Fort Sumter / Explore the Setting

What was it like to stand on the parapets at Fort Sumter and look around in the 1860s? What would you see? Take a look at these maps to get a sense of the geography of the Charleston, South Carolina area. One shows the view of Charleston from the sea looking inland; the other looks out from the city to the ocean.

How do you think the geography of the area affected Charleston, and the lives of its residents? As many people say, "geography is destiny." Test your understanding of the ways geography can shape a city and the lives of its people with this quick quiz.

Select true of false for each of these statements:

1. If you were a wealthy merchant, Charleston was a good place to set up a shipping company to move goods like cotton, textiles, and manufactured goods in or out of the South.
[True/False button]

2. The experience of being enslaved was the same if your owner lived in the city of Charleston or if you lived on a plantation 20 miles from town.
[True/False button]

3. While Fort Sumter was a big deal when it was built, by the time of the Civil War it wasn't that critical to the defense of the Charleston area, or of the country.
[True/False button]

4. The low-lying, marshy lands around the coast were good places to cultivate rice, while inland the rich soil of the plateau supported cotton growing.
[True/False button]

5. Charleston never could get very big because it was hard to build roads and bridges for transportation around the area.
[True/False button]

Answer pop-ups:

1. TRUE: Located near the Atlantic coast at the mouth of two major rivers, the Ashley and the Cooper, Charleston was an excellent meeting-point for goods coming from the southern US via rivers and railroads, from the northern US via the Atlantic coast, and from across the Atlantic.

2. FALSE: Geography shaped the experience of slavery just like it did many other factors of the city's life. People enslaved in urban settings like Charleston were likely to work as domestic servants or as skilled workers, or as porters in the city's shipyards, and they were more likely to live in houses that owned less than 10 slaves. By contrast, outside of the city more of the enslaved lived on large plantations that focused on producing one cash crop, such as rice or cotton.

3. FALSE: Fort Sumter remained a critical military installation, in part because of Charleston's important role as a port city (as you learned in question one). If the Confederacy controlled Sumter, it could continue to use it to trade and keep Charleston's economy going; if the Union was able to cut off Charleston from its trade partners, not only the city but the whole region of the South would suffer.

4. TRUE: Even though many people think only of cotton when they imagine slave labor in the South, Charleston's unique geography of very warm, humid, marshy lands close to the coast were excellent places for growing rice. It was probably Africans who brought rice-growing skills to South Carolina, based on their experience in growing rice in similar geographic regions of West Africa.

5. FALSE: When we look at a city today, we imagine driving around, or moving goods around in trucks. But in the 1800s, cities like Charleston were fortunate to have many water routes for moving goods and people, as water travel was often faster and more efficient than traveling over land.