

The Haunted Castle: A Connecticut journalist's journey into the African slave trade



The yellow envelope bore a scribbled return address, and I recognized the handwriting of my former newspaper colleague, a man who gave up a steady job to write a biography of Mark Twain's best friend, Gilded Age minister Joseph Twichell. Inside the envelope was a three-page printout from a microfilm reader and a card that read, "Saw this and thought of you. Love, Steve."

Do we ever see the precise moment when life changes?

In May 2004, my newspaper buddy sent me a story published in the *Hartford Times* in January 1928, a piece he had stumbled across in the course of his own research. I was then a longtime reporter and editor at the *Hartford Courant* and under contract to coauthor a book on slavery in the North for Ballantine Books/Random House.

Between newspaper investigations and research for the book, I had been studying Connecticut's relationship with enslavement for two years, eight hours a day, and most weekends. I know there is always more to learn, but I felt confident that I understood the general outline of the story of my state.

However, this nearly eighty-year-old newspaper clipping documented something I had not expected: voyages aboard three eighteenth-century slaving ships, two that sailed from New London to the west of Africa and one voyage from West Africa to the Caribbean island of St. Kitts. The article detailed the acquisition of the ships' logs several years earlier, and described, with cheerful bonhomie, the mariners' rough lives aboard the ships. Bound together

in an eighty-page notebook or log, records of all three voyages appeared to be in the same handwriting and were made between January 1757 and August 1758.

I knew that Connecticut was a powerhouse in the West Indies trade—a story that scholars Thomas Truxes and Joseph Avitable are making clearer every day—with huge investments in exportable goods, ships for transporting those goods, and a trade system that was creating New England's first fortunes, but no one had suggested to me that my state was also on the front lines of the slaving trade or that men from the Connecticut colony were on the ground in West Africa, buying men, women, and children.

I don't know why I was so dismayed to learn about Connecticut's role in the slave trade. After all, I already knew that the colony had been sending horses, livestock, food, and lumber to Caribbean sugar plantations, which the historian Adam Hochschild has described as a system of "slaughterhouses." And I knew from months of reading eighteenth-century newspapers and court records that there was nothing benign about Connecticut's approach to enslavement. The humiliation, beatings, and killing uncertainties of life as an enslaved person anywhere were experienced in my home state, too. But the clipping revealed what seemed to me to be a much darker part of the story.

I told my editor at the newspaper that I was going to spend a morning reading the microfilm of these voyages. The accounts have been in the collections of the Connecticut State Library in Hartford since 1920, when they were acquired from a North Carolina woman prompted by financial need to sell some of her late husband's collection of maritime documents. I printed out a few pages of the log's middle voyage, which described buying slaves at a place called Bense Island.

"Show Rob," my editor said, simply. I took my small collection of pages down to Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center on Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition to show Robert Forbes, my mentor and guide and then second in command at the Gilder Lehrman Center. I could ask Rob any question, betraying my stupidity, and he would never judge me or act offended by my lack of knowledge. Instead, he would recommend reading for me in response to specific questions or scholars for me to consult.

Rob is a calm and patrician guy, but when I showed him the pages of the logbooks, he jumped from his chair, saying, "Where did you get these?" I had thought he would be familiar with my documents, but he was dazzled and began to repeat, in an amazed way, "Bense Island! Bense Island!"

In the fortuitous way that later became typical of this project, and which made me feel that God or Allah or some sort of supreme being was helping me, the world authority on Bense Island was on a National Park Service Fellowship at Yale and in the next room.

Bense Island, today called Bunce Island, is a tiny island at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River, in Sierra Leone, West Africa. It is the size of a football

field, has been abandoned for two centuries, and holds the ruins of the last slaving castle built there by the English in 1796. The jetty where the shackled Africans were shoved down to the longboats—the upriver side of the island is at the limit of navigation for the ships that came from New England and Europe to trade—is still intact. The beach is still littered with eighteenth-century detritus such as Venetian beads and cowrie shells, bits of old bottles, pipes, and ship's ballast. There are even cannon bearing the cipher of King George III, though their wooden carriages have long since rotted away.

Joseph Opala, who teaches at James Madison University, was on a fellowship at Yale to help develop a plan to explore, document, and stabilize Bunce Island.



On Bunce Island in October 2004, a tribal leader from nearby Tasso Island hacks vegetation from a wall of the last slaving fortress built on the West African island in 1796. Local people believe that Bunce Island is haunted by a devil and refuse to stay there after dark. Photograph by Tom Brown/The Hartford Courant

Trained as an anthropologist and the son of a man who fought in the Polish Resistance, Joe discovered Bunce Island just before finishing a stint in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone in the 1970s. He spent the next twenty years teaching in Sierra Leone and exploring the history of the slave trade on the Sierra Leone River. Forced out during the country's long and brutal civil war, he now returns several times a year to visit friends and his grown adopted son and to continue the work of saving Bunce Island.

Joe is sly and irreverent, a born teaser, but he went, quite literally, pale when Rob and I showed him the pages from the logbooks. "Where did you get this," he said. "I need to see the rest!"

I began to feel that I was onto something that might be, to the scholarly world, a new piece of the story, or, at least, solid illumination of something very important. Joe said he thought he had seen every piece of original paper on the island—in London, in Africa, and everywhere in between—but he didn't know about these voyages.

He and Rob were clear about what should happen next: I needed to verify the names that appeared in the texts of the logs, trace the paths of the voyages, and see if I could find other slaving ships and captains that might have sailed from New London during the same period. I needed to be sure that these ships' logs were genuine and that, although they are extremely rare, they were part of a larger story of that region's eager participation in the slaving trade.

The extraordinarily accommodating Connecticut State Library agreed to photograph the logbooks for me, so that I was able to work with a readable copy of the original. A newspaper friend who understood mid-eighteenth-century navigational techniques took a copy and plotted out the three voyages, using the longitudinal notations the log keeper made every two hours.

Benedict Arnold made the next part of my job harder because on September 6, 1781, he had burned down New London's waterfront, destroying the New London custom house and its decades of shipping records. I couldn't find the kind of consistent archival documentation I needed for my period and turned to New London newspapers of the era for those precious "Enter'd in" and "Clear'd out" listings under "Custom-House New-London." I wanted to find the names of the men in the ships' logs—perhaps at the helms of other vessels. I wanted to know whether other ships were sailing from New London to Africa.

New London's first newspaper was established in 1758, and it was a gold mine for me. Most of the ships in the customs listings were headed for the West Indies, but in just a few short weeks of research I found other men and ships heading for or returning from Africa (sometimes dying there). In the *Boston News-Letter* and other early newspapers, I found references to New London men in Africa, enough to be confident that the voyages in my logbooks weren't an anomaly.

At the same time, I spent about eight weeks, full time, researching birth, church, military, and probate records also in the collections of the Connecticut State Library. I still have not been able to nail down the identity of the log keeper, though I believe his name was Samuel Gould. The commander in the first voyage, a Middletown, Connecticut, resident named John Easton, was fully a man of the slaving trade, a man who was skilled in its practice and profited from it. I found him on slaving voyages aboard a brig called the *Pompey*, and his obituary in the *Hartford Courant* said he died of something "brief and painful." I found his will in the state archives. He was a man who loved beautiful things, and from that last inventory of "chocolat bowles" and silver swords, I could imagine the interiors of his Connecticut River home in Middletown, which was torn down during urban renewal.

I found the captain of the third logbook voyage in state records and in a series of letters at the New-York Historical Society, grouching about how no one wanted to buy his rum. These voyages, I learned, were made at what was the high-water mark of slaving for the American colonies. The trade was perfectly legal and increasingly profitable, for both South Carolina and Georgia needed

laborers to grow rice. Bunce Island, which drew captives from hundreds of miles north and south, sold people who were among the best rice growers on earth.

As I continued to learn about the world of the slaving trade and to verify details contained in the logs, a trip to Sierra Leone began to seem like the logical next step, as well as the one to which my soul was drawn. Less than five months after first reading the newspaper clipping my friend had sent, I was on a plane to Freetown, to see the long coast my narrator had described, the islands where he had provisioned his ships, and his Bunce Island.

Joe Opala, as well as a videographer and photographer, had gone over several days ahead of me to hire local men to clear the Bunce Island ruins of brush, to secure use of the boats we would need, and to make other arrangements. My newspaper, the oldest continuously published newspaper in America, old enough to have been sued by Thomas Jefferson and to have published advertisements for runaway slaves, paid for the whole thing.

You don't show up in a predominantly Muslim country during Ramadan and just start asking questions. In addition to getting immunized, securing special visas, and making the necessary preparations before visiting one of the poorest and most war-wracked countries on earth, we tried to ready ourselves mentally. We needed to build our narrative in film, words, and photographs in just a few weeks; this was an expensive trip, and there wouldn't be a chance to go back and get what we missed the first time. In a country described by the United Nations as the least livable on earth, we needed to stay healthy, to work hard, and to be compassionate and sensitive to the suffering people we encountered each day.

Joe Opala had suggested that, in addition to the dozens of Wal-Mart watches I planned to distribute as gifts, I bring copies of the ships' logs that described Bunce Island to give to local African leaders.

One afternoon on Tasso Island—where eighteenth-century slave traders had reprovisioned their ships—we were entertained by musicians, dancers, and a handsome stilt walker who climbed a tree while wearing his stilts. There are several villages on Tasso, which has neither electricity nor running water, and all the people who were able came to Sangbulima Village for the festivities. Speaking in Krio, which a villager then translated into Temne, Joe introduced me to the island's blind and ancient chief, Alimamy Rakka. Surrounded by a hundred islanders, with an inner ring of tribal leaders, I gently touched the dry, worn skin of the chief's arm and then put my hand on the pages from the log, pages which described buying slaves in April 1757.

"Dear honored sir," I said, "my country is very sorry for this, and we are not going to stop exploring until we know the whole story." I felt terribly nervous and shy, and when we got home to Hartford and saw the videotape of that moment, I could hear that my voice was shaking. I said a little more, but I don't remember the words. I do remember wanting to cry.

A little later in the ceremony, a young sub-chief in a robe and headdress of brilliant green offered to buy me. I think he was just being polite and wanted to convey that an attractive woman had come to his village, to acknowledge that in a manly way. I don't really think he wanted to buy me, but he offered the men in my party twenty cows. My translator quickly piped up that I was "a fifty-cow woman," which dissolved even the pretend negotiations in laughter.

Later that afternoon, I saw Bunce Island for the first time. As our little speedboat approached the island, I could see parts of the fortress through a scrim of trees dappled by sun. The air was chokingly hot and still, and because the island is abandoned, everything seemed very quiet. As I slid down off the side of the boat and waded ashore through the warm surf, monkeys began to scream at us from the treetops.



At a community gathering on Tasso Island in Sierra Leone, West Africa, a stilt walker performs for the villagers from around the island. While he performed, he blew repeatedly on a whistle to dispel evil spirits. During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Tasso Island served as a source of fresh food, water, and wood for slave ships from Europe and the American colonies. Photograph by Tom Brown/The Hartford Courant.

Joe Opala and I crossed the jetty and then walked up a short rise through thick vegetation. Suddenly, we were at the empty doorway that led into the fortress proper. The ruins are roofless, and trees grow up through windows and holes in the walls, but you can see the layout of the fortress—where women and children were held in an enclosure separate from the men, where captives were examined for sale, and where their armed captors sat with guns. There is a small enclosure where gunpowder was stored, and it still has its roof. In 1791, Englishwoman Anna Maria Falconbridge visited the island and saw naked men in chains crouched around a tub of rice.

I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, and the brick walls seemed to tower above me. I knew that this place of heat and buzzing insects was a place of terror and suffering and the grief of exile. From the 1680s until the end of England's involvement in the slave trade in 1808, Bunce Island was a place where human beings were sold. Unlike Cape Coast Castle or Senegal's Goree or the dozens of

slaving operations on the West African coast, the fortresses on Bunce—I visited the last one—were not converted from military or other uses. This island was always about slavery. (Because of the island's history and the fortress's extraordinary state of preservation, an international effort is underway to stabilize and protect the ruins and the island itself. The desperate poverty of current Sierra Leone, however, and the difficulty of getting to the island—one must rent a boat in Freetown—complicates every effort. Joe Opala told me very recently that the eighteenth-century cannons that once guarded the fortress are being stolen and sold for scrap metal in Malaysia.)

“Lying at Bense, taking in slaves, wood, and water,” my log keeper had written in 1757. I kept that on a slip of paper in my pocket.

A few days later, we returned to the island, and I walked to the small graveyard where white traders and mariners are buried. I saw the grave of a man mentioned in the first voyage in the log—an English slave trader named William Cleavland whose schooner had passed close enough to the *Africa* to hail the New London ship and call out that he had thirty slaves on board. Thomas Knight, an Englishman who supervised slave trading on Bunce for eighteen years, was also buried in this cemetery.

Using paper and graphite I'd brought from Connecticut, I tried to trace the words on his headstone, but the stone was rough and in the sweltering heat the graphite was melting onto my hands before I could rub it against the paper. In frustration, I pulled the paper away from Knight's worn gravestone and saw that only one word was legible: Memory.

Further Reading:

A special supplement on this trip was published in the *Hartford Courant* in April 2005. [The story, photographs, and maps](#) can be seen on its Website. For firsthand accounts of the slave trade, readers can consult John Atkins's *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil and the West Indies in His Majesty's Ships, the Swallow and Weymouth* (first published in 1735 and reprinted in London, 1970); Alexander Falconbridge's *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (first printed in 1788 and reprinted in New York, 1977); Anna Maria Falconbridge's *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone During the Years 1791, 1792, 1793* (reprinted in Liverpool, 2000); as well as Robert Harms's *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York, 2002). Scholarly descriptions of the trade include Christopher Fyfe's *Sierra Leone Inheritance* (London, 1964); Bruce Hancock's *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (New York, 1997); and Bruce Mouser's *A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica: The Log of the Sandown, 1793-1794* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002), which manages to be both a first-hand account and a scholarly book with helpful descriptions.

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