

The Gullah:

Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

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Bance Island in Sierra Leone

Between about 1750 and 1800, Bance Island was one of the major slave trading operations on the Rice Coast of West Africa. Bance Island (now Bunce) is located in the Sierra Leone River about twenty miles above modern Freetown. It is a small island, only one-third of a mile long and uninhabited today, but in the days of the Atlantic slave trade it was an economically strategic point. Because Bance Island was at the limit of navigability for ocean-going vessels, it was the natural meeting place for European slave traders arriving in large sailing ships and African traders following the rivers down from the interior. As early as 1672 the Royal African Company of England established a commercial fort on Bance Island, but that company was poorly managed and abandoned its operation. Then, about 1750, the London firm of Grant, Sargent, and Oswald took control of Bance Island and made it into a commercial success. The London partners rebuilt the fort, established a shipyard, assembled a fleet of small vessels to cruise the Rice Coast in search of slaves, and expanded the African work force. They also concentrated heavily on supplying slaves to one particular market—Charlestown, South Carolina where local rice planters were eager to purchase slaves from Sierra Leone and the neighboring areas.



Bance Island in the Sierra Leone River, 1805. This slave "factory" included a "great house" for the Chief Agent, a slave yard, slave houses, storerooms, dormitories, watch towers, a jetty, and a fortification with sixteen cannons. Bance Island supplied numerous slaves to the Charlestown market in the mid- and late 18th century.

Richard Oswald was the principal partner in the London firm that operated Bance Island. About 1756, Oswald established a close personal and business relationship with Henry Laurens, one of the wealthiest rice planters and slave dealers in the Colony of South Carolina. As Laurens' papers have been preserved by the South Carolina Historical Society (and recently published), we can reconstruct the complicated business arrangements between these two men. Oswald's agents at Bance island dispatched several ships a year to Charlestown, each containing between 250 and 350 slaves and goods such as ivory and camwood (a red dyewood). Laurens advertised the slaves, then sold them at auction to local rice planters for a ten percent commission. He used the substantial earnings from the sale to buy locally produced Carolina rice which he sent to Oswald in London, together with the ivory and camwood, and often in the same ship that brought the slaves from Africa. If Oswald's ship were headed directly back to Sierra Leone, Laurens sometimes loaded ship building supplies such as masts, spars and plank-the products of South Carolina's forest industry. At times, the wealthy Laurens sent his own ship directly from Charlestown to Bance Island to obtain Sierra Leonean slaves for his expansive rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia. In a letter to Oswald, Henry Laurens once noted that slaves from Bance Island were "as advantageous as any" imported into South Carolina.

The profitable slave trade connection between Oswald and Laurens—between Sierra Leone and South Carolina—was significant enough to affect the course of American history. During the Revolutionary War Henry Laurens served as President of the Continental Congress (the provisional government) and was later appointed American envoy to Holland. Laurens was captured en route to his post by the British Navy and imprisoned in the Tower of London on a charge of high treason—the highest ranking American official ever captured during the Revolutionary War. Richard Oswald posted bail for his American business partner; and Laurens remained in London until the conclusion of the War, when he was freed in exchange for the British commander in North America. Laurens was then appointed as one of the four American Peace Commissioners who negotiated United States independence under the Treaty of Paris. But, amazingly, it was Richard Oswald who was named to head the British negotiating team, no doubt, because of his American business contacts and friendship with Laurens. United States independence was, thus, negotiated, at least in part, between a British slave trader with operations in Sierra Leone and his agent for rice-growing slaves in South Carolina. The slave trade connection, based on rice, had helped to boost both men into positions of wealth and international prominence.



Henry Laurens (1724-1792). Laurens was one of the wealthiest rice planters and slave dealers in colonial South Carolina. During the 1750s and 1760s he acted as Charlestown agent for the owners of Bance Island. Laurens later became a high-ranking American official during the Revolutionary War.

For a number of years after the Revolutionary War, American merchants could not buy slaves and goods arriving on British ships—but slaves from Sierra Leone were far too valuable in South Carolina to be turned away, and other arrangements were soon found. Reports from the 1780s show that Danish merchants were buying two thousand slaves a year at Bance Island, and during the same decade newspaper advertisements in Charlestown were announcing the arrival of Danish ships with slaves from the "Windward Coast." At "Bunce Island" today one can still find a cannon from a Danish ship dated 1780 and the grave of a Danish sea captain who died in 1783. There was money to be made by anyone who could bring slaves from Sierra Leone to South Carolina.