“If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your land of slaves; burden not your hearts nor your country with them.”

Bishop Richard Allen, to slave owners, 1794

“If I was concerned in the African Trade,” Henry Laurens had written from London that March, “I would be cautious this Year of sending many Negroes to Carolina.”

The year was 1773. Laurens—once the leading slave merchant in Charleston—worried that South Carolina’s planters risked being “overstocked” with slaves and burdened with debt made all the riskier in the province’s “present relaxed State of Government.”

Laurens had abjured selling slaves years earlier, but his instincts for the business remained honed. The rice and indigo crops had been bountiful in 1772. He feared that his fellow planters would now overexpand production and import more slaves than they could afford.

Laurens’s concern seemed misplaced. Supply was failing to meet demand. On May 31, 1773, the South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal reported that the large number of slave ships arriving in Charleston belied the number of Africans actually on board. “Although there are now no less than Twelve Cargoes of Negroes for Sale here,” the Gazette noted, “yet the Number . . . does not exceed 1900; most of the vessels having come off the coast with less than Half the Quantity of Slaves they were sent to purchase.”

The African Trade

Laurens had predicted—with some accuracy—that at least eight thousand Africans would be imported into South Carolina in 1773. One of them, in all likelihood, was a spindly thirteen-year-old boy who would be known most of his life as John Kizell. Someone—possibly his African owner—had accused him of being a witch. It was a common pretext for disposing of surplus labor in West Africa.

The boy had been sold to a slave dealer along one of the mangrove-lined creeks feeding the Gallinas River in today’s southeastern Sierra Leone. There he would have been confined in a rough stockade, along with those taken in some conflict far from
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the coast, men falsely accused of “damaging” one of a chief’s several wives, and other hapless witches. And there he would have remained until a slave ship captain arrived to negotiate for whatever slaves might be available.

The Blossom, captained by William Briggs, arrived in Charleston on May 24. It had left Cape Mount, just southeast of the Gallinas, with 336 slaves. When it landed—its cargo to be quarantined for several days on Sullivan’s Island—274 were still alive. Mortality on the so-called Middle Passage had been substantially higher than normal. About one in seven slaves died on voyages from West Africa to Charleston in the early 1770s. One in five had died aboard the Blossom. Whether it was this ship that had carried him, or some other vessel “concerned in the African Trade,” John Kizell had survived the first of many trials to come.  

Slave ships represented both the physical and psychological extremes of human degradation. Captains and crews shared a living—and dying—hell with their captives. In percentage terms, crew mortality often exceeded that of the enslaved cargo. A day seldom passed during the several weeks at sea when someone did not die. There was filth and feces. There was fever and dysentery. There was a stench that suffused every nook and cranny. And there was fear—among the crew, especially when Africa remained near, and among the humans stored below.

The boy and the others chained to one another knew what was happening. They understood that they were being separated from family, friends, and—equally important—from their ancestors. They understood that they would never again know their world. They probably had at least anecdotal awareness of where they were being taken and the alien experience in store.

Many may have shared the long-standing belief that they were to be consumed by the white men, which was not altogether illogical in the context of West African history. But it was their sense of loss—not of liberty per se but of their ties to kinship networks, to the land, and to their place in the African continuum of existence—that most frightened them.

An experienced slave ship captain knew this. He knew that, given the chance, many among his cargo would hurl themselves into the sea—to die and join their ancestors. He knew that many would be depressed or suicidal. He also knew that they had every reason—and the capability—to seize the ship and sail back toward the rising sun. It had happened often enough.

So it is no surprise that a woman aboard John Kizell’s ship refused to eat, intending to die and return home. Nor was it surprising that the captain had her tied on deck, with Kizell and others brought up to witness her flogged—deliberately—to death. Better to let this one woman “go home” on his terms—terms that would dissuade others from starving themselves to death and depriving him and the vessel’s owners of their profit.

It would have meant nothing to the boy that the rice and indigo harvests had been bountiful in South Carolina the year before. If he was not helping his father in their own field, he might have been hunting birds with a slingshot or catching fish in a
Chained Together

nearby stream. He might have been sitting with his age-mates beneath a majestic cotton silk tree, talking in hushed tones about their approaching initiation into Poro, into manhood.

In the evening, seated with the other children as the village gathered to be entertained, he might have listened raptly to an old man recite fables and fearsome stories about animals behaving like humans and devils living in the bush. Of such nights, a Sherbro remembered of his youth, “we trembled in the darkness and avoided the loneliest places” for days to come.7

The rice and indigo harvests in a place called South Carolina would have been far beyond their ken or caring. They knew about slaves, however. Many of the people in the village were bound to others, who “owned” them and their families, within a traditional framework of mutual obligations. They knew as well about people—even some who lived among them—who were sold to the white men, in their large ships draped with billowing cloth.

They were aware that the white men wanted slaves of their own and were willing to trade rum, muskets, gunpowder, tobacco, and other goods to which their people had become accustomed. But they would not have known about the large crops of rice and indigo that the white men’s slaves had grown in the South Carolina low-country in 1772. Nor would they have known that the people to whom these slaves were bound planned to clear and drain swaths of new land to grow even more rice and indigo; and that to do so they would need to send more ships to buy more of their people than ever before in a single year.

The importation of slaves into South Carolina over the preceding decade had been extremely volatile—but not entirely unpredictable. Henry Laurens was prescient in 1773. As many as 9,000 Africans may have arrived in Charleston that year—nearly twice the 4,800 in 1772. A mere 2,500 had been imported in 1764, but nearly three times as many in the following year as planters expanded in the lowcountry. Then no slaves were brought in during four of the next five years. In 1766–68 high customs duties virtually shut down the trade in slaves, as did South Carolina’s agreement in 1769 to ban importation of British goods.8

The legislature, subscribing to the nonimportation strategy taking hold among the colonies, promised that South Carolinians would adopt the “utmost economy in our persons, houses, and furniture, particularly that we will give no mourning, or gloves or scarves at funerals.” They would also forgo wine and one other form of consumption: fresh slaves.9

Abstinence lasted for a year. While some British manufactures slipped through the colonies’ boycott, England in 1770 repealed some of the despised imposts on paper, glass, and painter’s pigments. Tacitly conceding Americans’ right to refuse to pay taxes without representation, Parliament stubbornly left one duty standing: on tea.10

The economy immediately bloomed in Charleston and South Carolina, at least for the merchants and planters. But it was a false prosperity. In her classic analysis of Charleston’s business climate in the years leading to the Revolution, Leila Sellers
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recalls what seemed a bounteous era. “From the spring of 1771 until the fall of 1774,”
she writes, “was a time of great business activity. Great quantities of East India tea were
being imported despite the non-importation agreement, great numbers of slaves were
being brought in and sold at fancy prices, and bills of exchange were selling at a pre-
mium, a sure sign that the planter was in debt to the merchant.”

The dozen or more recently arrived cargoes of slaves prompted mixed reactions in
Charleston in mid-1773. Artisans and mechanics already regarded the city’s abundant
pool of skilled slaves as direct competition. Nor were they benefiting from the reopen-
ing of trade with England. Peter Timothy, the publisher of the South Carolina Gazette
and Country Journal, championed the artisan class. Though a slave owner himself, he
was dubious that importing large numbers of slaves was in everyone’s best interest.

“Nothing,” the Gazette warned on June 7, “could have happened more injurious
to the British merchants concerned in the Slave Trade, than the recent Stop put to
granting of Lands, at the same Time that the First Cutting of Indico is lost: But for
these Events, the Cargoes of Negroes now here . . . would have been sold at consider-
ably higher Prices than they are now likely to be.”

Merchants and planters—dependent respectively on the trade in slaves and on
slave labor—were vulnerable to the crosscurrents of revolutionary ferment and a mer-
cantile system controlled by the mother country. The slave trade, which operated like
any other business—on credit—was becoming a financial burden to its principals as
the numbers increased dramatically. By late 1773 hard money and bills of exchange
had become “very scarce” in Charleston, according to one merchant. “All the Dollars
and Heavy Gold has been sent to Great Britain for Remittance.” Some of it had paid
for a thirteen-year-old boy accused of witchcraft.

Cautious businessman and plantation owner that he was, Laurens had looked
beyond planters’ unbridled enthusiasm for more land and thus for more slaves. He
may not have been alone. While he remained in London, his fellow planters and mer-
cants in the provincial congress never mentioned the slave trade when debating
a renewed nonimportation association to take effect on December 1, 1774. By now
many may have doubted its benefits. They would import less than half the slaves in
1774 that they had the previous year. They would boycott the trade altogether in 1775.
None could know that it would be eight years before another slave ship came up from
Rebellion Road.

Charleston and its lowcountry hinterland were the wealthiest—and yet the most
dangerous—places in colonial North America. Wealth was measured in land, rice,
indigo, and slaves. Danger was measured in violence and disease. Laurens not only
feared that the “vast importation of Negroes” would lead to greater indebtedness; he
believed it would “greatly expose the capital to Infectious Distempers, Smallpox or
Fever,” which in turn would further degrade the sale price of new slaves.

Although slave ships were required to quarantine their human cargoes for ten days,
the pesthouse on Sullivan’s Island could not effectively handle the thousands of
Africans arriving during the peak months. Judging from the arrival and auction dates
in newspaper advertisements for large slave shipments in mid-1773, the quarantine process often was cut short.

Like many such announcements, the notice in the May 25 Gazette assured the public that the “negroes” aboard the Blossom were “prime and healthy” and “directly from . . . Africa.” Slave merchants and planters could only be certain that the new arrivals were indeed straight from Africa—and thus not “contaminated” by exposure to West Indies slavery. They could not be sure that they were “prime and healthy.” What counted was that they were survivors.17

Survival preoccupied whites. “It was the violence of eighteenth-century life that kept Charleston society fluid,” writes historian George C. Rogers Jr. “Disease, fire, hurricanes, and wars kept the people from settling down to a long-term routine. Life was short.” Malaria was omnipresent; yellow fever was a periodic reaper; but smallpox was the most dreaded.18

Whites internalized what many perceived every day as the greatest threat: a black population that outnumbered them and that—in spite of its enslavement—exerted considerable control over white people’s lives and over the economy of the town. When Peter A. Coclanis, in his history of the lowcountry economy, refers to the “spirit and soul” of Charleston on the eve of the Revolution, he is alluding to its embodiment of the area’s burgeoning wealth and the white society that fed upon it.19 Charleston’s spirit and soul, however, reflected the vibrancy of its African and African American majority as much as—if not more than—the planter-merchant aristocracy or the white artisans and mechanics. When John Kizell was led in chains onto a Cooper River wharf, he joined the second largest urban black community in the world. Only London’s was greater.

Not far to the west of that wharf—somewhere on King Street—the widow of a German innkeeper, Conrad Kysell, was still sorting out his affairs. As his executrix Esther Kysell had already auctioned Lucca and Nancy, their two “negro wenches,” as Kysell described them in his will.20 He had bequeathed to his brother-in-law, George Fulker, most of his other possessions—his land, horses, a watch, and silver buckles, as well as his “artillery regimentals and accoutrements.” The latter bespoke a former life in the Palatine.

Esther had the tavern to run and money—perhaps from the sale of Lucca and Nancy—to invest in land. While the Blossom’s “New Negroes” were being dispersed, Esther was about to purchase two and a half acres in Charleston, originally part of the “general plan of George Anson, Esquire.”21 Lucca and Nancy each would have been worth the land’s price of three hundred pounds.

“New Negroes” in South Carolina would soon detect the tension brewing among whites. The genie of rebellion was out of the bottle. One of the first things a young arrival from Africa learned was that the white people were divided over their loyalty to a king who ruled from a great distance. He would also hear rumors that Africans who lived under that king, in his own country, had recently been restored their freedom. In Africa a good king protected his people—even his slaves. The “New Negroes” from
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the Blossom would begin to form their own opinions about the white people’s king and listen closely to what was said about him and his policies.

Blacks throughout the American colonies, and especially in Charleston, were at least vaguely aware that a judge in England had recently “freed” the slaves there. Slavery remained legal, but the decision effectively meant that one could not be a slave in England. If the nuances of Chief Justice Lord Mansfield’s decision were lost among most in America, slave and free, there was a general apprehension that something important had occurred and that it threatened the basis of slavery. Laurens’s servant—“my foolish Rascally Robert”—had followed the Somerset case, as it was known, and fraternized with London’s black community. He came and went more or less as he pleased and had begun acting as though he were a free man.22

There was much to whisper about, discuss, and ponder in the Charleston that the thirteen-year-old African boy encountered in the bewildering first days ashore. He may not have appreciated the import of the news that the British Parliament had just passed something called the Tea Act, but he could not fail to notice that it agitated the whites.

He would have listened with greater comprehension to those countrymen who understood the white man’s language, as they passed along published news reverberating throughout the city: Slaves on the New Britannia had seized the ship in the Gambia River. While the crew struggled to restore control, the ship had exploded, killing everyone aboard—including more than two hundred slaves.23

To whites this was further evidence that blacks were inherently rebellious and not to be trusted. To blacks—certainly the many who were African born—the demise of the New Britannia indicated the agency of powerful spirits. They knew that in Africa all events—as well as one’s fate—were linked to forces that the white people did not, and perhaps never would, understand.

“My scruples are vanished”

From shore the vessel anchored in midriver looked like any other seagoing ship. The nearly naked boy and his fellow captives could perhaps glimpse her through the stockade of tree trunks and bamboo poles. They would have seen a few bearded white men, stripped to the waist, lowering boxes to the glistening black Krumen in a large dugout canoe. They might have noticed, near the ship’s bow, the swivel gun. Only a slaver, which carried no cannons, mounted a swivel gun, to train on the deck to quell a slave uprising.24

They might also have noticed strange gold squiggles painted on the ship’s stem, not unlike the Arabic script that some understood or had seen used by itinerant Mandingo merchants. They were unaware that these represented the names given by the white men to each of their vessels—in this case, the Blossom, of Liverpool. If they turned their attention from the ship, they might have missed two white sailors dropping the limp body of a black man over the side, and the brief thrashing of the crocodile that had been waiting expectantly.
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Such scenes were common along the coast, which Captain Briggs and the Blossom had been combing for months to fill his ship to capacity. John Kizell left no account of his Middle Passage—apart from the exemplary execution of the woman bent upon starving herself. Henry Smeathman, however, left little to the imagination when he wrote in July 1773 of what he witnessed aboard the Africa as it took on slaves at the Isles de Los, two hundred miles northwest of the Gallinas.

Smeathman had come out from England in 1771 to gather botanical specimens in Sierra Leone for London collectors. Unschooled as a botanist, he soon acquired expertise in another trade: slaving. In May 1773 he could write that “my scruples . . . are vanished” respecting the business. But that did not prevent him from documenting its horrors. The Africa had just returned to the coast after delivering 185 slaves in Charleston at the end of May. The rains had begun their almost daily deluge. Smeathman, who had seen slaves awaiting shipment near Sierra Leone, had no scruples about revealing the squalor and human degradation endemic to the trade.

“Alas!” he began. “What a scene of misery and distress . . . The clanking of chains, the groans of the sick and the stench of the whole is scarce supportable. . . . There was . . . two or three slaves thrown overboard every day dying of fever, flux, measles, worms all together. All the day the chains rattling or the sound of the armourer riveting some poor devil just arrived in . . . irons. The woemen slaves in one part beating rice . . . Here the doctor dressing sores . . . or cramming the men with medicines and another standing over them with a cat to make them swallow . . . their rice.”

The same Africa, which disgorged survivors of this nightmare in Charleston, may also have carried five men consigned to Henry Laurens by his friend John Holman, an English slave trader based in the Isles de Los. Holman had also sent five leopard skins and a pair of African earrings. Writing on June 9 to Laurens in London, his brother James said he would give the five male slaves to John Lewis Gervais, a prominent Charleston slave dealer, “to sell as he did the former Parcel.” Henry Laurens had not entirely abandoned the African trade.

John Kizell, awaiting his fate in an open stockade, was about to become a “parcel,” which would be carefully examined by the ship’s captain before he negotiated a price. Captains of slavers had to have a keen eye to distinguish the healthy and robust from the weak or sick. The latter would not endure the hellish voyage to come, much less attract a decent price at market.

Still they died in droves—before the journey, during it, and at journey’s end. To Alexander Garden, the port physician in Charleston in the 1750s and 1760s, it was “a wonder any escape with life.” They continued dying—in quarantine on Sullivan’s Island, if not dumped into the harbor soon after arrival. As many as a third consigned to working in the lowcountry could expect to die within their first year.

Sullivan’s Island, a few miles east of Charleston proper, was a holding pen where newly arrived slaves could be sorted out in a macabre death watch. Described by a northern visitor as “very sandy, hot, and barren,” it was where more than two hundred slaves waited to see who lived and who died. The quarantine also discouraged ships
from dumping dead and dying slaves into the harbor. As the governor warned in 1769, dead Africans were polluting the marshes facing the city. “The noisome smell arising from their putrefaction may become dangerous to the health of the inhabitants.” He offered a reward to anyone identifying those responsible.  

The unprecedented numbers of slaves brought into Charleston in the spring and summer of 1773—and the frequent advertisements of slave auctions closely following arrivals—suggests that many ships were permitted to abbreviate or bypass the quarantine. There are no records of the Sullivan’s Island operation in this period, so it is impossible to know which ships might have been waived past, the number of slaves actually held for observation, or the death rate among them.  

Whether Kizell was compelled to endure the heat and pestilence on Sullivan’s Island is problematic. All that mattered, when he stepped onto a Charleston wharf, was that he was alive and marketable. Where he was destined—to a lowcountry plantation or an urban household—was yet to be decided by the whims of those with the cash or credit to buy him.  

Plantation owners’ collective appetite for slaves—mainly to produce rice—remained voracious. The cultivation of rice had been expanding in South Carolina since the 1720s. This accounted for increasing slave imports, especially in the early 1760s and 1770s, as more planters adopted Africans’ well-developed dike technology to control water levels and harness tidal marshes for rice production. In the meantime the market for rice in Britain, Europe, the West Indies, and the northern colonies was brisk.  

Cultivating rice was not just labor-intensive; it was labor-destructive. Digging and maintaining canals for irrigation and drainage was hard work. It wore slaves down. So did the slow mortar-and-pestle processing.  

Planters knew this, although few may have been as solicitous as Henry Laurens. Concerned that slaves were being misused in the colony’s rice plantations, he wrote a long letter to his partner in April 1773 urging that his slaves not be sacrificed “for the sake of a few barrels of Rice.” He did not want them “cruelly treated, & driven by severity to such practices, as were never before known among them.”  

Laurens knew that many of his slaves were African-born and brought with them substantial knowledge of rice cultivation. Using them wisely made considerable sense. Daniel C. Littlefield, in his 1981 study of rice and slavery in colonial South Carolina, points to obvious links between the growth of the rice industry and the importation of slaves skilled in rice cultivation. However, he is unwilling to attribute the crop’s development in South Carolina to the conscious recruitment of experienced African rice farmers.  

Building on Littlefield’s work and Peter Wood’s 1974 *Black Majority*, geographer Judith A. Carney directly credits West Africans’ expertise in rice cultivation for its success in the lowcountry. Carney uses “a geographical perspective focused on culture, technology, and environment to support the contention that the origin of rice
cultivation in South Carolina is indeed African, and that slaves from West Africa’s rice region tutored planters in growing the crop.”

In earlier decades slaveholders in South Carolina had flattered themselves that they could discriminate among African-born slaves in terms of their origins and their skills. In stereotyping Gambians, who were expert in rice cultivation, versus Calabars and others who were not, they believed they could isolate desirable traits such as strength, endurance, and obedience.

As the proportion of Africans declined vis-à-vis “country-born,” or American-born, slaves, planters gradually lost interest in their home regions. They had effectively adapted African rice technology and no longer placed a premium on importing slaves from major rice-growing areas. By the early 1770s, arriving shiploads of slaves were more often advertised simply as from “the coast of Africa.” Small lots of slaves were frequently tagged “unknown origin”—a generic term for African.

Kizell could have fallen into either category. Having been purchased at a relatively minor slave factory, probably as part of an odd lot of captives, he would have found himself aboard ship among people from locales scattered over hundreds of miles. Twenty or thirty years earlier, it might have mattered that he did not come from the Gambia, Gold Coast, or some other area fancied in South Carolina. But in 1773 low-country planters and backcountry settlers alike were concerned only with buying as many slaves as they could.

Never had the colony seen such growth or accumulation of wealth. Josiah Quincy Jr., visiting that year from Massachusetts, marveled at “the number of shipping” in Charleston, which “far surpassed all I had ever seen in Boston.” Kizell and his fellow Africans would have been equally amazed, if not more so, at the sheer bustle of the harbor and the city beyond.

The boy’s youth likely served him well in his transition from African to African American. He may have been physically and mentally more resilient than his elders in the face of their sudden uprooting and the harrowing voyage. Described in adulthood as short, he would have been noticeably small as a boy. Planters looking for tall men, who were most sought, would have ignored him. They wanted young adults who could become productive immediately and quickly amortize their investment.

Even in Charleston whites preferred young slaves who were fit for hard work, if not for the harsher conditions on the plantations. At thirteen the diminutive Kizell would have been desirable mainly to a household or business establishment in need of a servant or messenger.

No documentation or firsthand accounts of Charleston slave sales and auctions in this period have ever been found. The Africans delivered in the Blossom were consigned to the firm of Robert, John and James Smith. Their sale was advertised on May 25. There the trail ends. Nonetheless enough is known generally of the selling of slaves in Charleston to provide a telling portrait of the business that governed the immediate destiny of John Kizell.
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In polite society the marketing of slaves was not a sordid profession. It attracted some of the most respected white men in the town—Henry Laurens foremost among them—and occupied a public place in day-to-day life and commerce. Laurens and other slave merchants were general importers. They would not have deigned to sell common trade goods, such as clothing and hardware. But “to deal in slaves and indentured white servants was a highly honorable employment,” at least according to Sellers.  

The buying, transporting, and selling of slaves was not only complex and risky; it also required enormous capital, collateral, and credit. Slave merchants—or factors, as they were known—frequently were planters as well. Some of the most successful—Laurens and his partner, John Lewis Gervais, included—parlayed plantation profits into equally rewarding slave-trading ventures. “The prosperous planter,” Sellers writes, “invested his money in a mercantile establishment so that he might service himself, establish direct relations with merchant firms in England and thus free himself from excessive charges of the Charleston merchants.”

It also helped to have a financial godfather, as John Hopton well knew. Hopton had learned the business during five years as Laurens’s clerk. In April 1771 Laurens and another merchant provided the young Hopton with sureties worth ten thousand pounds sterling to begin trading in slaves. Hopton became one of the most active and successful slave factors in Charleston during the four golden years before the trade was suspended. He and a partner handled at least twenty-four ships, which brought more than 4,600 slaves into Charleston during this frenetic period. One was the Africa.

Colonies were dependent on having enough settlers and adequate labor, so it is hardly surprising that what Sellers calls “the most lucrative . . . branch of commerce in the country” was the provision of people—not just African slaves, but thousands of Europeans as well. Dealing “in immigrants and indentured servants was profitable,” Sellers writes, “at a time when there was in Great Britain a class of abject, rootless, landless persons. . . . The most valuable part of the import business of Charleston in the eighteenth century was the traffic in white and black people.”

The industrial-scale marketing of slaves was highly organized. Importers carefully monitored conditions such as the weather that could affect demand. They provided detailed instructions and market intelligence to the captains who went to Africa on their behalf, often in ships partially owned by the merchant. They advertised sales widely and maintained a network of fellow merchants in Georgia and East Florida to whom they supplied slaves. Profit depended on keeping inventory low and selling slaves as quickly as possible, often on short- or long-term credit.

Large sales of New Negroes usually were held at “public vendues” on the Cooper River wharves, but the selling of country-born slaves was common throughout the town. They could be found for sale almost anywhere, Sellers relates: “the grocery store, the shoemaker’s . . . at the race course between the heats of the races, in the public Negro yard, . . . at the retail stores, and at the wholesale warehouses of the big importing merchant.”