slave voyage.<sup>28</sup>

Of the 437 British ships that landed in South Carolina during the period of 1735-1807, 330 ships could be identified by record of ship name, ship captain, and ship owner. Twelve different ships owned by The Royal African Company landed in Charleston, were known to carry slaves and textiles. All these ships were identified as being owned by either Richard Oswald, Alexander Grant, or Augustus Boyd. Of the 12 ships, there were 54 landings in the period 1754-1785, which accounted for 16% of the total landings in the Port of Charleston. These metrics prove that The Royal African Company and its owners represented a significant interest in slave and textile trade to the American colonies.

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<sup>27</sup> White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave clothing and African-American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Past & present* 148 (1995): 185.

<sup>28</sup> "Page From the Account Book," *portcitiesbristol.com*, accessed September 8, 2017. <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/browse/slavery/page-from-the-accounts-book/>.

## Timeline and Key Players

From its earliest inception, the British slave trade was cultivated in order to provide workers for the Mother Country's global industries, and explorations began as small enterprises.

| 1562                         | 1600                              | 1640               | 1748                                  | 1799                    | 1807                          | 1813                       | 1833   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| John Hawkins' Initial Voyage | <b>East India Company</b> Founded | Slaves to Barbados | <b>Royal African Company</b> Acquired | British Slave Trade Act | British Slave Trade Abolished | East India Company Limited | Use of Slave Labor in British Territories Outlawed |

*Figure 1. Timeline of British slave trading.*

The British had witnessed the success that the Portuguese had in such endeavors, and began to dabble in 1562 (Fig 1) when John Hawkins launched a hand full of voyages to Africa, which proved to be quite lucrative. Investors in those voyages made 200% profit on their original investment.<sup>29</sup> The formalization of the triangular trade occurred in 1600, when the East India Company was founded, and textiles from India comprised the greatest in exchange for slaves.<sup>30</sup> The Royal African Company was also well known to traffic both slaves and tartan textiles. It has been recounted slaves located on the Island were clothed in tartan as a device to claim ownership.<sup>31</sup> In 1799 the British Government enacted legislation that relegated slave trading to a handful of ports in England; those being Bristol, Liverpool, and London.<sup>32</sup> In 1807, the British Government abolished the trading of slaves, and subsequently in 1813, the East India Company's trading activities were severely curtailed and limited to Asia. Finally, in 1833 all use of slaves in all British territories was outlawed.

During the period of slave trading, over 2.7 million slaves were imported into North and South America and the Caribbean. Charleston, South Carolina was the largest location of imported slaves with almost 110,000 slaves in total (Fig 2).

<sup>29</sup> "The South West Ports of England," *portcitiesbristol.com*, accessed September 8, 2017. <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/routes/places-involved/britain/south-west-ports/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Suppliers to the Trade," *portcitiesbristol.com*, accessed September 8, 2017. <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/people-involved/traders-merchants-planters/slave-economy/suppliers/>

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 275.

<sup>32</sup> "British Law and the Slave Trade," *portcitiesbristol.com*, accessed September 8, 2017. <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/routes/places-involved/britain/british-law/>



| <b>South Carolina</b> |                 |                   |   |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---|
|                       | <b>Beaufort</b> | <b>Charleston</b> | <b>South Carolina, port unspecified</b> |
| 1731-1735             | 0               | 4153              | 0                                       |
| 1736-1740             | 280             | 13760             | 0                                       |
| 1741-1745             | 0               | 1009              | 0                                       |
| 1746-1750             | 0               | 2147              | 0                                       |
| 1751-1755             | 0               | 6628              | 905                                     |
| 1756-1760             | 0               | 15046             | 360                                     |
| 1761-1765             | 0               | 15804             | 0                                       |
| 1766-1770             | 0               | 6802              | 0                                       |
| 1771-1775             | 0               | 20770             | 0                                       |
| 1776-1780             | 0               | 0                 | 356                                     |
| 1781-1785             | 177             | 5901              | 212                                     |
| 1786-1790             | 0               | 51                | 0                                       |
| 1791-1795             | 0               | 0                 | 0                                       |
| 1796-1800             | 0               | 45                | 0                                       |
| 1801-1805             | 0               | 7895              | 0                                       |
| 1806-1810             | 119             | 7328              | 0                                       |
| <b>Totals</b>         | <b>576</b>      | <b>107339</b>     | <b>1833</b>                             |

*Figure 2. Numbers of African slaves imported to South Carolina. (Generated on slavevoyages.org by the authors)*

This number is comparable to the total number of slaves imported into Barbados, which was one of the leading areas in the Caribbean for the British slave trade. Hence, it was confirmed that South Carolina should be the primary focus of the present inquiry; all other areas in the American colonies paled in comparison to the number of slaves imported to South Carolina, and the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 was enacted there.

### **Slave Trading Routes**

The present research focused on connecting those British and Scottish individuals who traded in slaves and textiles to the South Carolina colony. It is important to point out that there was a uniform pathway for ships to cross the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to North America, dubbed “The Middle Passage,” which ran from Western Africa to the Caribbean and North America. Merchants brought textiles from both Britain and India to exchange with African slavers, then slaves were transported to North America and the Caribbean.

The following is a map generated from the Emory database that represents ships meeting the criteria described in the methods section (Fig 3), which illustrates that these vessels all followed the Middle Passage route. As is apparent when culling out voyages to Charleston and applying it to the map, it becomes more obvious that the Caribbean was the main destination for British ships carrying slaves from West Africa; however, Charleston was the primary port of call for these ships in the American colonies.



Figure 3. Routes for British slave ships 1735-1833. (Generated on slavevoyages.org by the authors)

### A Synergy

After the unification of Scotland and England in 1707, there were a variety of uprisings by pro-Scottish factions, who were called Jacobites, as they were supporters of the Scottish Stuart family, and aimed to reinstate King James VII to the throne. These uprisings were termed the Jacobite Rebellion, and reached a peak in 1745 when British and Jacobite forces clashed in the Battle of Culloden, where the Jacobites were finally defeated.<sup>33</sup> In order to deal with the unrest, Britain began a series of ethnic cleansings in the Scottish Highlands in conjunction with Scottish lairds who owned most of the lands. This process involved seizing farmlands and reassigning ownership, and deporting individuals characterized as insurgents to North America.<sup>34</sup> During this time, it is estimated that 50,000 Scottish immigrants landed in North Carolina. This migration of civilians was supplemented by the deployment of Highland Regiments to America during the Seven Years' War,<sup>35</sup> and soldiers in the regiments were offered to settle in North America after

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Martin Devine. *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Mackenzie. *The Story of the Highland Clearances* (Midlothian, Scotland: LangSyne Publishers, 2012), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Martin Devine. *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 27.

their service, thereby fortifying the infusion of Scots in the colonies, who brought their tartan textile traditions with them.<sup>36</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, the base of slaving operations in West Africa were intensified, through Scotsman Richard Oswald's acquisition of The Royal African Company in Sierra Leone. Again, recorded observations note that tartan was worn both by the slavers and the slaves. Almost simultaneously, Britain advanced into India, situating its Scottish 78th Highlands regiment in Madras. Faiers notes that Scottish soldiers brought with them Highland Dress and tartan designs, which were highly inspirational to textile workers in Madras.<sup>37</sup> The workers in Madras were motivated to incorporate check or plaid textile layouts that closely resemble tartan, which were then exported to Africa, Britain, and America by the East India Company.

These simultaneous large deportations, business ventures, and military operations that occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century resulted in a large number of British and Scottish plantation operators and overseers in the areas of North America and the West Indies. As previously noted, tartan designs diffused into Indian textiles due in part to Scottish military units occupying the area and bringing design inspiration for workers in Madras with them. The business activities of entities like the East India Company and the Royal African Company, who traded in a variety of goods including slaves and textiles, ensured that goods were plentiful and created a consumer base for products (including tartan-inspired Madras fabrics) being produced, which included both free citizens and slaves.

### Summary

One approach to prove the existence of a synergy between British and Scottish slave trade and textile production is to connect companies who traded in both textile and slaves to North America. Linking the prominent slave trade business of the Royal African Company and the East India Company with large ports, such as, Charleston furthers the notion that Britain created a synergistic system of both production and consumption, supported by sumptuary laws like the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735. The present study is significant, in that it adds to the body of knowledge concerning British involvement in the trading of both slaves and textiles during the colonial period.

However, the current research did not analyze records from specific ships to determine whether the cargo contained slaves, textiles, or a combination of both. Further research could include analysis of primary data sources, such as ships' manifests, British and Indian archival export records, consular dispatches from the Port of Charleston, and personal communications, in an effort to determine if the ships identified in this study carried both slaves and textiles. In addition, research could be expanded to examine The Royal African Company and Richard Oswald's connections to other ports in the American colonies and the West Indies. Also, it may be beneficial to complete an analysis of slave narratives and runaway slave notices for Scottish

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Faiers. *Tartan* (Berg Publishers & The Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 260.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

plaids, checks, and other similar terms, along with the experiences of the slaves wearing these textiles, as this would lead to a greater understanding of the pervasiveness of tartan usage and its role in slave dress and the slave trade.

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Eulanda A. Sanders, Ph.D. is Professor and Chair of the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University. She also holds the Donna R. Danielson Endowed Professorship in Textiles and Clothing, where she teaches Apparel, Merchandising and Design. Her research and creative scholarship foci: include historical meanings of African American appearance, knit wear production, wearable art, material reuse, and computer-aided design technologies. Sanders has exhibited 68 designs in juried exhibitions, mentored 60 student designs in juried exhibitions, given 85 refereed research and teaching presentations, and presented over 60 workshops and lectures. In 2006, she was a Fulbright Scholar to India.