

History sleeps where footsteps tread

By **Jenny Yarborough**

Staff Writer

The ground beneath our feet breathes the history of our ancestors—places in Wilmington preserved—so the same ground

intertwine.

On Bunce Island, sit remnants of a British slave castle that operated between 1668 and 1807. Its stone walls, now crumbling and disfigured, are surpassed by the foliage and root systems of native plants masking the place where atrocities

Jacksonville, NC to Jacksonville, Fla.) and Sierra Leone is based on rice.

More of the Gullah people were sent from Bunce Island to the southeastern coast of the U.S. than anywhere else in the world.

It was well known that the Gullah of West Africa were pros when it came to rice propagation. The people of Sierra Leone knew how to grow every type of rice known to man and could grow it from the dry desert to the moist jungle. This is where the British—knowing the crop could bring wealth—came in search of slaves.

On Sunday, Feb. 21, Professor Joseph Opala of James Madison University visited the University of North Carolina Wilmington's (UNCW) Randall Library to speak on this subject, which he has dedicated the last 30 years of his life to researching.

Opala's efforts are leading to the preservation of this history, unique to two lands so far apart. He has already linked African-Americans like Isaiah Washington of "Grey's Anatomy" and Colin Powell to Bunce Island.

Opala said, the people of the Jewish Holocaust are remembered because of the photographs taken but there are no photographs to illustrate the African holocaust. For this reason, he has spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours at the castle on Bunce Island, in order to recreate its essence and capture its story for those who are such a part of it.

He has curated traveling exhibits—one for each involved state. North Carolina's has been on display in Randall Library since Feb. 1. This exhibit, purchased by the African American Heritage Foundation (AAHF) will stay at

UNCW through the end of the month and travel to various schools until the AAHF's museum is fully completed. The Bunce Island exhibit is the first unit of work purchased for the African American Heritage Museum (North Fourth and Harnett streets), said AAHF President John Battle.

Battle said, "The exhibit does not include a lot of Wilmington history but we know that there is a direct connection."

In fact, Opala said an African American by the name of Thomas Peters who escaped slavery during the American Revolution and went on to found the capital of Sierra Leone—Freetown—was born in Wilmington, N.C.

And, although most rice was grown and harvested in S.C. and Ga., we too in Wilmington, just along the Cape Fear—grew rice crops of our own.



Staff photo by Allison Breiner Potter

Professor Joseph Opala of James Madison University speaks about the history of Bunce Island, Sierra Leone and its connection to the Wilmington area on Sunday, Feb. 21, at the University of North Carolina Wilmington's Randall Library.

where the ancestors once walked and where they danced—where the brothers and sisters of the races broke apart and came together.

Within the Great Bulge of West Africa, in the small country of Sierra Leone, there is a story that lies 17 miles deep, within a harbor on an island about two city-blocks long and one city-block wide. Here, on this tiny plot of land surrounded by water is a place where African, American and European histories

ties were committed. What is left of a jetty still juts from the edge of the building into the shore. This is where nearly 30,000 Africans last set foot on their native soil—the point of no return—before being shipped across the Atlantic, where they were branded, chained to one another and purchased for their skills in the cultivation of rice.

The direct link between us, in the low country south (stretching the southeastern coastline from

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