Few slaving agreements contracted between African sellers and American purchasers appear to have survived. They were rarely committed to paper, were destroyed after commitments were fulfilled, or were removed from business records kept by slave traders. The contract discussed here is of considerable interest as a document which, although brief, records important information and offers intriguing insights concerning African-European and African-African relationships in Guinea-Conakry at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The slaving contract is dated 15 November 1804, and apparently was negotiated aboard the merchant ship Charlotte of Bristol, Rhode Island, Jonathan Sabens, master, anchored at the Iles de Los archipelago.¹

HISTORY IN AFRICA, 14 (1987), 341-347
Respecting the American traders involved, the Charlotte was jointly owned by George D'Wolf and Jonathan Sabens of Bristol, Rhode Island. Captain Jonathan Sabens was an experienced mariner, involved in at least three previous slaving voyages, including one as master of the Charlotte. Members of the D'Wolf family were associated with numerous slaving voyages to west Africa and continued to invest in slaving ventures long after Rhode Island made the trade illegal in 1787.²

The Charlotte, registered at 193 tons, departed Bristol on 13 August 1804, with a crew of twenty men. The vessel carried four cannon, a sensible precaution for sailing the high seas and for engaging in trade along the coast of west Africa during the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when British and French vessels might, or might not, respect Americans' professed neutrality and determination to profit from wartime opportunities. The Charlotte's cargo included rum, tobacco, flour, beef, butter, molasses, lumber, shooks, and hoops. Rum and tobacco were the staples of American commerce with west Africa, and the other commodities no doubt were expected to fetch good prices from Europeans and Eurafri cans in the coasting trade and Afro-American settlers at Freetown, all cut off from European suppliers owing to wartime conditions.³

The Charlotte's first landfall in west Africa was at Goree Island, cradled by the Cape Verde peninsula in modern-day Senegal. During the last days of September and first week of October Captain Sabens sold considerable quantities of tobacco, rum, and provisions to resident European and Eurafri can traders. His largest sales ($994.95, principally tobacco) were to a fellow American, Captain Sterling E. Turner, of Charleston, South Carolina. Turner was involved in slave trading along the Upper Guinea coast for many years, residing in the Cape Verde Islands during the 1810s and early 1820s. Rhode Island's link with Goree was remembered long after the era of the slave trade: the name of the black neighborhood in Bristol was for many years called "Goree."

Sabens evidently sailed from Goree direct to the Iles de los, where he recorded sales with resident traders from October 30. He probably anchored the Charlotte in the deep waters between Tamara and Factory islands. The half-dozen islands and islets
of the Iles de Los archipelago are located a few miles off the modern-day port of Conakry, the present capital of Guinea-Conakry. The archipelago was conveniently located for sailing vessels trading along the Upper Guinea coast, offering safe anchorage, fresh water, citrus fruits, and other provisions grown by African communities on Tamara, Factory, and Crawford islands. Africans living in the archipelago had long welcomed European and American traders and a number of white traders had settled on a more or less permanent basis. They warehoused their trade goods on the islands, engaged in coastwise and riverine commerce, and, when opportunity offered, served as middlemen for visiting traders such as Captain Sabens. African and European residents of the Iles de Los, their employees and skilled domestic slaves, provided a variety of services needed by visiting mariners. There were pilots, carpenters, sailmakers, ropemakers, smiths, and joiners available, and sometimes a doctor who had been a ship's surgeon on a slaver. All of these considerations made the Iles de Los a favorite resort for European and American trading vessels, whether for brief stopovers or to use the archipelago as an anchorage from which to conduct trade. 4

The archipelago was the principal entrepôt for commerce with the Nunez and Pongo rivers, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries principal outlets for trade routes linking the Futa Jallon massif and the upper Niger River valley beyond. Slave trading in the Nunez and Pongo greatly increased after the founding of the Fula almamate in Futa Jallon in the 1720s, as Fula progressively conquered the massif and sold numerous war captives into trans-Atlantic slavery. From the latter part of the eighteenth century, Fula sought to impose their hegemony over Susu, Landuma, Nalu, and other groups inhabiting the Nunez and Pongo rivers. During the sporadic warfare which ensued, shifting alliances among African landlords and trading groups made commerce unpredictable for visiting shipmasters such as Sabens. 5

At the time of the Charlotte's visit, the African landlord of the Iles de Los was Thomas William, a Baga who lived on Factory Island. William was unusually knowledgeable concerning European ways, having resided several years in England. In 1788 he and several sons and daughters of local rulers and traders were sent to live near Liverpool where they were "to learn Sense and get a good Head", afterwards to return home to promote Liverpool interests in the area. By 1794 William was the recognized landlord of the archipelago, collecting anchorage duties from shipmasters who used the islands as a base of operations and participating himself in commerce as a trader. 6

Thomas William's own landlord was Fendan Modu Dumbuya, whose name appears on the slaving contract. Dumbuya, a Susu, was ruler of the coast neighboring the Iles de Los, which authority he had inherited from his father, who in the 1770s had gained ascendancy over the mainly Baga-speaking people of the area. Dumbuya's political and economic influence and that exercised by other Mande-speaking groups along this part of the Upper Guinea coast during this period remains to be fully delineated,
with respect to intra- and interstate relations, and with respect to the Fula almamate's expanding political and economic hegemony over coastal groups.  

At the end of the eighteenth century Europeans commonly, but erroneously, believed that Fendan Modu Dumbuya controlled an area extending southwards from the Iles de Los for some thirty miles. Richard Bright, an official of the Sierra Leone Company who visited Dumbuya at Wonkapong in October 1802, was informed by Dumbuya that he controlled nine villages which produced a surplus of more than 100 tons of rice and 100 tons of salt. The salt and cotton cloth manufactured by Dumbuya's dependents, plus additional purchased cloth, were sold in the interior for gold, ivory, captives, and cattle. Many of the cows were sold to feed the growing Sierra Leone settlement at Freetown. Dumbuya thus could engage in privileged trade with visiting shipmasters such as Sabens and with Freetown, and at the same time exact tariffs and duties owed him as ruler and landlord of the Iles de Los and the adjacent mainland.

Dumbuya's contract with Captain Sabens, brief as it is, records valuable information regarding local circumstances. It is possible that the contract was not signed by Dumbuya himself, but by his agent, Mohammed. The writing after "Mohammed" has been rendered variously by informants who have been frustrated by the imperfectly rendered Arabic script. Names and words (and documents) written in Arabic are not particularly remarkable for this region of the Upper Guinea coast during this period, but they serve to remind the reader of the commercial and political developments related above, and suggest the possibility that Mohammed was a Fula and that the Fula almamate exercised some sort of suzerainty over Dumbuya. In any case, Mohammed demonstrated literacy in Arabic at least comparable to Captain Sabens' command of written English.

Regarding the terms of the contract, the promise to pay Sabens 995 bars' worth of rice and captives in forty days implies that Sabens had advanced Mohammed and Dumbuya a substantial amount of cargo from the Charlotte Advancing, or "trusting" trade goods to African traders on credit was common practice along the Upper Guinea coast, African traders insisting that without goods in their possession they could not attract caravans from the interior. Advancing goods, however, diminished the incentive to meet deadlines, to the often expressed frustration of European and American traders. Frequently, contracts were not fulfilled when it was time to sail, thereby confronting the shipmaster with invidious decisions as to whether to tarry for an unpredictable period of time relying on assurances that debts would soon be paid, or to return home and face irate shipowners, who explicitly warned against such a possibility in letters of instructions entrusted to shipmasters at the time of sailing.  

"Bars" were a common unit of measure in West Africa, based originally on the value of iron bars. "Bar values" of African, European, or American commodities changed according to supply and demand. The stipulated four tons of rice could presumably be readily supplied, inasmuch as it was already harvest time.
on the Upper Guinea coast. The remainder of the amount of the contract, 635 bars, would purchase only five-plus captives, depending on the price differentials regarding sex, age, and other considerations, only a fraction of the Charlotte's capacity of more than 300 slaves.

Given the contract's relatively modest value, it may represent politics no less than economics, sensible accommodation with an African landlord. That the contract was taken back to Bristol suggests that its conditions were not fully met and that payment was sought on a subsequent voyage. Such seemingly was the case, for on the reverse side of the contract is the name "Fendemodo" and "Note for 195 Bars," indicating that of the 995 bars' value contracted 800 had been paid and 195 was still forthcoming. Evidently, Sabens was unable to collect the debt on his subsequent voyages in 1805 and 1807, so the contract was retained and preserved following his death.

In other respects, Sabens must have been satisfied with the results of the voyage. The Charlotte departed the African coast with 285 captives, all but 45 which were landed in Havana.11 Captain Sabens undertook at least two other voyages in the Charlotte in partnership with George D'Wolf. A voyage that departed Bristol on 19 August 1805 carried 212 captives from Africa to an unrecorded destination; and a voyage that left Bristol on 16 April 1807 departed Africa with 370 captives, of which 330 were landed in Charleston.12 Concerning the latter voyage, a note in the D'Wolf Papers records that Captain Sabens died at sea in 1807 en route from Africa to Charleston.

The subsequent activities of the other principals recorded on the contract remain to be learned. Perhaps readers of this journal can contribute additional information; the authors welcome communications.

The routine frustrations experienced transcribing and annotating documents such as this slaving contract, brief as it is, served to remind of the longstanding need for data banks recording names of African rulers (and their titles) and African traders, likewise names of European and American vessels, masters, cargo manifests, and other data that may be easily retrieved by computers, collated, and quantified. Who will undertake this monumental challenge and earn the gratitude of generations of scholars to come?

NOTES

1. Documents concerning the Charlotte's voyage are deposited in the D'Wolf Papers at the Bristol Historical Society. We are indebted to Captain Charles O. Cook, Jr., Michael Levesque, Ruth Sanford, Helen Tessler, and Charlotte Young for their assistance. We are also indebted to Abdullah Munahi Al-Otaibi, Abdirahman Beileh, Adam Egeh, Kathryn L. Green, John Kabba Kamara, Martha B. Kendall, Bradford G. Martin, and Fouzia Sabil for transliterating and discussing
the Arabic script.


3. For American trade with West Africa during this period, George Brooks, Yankee Traders, Old Coasters, and African Middlemen (Boston, 1970), Chapter 2.


9. One such example concerns the Sloop Dolphin of Warren, Rhode Island, Captain Eddy. Captain Eddy arrived in west Africa in October 1795 and soon found himself enmeshed in a web of advancing trade goods while experiencing unending delays awaiting deliveries of promised African commodities.
Eddy remained at the Iles de Los for nearly eleven months, waiting for cargo that never arrived. Meantime, the *Dolphin* deteriorated rapidly and was juried unfit to sail. Eddy lost not only his cargo but also his vessel. Mouser, "The Voyage of the good Sloop *Dolphin* to Africa, 1795-1796," *American Neptune*, 38(1978), 249-61.

10. For discussion of iron bars and bar prices see Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa; Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1975), 240ff.


12. Ibid., 279, 285.