

Black History in Cape Fear:

Randall Library showcases a local heritage

February is Black History Month, which always gives America a lot to think about—particularly in the South. Our own Cape Fear region has an especially poignant part in the past, with a rich heritage of struggle and strife for African-Americans. Of course, the history has remained largely unacknowledged in history books until recently.

"African-Americans, free and enslaved, were crucial to the development of southeastern North Carolina," John Battle, director of the African-American Heritage Foundation of Wilmington, Inc. (AAHF), says. "Besides providing the bulk of plantation labor, they dug the canals, labored on the railroads, worked in commerce and shipping, and help construct much of the built environment, some of which is still in existence today."

Battle and his colleagues at the AAHF have been busy studying the connection between the history of Wilmington and Sierra Leone. In fact, a former slave named

by: Lauren Hodges

The Bunce Island Exhibit

Randall Library Exhibit Center,
UNCW campus
on display through Feb. 27th
Grand opening reception Feb. 21st, 3pm
www.bunceisland.org
(910) 262-8208

"Thomas Peters" joined the British Army in the Revolutionary War and later became a founder of Freetown, Sierra Leone. He was known as a "Black Pioneer."

"Bunce Island was an 18th-century British fort in Sierra Leone," Battle explains. "It shipped thousands of African captives mainly from the Rice Coast of West Africa to the rice-growing regions of North America during the mid- and late-1700s." As the history points out, that knowledge of rice farming became an asset to the South and its economy.

As slave owners profited from the labor and knowledge of the African imports, a new culture had started to develop in the fields. In 2006 Congress established a Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, making it the only one in existence to commemorate African-American history. The 12,000 square miles spread along the Southern coast and include pieces of North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Parts of New Hanover County are included in the stretch.

"Over time, enslaved Africans who lived and labored in relative isolation on rice plantations developed the distinct Gullah language, traditions, music, material culture and foodways," Battle says. "Much



HISTORY UNCOVERED: The rich past of the Gullah-Geechee people in our area is on display at the new Bunce Island Exhibit at UNCW.

of this culture is maintained to this day."

Yet, many people are unaware or know very little of this rich cultural heritage in the Wilmington area, largely due to the lack of information available to the public. "The historic presence of the Gullah people has largely escaped or been excluded from records, books and until recently, historical scrutiny," Battle says. "But this might be because of an inability to distinguish among African-American origins. It is often viewed by others as a homogenous group of people."

The AAHF hopes that a new public exhibit will help to educate the local population on the Gullah/Geechee culture. Working with the UNCW Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, the organization has been able to sponsor a display in the Randall Library. Called the "Bunce Island Exhibit," the show features papers and pictures depicting the history of the understated people. The story of Sierra Leone, the Atlantic Slave Trade and the origins of the culture in North America is told vividly in illustrations along the library's main corridor.

"It is our hope that the exhibit will stimulate new representations and historical narratives based on Western forms of evidence," Battle informs. "We want to validate the Gullah people's family and oral histories, memories, folklore and life experiences."

The Bunce Island Exhibit is on display from February 1st to the 27th in the Randall Library Exhibit Center. On February 21st a grand opening reception will be held, featuring a lecture and video with Professor Joseph A. Opala, the show's curator. The lecture will begin at 3pm with time for questions and discussions at 4pm. The video and reception will follow. Visit www.bunce-island.org for more information or call (910) 262-8208.



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Senior Games by the Sea
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Events will be held April 12 - 30

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NHC Senior Center
2222 S. College Road in Wilmington.

Information is also available at

www.wilmingtonrecreation.com
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Registration will continue through April 3, 2010.

For more information contact
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