Introduction

This report details archaeological research undertaken in conjunction with cultural resource management work on Bunce Island, Port Loko District, Sierra Leone. The European fort on the island was focus of English and then British trade in the region during the late 17th and 18th centuries. Archaeological fieldwork has been conducted in several field seasons, during 1993, 2006, 2011 and 2013. The objectives of this research were to: document the cultural resources present on the island; evaluate building foundations and roadway surfaces in preparation for stabilization of historic structures; and to evaluate sub-surface cultural resources at proposed locations for new toilet, jetty, and research facilities. Drawing on the information provided by this archaeological work, a general management plan for the island is being prepared. The archaeological data recovered also provides important baseline information on the Atlantic period trade materials and the associated archaeological record of this portion of West Africa. The research is part of the Archaeological Initiative for the Sierra Leone Estuary, an ongoing, collaborative research project focusing of the history and archaeology of coastal Sierra Leone.

Historical Background

Bunce Island is unique for several reasons, including its historical significance with regard to Sierra Leone’s intersection with the Atlantic World, its distinct connections to North America, the site’s excellent preservation, and the unique architectural features associated with the slave trade. References to Bunce Island’s role in Sierra Leone’s past are prominent in both primary and secondary historical sources and well illustrate the island’s pivotal role in the region’s history (e.g., Alie 1990; Fyfe 1962; Hancock 1997; Kup 1961). At its peak, the fort was the major European slave trading outpost on the West African coast between the Senegambia and coastal Ghana. English occupation of the island dates to the 1670s, when the English established a trading lodge. Variously known as Benns, Bens, Bunce, Bance, or George Island, the site remained British, despite periodic attacks by the French, pirates, and destruction by a slave trader (Figure 1).

Bunce Island’s apogee was during the second half of the 18th century when it was operated by two privately owned companies: Grant, Oswald & Company (1748-1784) and the Company of John & Alexander Anderson (1784-1807). Under the management of these companies the island was one of the most lucrative slave trading operations on the West African coast (see Hancock 1997: 172-214). During its 140 years of operation, the traders on Bunce Island exiled thousands of enslaved Africans to North America and the West Indies. Beginning in 1756, slaves were taken from the island to South Carolina and Georgia on a continuing basis. These historic connections contributed to the distinctive character of the Gullah Geechee Culture of the South Carolina Lowcountry (e.g., Morgan 2011; Opala 1987). Recognizing their connections with this site, African Americans from South Carolina and Georgia have made several highly publicized visits to Bunce Island. During the Revolutionary War, Bunce Island’s Charleston agent, Henry Laurens, became president of the Continental Congress and, after hostilities ended, he was one of the four
American diplomats who negotiated the United States’ independence under the Treaty of Paris. The British representative at those negotiations was none other than Richard Oswald, Laurens’ former business partner and the owner of Bunce Island (Hancock 1997: 390-396). Other prominent Americans also have ties to the island, including Presidents George Herbert Walker and George Walker Bush, whose ancestor Thomas Walker traded slaves at Bunce (Akam 2013).

Following the British prohibition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, and with the growth of Freetown, a settlement established for liberated slaves, Bunce Island’s prominence waned. The Company of John & Alexander Anderson shut down their trading operations on Bunce with British abolition. There were attempts to make the island into a plantation. It was briefly used by the British military and the island also served as a sawmill, but by the middle of the 19th century the island had passed into history. Today the island is uninhabited, a fact that has been extremely beneficial in terms of the preservation of the island’s ruins and of the other archaeological resources present. In this respect, Bunce Island is distinct from the vast majority of other European trading outposts in West Africa, which in most instances remained in use or have

Figure 1: An 18th century French view and plan of Bence (Bunce) Island adapted from William Smith 1726 (author’s collection).
been obliterated by modern settlements (see Kankpeyeng and DeCorse 2004:106-117). Bunce consequently stands as one of the best-preserved European forts in Africa. Yet, while it has been spared some of the ravages of development, there has been impact to the site due to both the environment and human activity. Today, the island is an officially protected site in the Republic of Sierra Leone. It was recently added to the World Monument Fund’s watch list of the 100 most endangered sites worldwide (see listing at www.worldmonumentswatch.org).

Cultural Features

The principal cultural features on the island relate to the fort complex located on the northern end of the island (see Figures 1 and 2; DeCorse 2007, 2011). A low knoll drops off precipitously on the northwestern, northern, and northeastern sides affording some natural defense. The outpost was captured and destroyed on several occasions by the French and once by a Welsh pirate (Fyfe 1962: 4-5, 78; Kup 1961: 55-61, 70-72,100, 107-112, 171-72). The majority of the structures likely date to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but both earlier and later features are present. The island was fortified, but the defenses were relatively modest and the garrison small compared to some of the other European outposts in West Africa (e.g., DeCorse 2010, in press; Lawrence 1963:77-78). Yet at its apogee the fort is said the have been well-fortified and considered the “best English fort on the Coast” (Fyfe 1962:7).

In addition to the fort complex, there are a number of related historic features, including a jetty, sea walls, a well, probable kiln sites, two graveyards, and material associated with a grumete (African laborers’) settlement (DeCorse 2007). Some of the shell middens present on the island may also relate to the historic use of the island. Cut timber along the island’s eastern shore likely relate to the island’s service as a lumber mill during the 19th century. Modern cultural features include a concrete jetty (probably constructed in the 1960s or 1970s), a navigation marker associated with the Pepel iron loading station, shell mounds of uncertain history, traces of a guest house, and two 20th century caretakers’ houses.

Despite the island’s preeminent role in the history of the region surprisingly few plans and detailed descriptions of the fort exist. Those that do survive provide a limited understanding of the fort’s arrangement and the organization of the associated grumete village. On one hand the plans differ in time period and quality and, on the other, it is possible some aspects of the images are derivative of earlier images rather than first hand observations by the artist. Consequently, understanding of the fort’s organization and operations must be gleaned through a combination of written records and archaeological data. The earliest description dates to the 1670s and is provided by Jean Barbot who described Bunce as a small fort built of solid stone and bricks (Barbot 1992:182, 198 fn.19). A slightly later 17th century description notes the lodge as having an eight-foot wall on the seaward side, a small stone governor’s house, and a stone slave building, as well as other structures for the garrison women, sailors and African domestic slaves (Jones 1985:27). Illustrations from 1726, 1748, and 1807 show a general correspondence between some of these plans and the location of extant structures. In particular, the location of the main fortifications and two distinct, semicircular or “half-moon” bastions are still among the fort’s most prominent features (DeCorse 2007: 7-9).

Archaeological Fieldwork

Prior to the current research, Bunce Island had been the focus of limited archaeological research and preservation efforts. Dr. M.C.F. Easmon, a Krio doctor and founder of both the Sierra Leone National Museum and the Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission, directed a preliminary survey of the island in 1947. Easmon was responsible for Bunce Island’s designation as Sierra Leone’s first historic site under the Monuments and Relics Act. Easmon’s plan and model of the fort in the Na-
Figure 2: Map of Bunce Island showing 2011 survey and excavation areas with grid added by Atkinson-Noland & Associates (see DeCorse 2011).
nional Museum provide an important record of the site, and his map afforded the only plan of the site prior to the present research. Easmon may also have cleared fallen rubble from some of the structures to facilitate mapping. Joseph Opala’s ongoing public history work on Bunce Island and Sierra Leone’s history over the past 30 years work began as a Peace Corps project (Opala 1977). Opala also interpreted the purpose of some of the structures and identified surface archaeological materials. With computer specialist Gary Chatelain, Opala is currently constructing a virtual recreation of Bunce Island as it appeared in 1805, two years before its slave trading operation ceased. This prior research provided limited information on the archaeological resources present. Prior to the present work, the only detailed, published information on the archaeology of the island was a report on beads surface collected in the 1970s (Karklins 2007).

The archaeological research reviewed here was aimed at documenting and assessing the cultural resources present on the Island. The results of the project are being used by the government of Sierra Leone, especially the Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission, to manage and preserve the island’s resources. Fieldwork has been conducted in four field seasons, during 1993, 2006, 2011 and 2013. Work has been challenging, including the lack of financial support and the interruption of conservation efforts due to the Sierra Leone Civil War and, more recently, by the Ebola outbreak. Although substantial donor support for work on the island had been promised, this has not been forthcoming. Support for the archaeological and preservation work undertaken has come from variety of sources, including: the United States Embassy in Sierra Leone; the Bunce Island Coalition, United States (a group devoted to the island’s preservation); and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. All of the archaeological research has been undertaken with the permission and support of the Sierra Leone Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs and the Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission.

1993 Archaeological Reconnaissance. In 1993, partial funding for a brief archaeological reconnaissance of Bunce Island was provided by the United States Embassy, Sierra Leone, with additional support from a Smithsonian Postdoctoral Fellowship, and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. The research was aimed at providing a preliminary assessment of the archaeological resources on the island, with the secondary objective of assessing the extent of deterioration of the standing historic structures (DeCorse 1994, 2007: 209-279). A site reconnaissance was undertaken in October 1993 with the assistance of Leland Ferguson, then Professor of Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Fieldwork concentrated on a surface examination and the collection of surface artifacts. Most of the archaeological materials noted were located on the northern end of the island, particularly the shoreline areas associated with the fort complex, with less artifactual material noted toward the well, cemeteries, and kiln features, areas outside of and to the south of the fort complex. No cultural material was found on the southern half of the island, south of the African and European cemeteries. This distribution of cultural material is consistent with observations made during following field seasons. It is likely that the concentrations at least partially represent the areas of most intensive historic activity on the island. However, the areas that provided the greatest concentrations of artifacts also afford the greatest surface visibility. While an effort was made to examine all areas of the island, many were (and remain) covered in brush. The limited time and money available precluded the clearing of many areas that might have yielded surface artifacts. No sub-surface testing of any kind was undertaken during the 1993 project. Diagnostic artifacts collected included sherds of European trade ceramics, tobacco pipe fragments, fragments of bottle glass indicating method of manufacture, beads, and other materials that indicated age or origin. Most of the material recovered consists of 18th century British manufactures. Washing and re-bagging of the finds was initiated on neighboring Pepel Island and
completed in Freetown. All the recovered materials were washed, labeled and re-bagged for curation at the Sierra Leone National Museum.

2006 Cultural Resource Assessment. The archaeological field project undertaken in May and June 2006 provided a detailed cultural resource assessment of Bunce Island (DeCorse 2007). The work, directed by Christopher DeCorse, was completed by an international team of archaeologists from the United States, Brazil, and Ghana. Representatives of the Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission and students from Fourah Bay College also assisted with fieldwork. Detailed topographic mapping was done by Techsult & Company Ltd. of Freetown. Principal support for the 2006 field project was provided by a United States Embassy Ambassadors’ Fund Grant. Mr. Thomas Hull, then the United States Ambassador to Sierra Leone, worked with Joseph Opala and Christopher R. DeCorse in preparing the proposal. The grant was used to hire Techsult & Company Ltd. Sierra Leone and local Sierra Leonean field staff. Members of the archaeology project staff donated their time and paid for their own airfares. Matching support for fieldwork and for the preparation of the report came from an Appleby Mosher Fund Grant and faculty research money from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

The 2006 field project recorded, mapped, and provided detailed drawings of all extant walls, buildings and other surface features present on the island, including material of modern (20th century) origin, as well as features of historic significance (see Figures 2 and 3). Many of the areas of the island were cleared of brush, in some cases exposing features that may not have been cleared for decades. The mapping provided the first detailed, topographic map of the island. Archaeological survey targeted areas identified as high priority on the basis of background documentary research. These areas included: the fort complex; the historic jetty; the well; cemeteries; the shore line and sea walls; kiln features; the shell middens; and the area of the grumete village. Archaeological materials on the surface were noted but not collected and no subsurface excavation was undertaken. The Bunce Island Cultural Resource Assessment (DeCorse 2007) provides an overview of the island’s cultural significance and a review of previous archaeological research, as well as a description of the work undertaken on the island and the cultural materials recorded. The report concludes with recommendations for the management of the island’s natural and cultural remains.

2011 Archaeological Investigations on Bunce and Tasso Islands. The 2011 archaeological research on Bunce Island and neighboring Tasso Is-

Figure 3: Plan of fortifications and bastions showing locations of cannon. The arrow indicates magnetic north (DeCorse 2007).
land was completed with financial support provided by the Bunce Island Coalition, United States (DeCorse 2011). The project evaluated specific building foundations and roadway surfaces in preparation for the proposed restoration and/or stabilization work of selected historic structures, and to evaluate the presence/absence of cultural resources at the possible locations for new toilet, jetty, and research facilities. The specific areas targeted for investigation were detailed in a scope of work provided by Atkinson-Noland & Associates, Inc., Consulting Engineers, under contract with the Bunce Island Coalition to provide a preliminary assessment and mitigation plan for stabilization work on Bunce Island. The archaeological fieldwork was undertaken between May 17 and June 24, 2011.

The 2011 project had five distinct components: 1) Archaeological excavation units located within the fort complex to evaluate building foundations and surfaces for possible stabilization and reconstruction work; 2) Archaeological reconnaissance and shovel testing on Bunce Island to evaluate the location of proposed toilet facilities; 3) Archaeological reconnaissance and shovel testing on Bunce Island to evaluate the possible location of a new jetty; 4) Documentation of surface material recovered during the clearing of wall debris in the Slave Yard passage on Bunce Island, and; 5) An archaeological reconnaissance on Tasso Island, Sangbulima village to evaluate the possible location for new research facilities and housing for project engineers. The 2011 excavations represent the first subsurface archaeological excavations undertaken on the island. Collectively this work substantially expanded the information on the archaeological resources present on the site. The material overwhelmingly consisted of European, primarily British, trade materials of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. A very limited amount of locally produced ceramics was found and no contexts indicating pre-European contact occupation. Artifact analysis of all of the material recovered was completed at the field house on Pepel Island. The recovered material was then deposited at the Sierra Leone National Museum.

The 2013 project had two main objectives: 1) Excavations at the rear of the Men’s Slave Yard to determine if any structures were present and; 2) Archaeological reconnaissance and shovel testing of areas south of the fort complex to document any archaeological resources present, especially the possible site of the grumete village. The test excavations of the Men’s Slave Yard revealed evidence of a shell mortar floor and other features suggesting that there had been a structure at the rear of the Men’s Slave Yard that duplicated the masonry structure at the rear of the Women’s Slave Yard. The excavations also revealed artifacts likely related to the historic use of the area, providing some of the first evidence of material culture directly associated with enslaved Africans. The archaeological shovel testing of the area south of the fort complex extended the units excavated at the proposed toilet facility site evaluated during the 2011 project, further delineating the extent of archaeological resources present on the island. It is currently unclear if these artifacts are associated with the grumete settlement or other historic activities on the island; some of the material clearly dates to the post-abolition period. The analysis of the excavated material is still underway.

Bunce Island General Management Plan. At the request of the Sierra Leone Monuments and
Figure 4: View of Office Tower 2011 (left). The three-story wall at left collapsed in December 2013. Grave of Adam, last headman of the grumetes (at right). Once largely intact, the gravestone was broken into fragments by vandals in the past decade.

Relics Commission and with partial support from the Bunce Island Coalition, United States, a General Management Plan for Bunce Island is currently being prepared by Christopher DeCorse. The plan will provide guidelines for the management, development and use of the Bunce Island National Historic Site to best serve visitors, while preserving the site’s cultural and natural resources. It will identify specific conservation priorities and formalize the future direction of the site’s management. The plan provides an overview of the historical, cultural and natural resources present, and offers and assesses alternative proposals for the implementation and management of short- and long-term preservation, protection and interpretation of the island’s resources.

The General Management Plan will be finalized with the input and approval of the Sierra Leone government, including the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs and the Monuments and Relics Commission, as well as field experts and stakeholders in Bunce Island’s past. The plan will ensure its conservation and preservation for the present and the future.
Management Concerns and Future Work

Documenting the cultural resources present and developing a general management plan are important steps in preserving Bunce Island’s important history. The site is, however, threatened by the environment, human activity, and the ravages of time (Figure 4). The lack of local infrastructure in historic conservation, archaeology, and cultural resource management is a major hindrance. The Sierra Leone Monuments and Relics Commission lacks resources and personnel to protect the site. Supervision of visitors to the site is limited and virtually no stabilization or conservation work has been undertaken on the historic structures. In addition, tourists and casual visitors to the island have left behind modern trash and removed artifacts, including a brass cannon and two iron cannons. There also have been instances of vandalism, especially in the graveyards.

Since conservation efforts were initiated to document and preserve the island’s resources in 2006 the condition of many of the historic structures on the site have severely deteriorated. The structural integrity of many of the walls has been compromised as a result of weathering and vegetation. Although the number of standing walls present within the fort complex is striking, the shell-mortar walls lie exposed to rain water, and vines have prized their way into the masonry. Portions of a number of structures that had stood for over two centuries have collapsed in the past few years, including the fort’s main curtain wall, portions of the slave yard, and one of the wall of the office tower, which had stood to a height of three stories. Apart from the preservation concerns, the unstable condition of many of the structures poses a safety concern to visitors to the site. International funding sources and donor support is being sought to help with the island’s preservation. While some donor support has been provided through Bunce Island Coalition, United States, promises of substantial donations have not materialized.

Archaeological research on Bunce Island has provided a baseline assessment of the archaeological and cultural resources on the island, as well as the surrounding African and European trading sites in the Sierra Leone Estuary. The island is iconic of a trade that brought millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas and it stands as unique testament to Sierra Leone’s intersection with the Atlantic World. In many respects the island is unique in its organization and arrangement when compared to other European slave trading operations. The center of European trade throughout the region, Bunce Island epitomizes the organization of the slave trade into an efficient, commercial enterprise. Ongoing work under the Archaeological Initiative for the Sierra Leone Estuary (AISLE) is situating the island into the wider socioeconomic landscapes of which it was part. Research on the wider Sierra Leone Estuary is the focus of research by Samuel Amartey and Sean Reid, discussed elsewhere in this issue of Nyame Akuma.

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