

Abstract from the Eighth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference
at Yale University

Slavery and Public History: An International Symposium

November 2-4, 2006
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Sierra Leone: Bunce Island and the “Gullah Connection”

Joseph Opala, James Madison University

Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/opala.pdf

Bunce Island is a slave castle located in the West African nation of Sierra Leone. During the second half of the 18th century, British slave traders based there sent thousands of African captives to South Carolina and Georgia. Rice planters in those colonies were willing to pay premium prices for Africans from Sierra Leone and other parts of the “Rice Coast,” the traditional rice-growing region of West Africa.

An American historian, I lived in Sierra Leone for 17 years, doing research on Bunce Island and teaching at that country’s Fourah Bay College. My study of Bunce Island ultimately led me to South Carolina and Georgia and to the Gullah people, African Americans living in the coastal areas of those states who have preserved more of their African cultural heritage than any other black community in the US.

When I gave lectures and radio interviews in Sierra Leone on my discoveries about the “Gullah Connection” -- the historical and cultural links between Sierra Leone and the Gullahs -- the public response was far stronger than I anticipated. Sierra Leoneans were fascinated to learn they had “lost family” on the far side of the Atlantic.

Responding to public demand for more information, I focused my research on the Gullah Connection for more than a decade. In 1988, I organized a visit by Sierra Leone’s president to a Gullah community in South Carolina. I would later organize three “Gullah Homecomings” to Sierra Leone in 1989, 1997, and 2005, each involving a tearful and dramatic encounter with Bunce Island.

My presentation describes the different reactions of Sierra Leoneans and Gullahs to learning about their historical ties. Most Sierra Leoneans received news of the Gullah Connection with pride, but some were initially hostile to this new version of their history as it threatened vested interests. Gullahs received this new information in the context of their long experience as a stigmatized culture, and used it to give respect to traditions long held up to ridicule by outsiders. Sierra Leoneans and Gullahs have both come to see Bunce Island as an historical shrine of great importance, but they have developed very different views about how the slave castle should be preserved and interpreted.