

Richard Oswald as "An American": How a Frontier South Carolina Plantation Identifies the Anonymous Author of *American Husbandry* and a Forgotten Founding Father of the United States

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"What do they know of England who only England knows?"
---Rudyard Kipling

A writer using the *nom de plume* of "An American" first reviewed in print the potential for the agriculture in Britain's New World possessions in the two-volume *American Husbandry Containing an Account of the Soil, Climate, Production and Agriculture of the British Colonies in North America and the West Indies*, published by J. Bew, Pater-noster-Row, London in 1775.¹ The Internet today identifies hundreds of books and articles published in the more than two centuries since that have used these two volumes as a unique source for information on early America. Historian Harry J. Carman wrote, "Of all our colonial literature, *American Husbandry* is the most accurate and comprehensive account of the English colonies and gives by far the best description of their agricultural practices."²

The identity of the author has remained unknown, despite the work of several scholars, from 1776 to almost the present. A group of anonymous letters published included in the book have not only resolved this long-standing literary mystery but also revealed the writer as having played an unappreciated role in the creation of the United States. Discovering that secret came from a fabrication that answers a riddle hidden inside the enigma of the creation of this unique book.

A problem, false lead, and part of the solution to solving the authorship of *American Husbandry* began in its publication. It went all but ignored in its own time. The attitudes of Britain's public had changed from seeing the New World as a land of expansion and economic opportunity to one of treason, rebellion, ingratitude, and coming war. In London's *The Monthly Review or Literary Journal* of January 1776, the sole and equally anonymous reviewer of the book, in print, accused "An American" of trying to use a discussion of agriculture and economics as a subterfuge to cover an argument for conciliation with the American colonies:

¹ An American, *American Husbandry Containing an Account of the Soil, Climate, Production and Agriculture of the British Colonies in North America and the West Indies with Observations on the Advantages and Disadvantages of settling in them compared with Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 vols. (London, 1775).

² "An American," *American Husbandry*, ed. Harry J. Carman, (1775; rep. ed. New York, 1939), xxxiii, xli, lix, cited hereafter as Carman, *American Husbandry*.

But when we find this pretended Yankee attempting to foist himself upon us for the genuine Simon Pure, assuming airs of self-sufficiency, and dictating to us with intolerable presumption; he deserves the severest castigation, for his imposture, his arrogance, and his folly.³

A M E R I C A N
H U S B A N D R Y .

Containing an ACCOUNT of the
S O I L, C L I M A T E,
P R O D U C T I O N and A G R I C U L T U R E,
O F T H E
B R I T I S H C O L O N I E S

I N
N O R T H - A M E R I C A and the W E S T - I N D I E S ;

W I T H
O b s e r v a t i o n s o n t h e A d v a n t a g e s a n d D i s a d v a n t a g e s o f s e t t l i n g
i n t h e m , c o m p a r e d w i t h G R E A T B R I T A I N a n d I R E L A N D .

B Y A N A M E R I C A N .

I N T W O V O L U M E S .

V O L . I .

L O N D O N ,
P r i n t e d f o r J . B E W , i n P a t e r - n o t t e r - R o w .
M D C C L X X V .

³ Ibid, xxx, xxxiii, xli, lix.

(Other British writers of the period, notably historian Edward Gibbon, made the same argument for saving the imperial possessions in other ways, however.)



Contemporary French political cartoon on American agriculture and the rising conflict that would lead to the American Revolution. (Library of Congress)

The critic used much of the rest of the review on how, in *American Husbandry*, “An American” was misinformed and inexperienced in the sugar agriculture in Jamaica and the West Indies. Because these mistakes also appeared in Arthur Young’s 1772 work on sugar, the reviewer attributed the authorship of *American Husbandry* to Young. “An American” deserved better, however, for in this book the author covers a great deal of ground, by any definition. In volume I of 472 pages and volume II of 319 pages, it provides varying amounts of information on agriculture and the economies of the colonies of British Empire. The author reviewed agriculture in Nova Scotia, Canada (three chapters), New England (four chapters), New York (two chapters), New Jersey, Pennsylvania (two chapters), “Virginia and Maryland” (four chapters), “The Ohio,” North Carolina, South Carolina (five chapters), Georgia, “The Floridas,” Eastern Louisiana, “The Illinois,” Jamaica, Barbadoes (sic, Barbados), Leeward Islands, Ceded Islands, and Bahama (sic, Bahamas) Islands. The concluding chapters discuss the overall manufactures, population, and importance of the British colonies with a call for a stronger union with the metropole. Content in the work varies from the author’s personal experiences in Virginia and Maryland to the previously cited faulty account of sugar production.

All or almost all of *American Husbandry's* readers have wondered how an important work by someone with such an exceptional knowledge of America has remained anonymous. Identifying its creator would go a long way in evaluating it within its time and place but also in explaining its errors and omissions. Almost two centuries of speculation on the creator of *American Husbandry* has proved inconclusive, however. The anonymous reviewer in January 1776 identified the author as "that eminent book builder, Mr. A---r Y---g," certainly a reference to Arthur Young (1741-1820), a pioneer agronomist and a leading published British geographer and botanist. "An American" clearly copied the mistakes on sugar production from a well-known Young publication of 1772 but would Young have repeated mistakes surely brought to his attention by 1775? Otherwise, his work and *American Husbandry* share little in common. He had authored *Political Essays Concerning the Present State of the British Empire* in 1772 but, as with his later forty-five volume *Annals of Agriculture* (1784-1808), he did so openly under his own name. Arthur Young also likely never spent time in the New World and his extensive surviving letters fail to so much as hint at any connection to *American Husbandry*. Correspondence between Young and George Washington after the Revolution proves Young's lack of knowledge of agriculture even in Virginia where, as with Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New England, "An American" had at least visited and later described farming practices from first-hand experience.⁴

In 1919, scholar Dr. Lyman Carrier argued against Young as the compiler of *American Husbandry* and credited the book to Dr. John Mitchell (1711-1768). A resident of Virginia before moving to England, Mitchell compiled *A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America* (1755), a work widely praised and extensively used in his era and, like *American Husbandry*, by scholars to the present-day. Carrier wrote that some anonymous person, for reasons unknown, edited the two-volumes to hide John Mitchell's identity by the time that the book went to press in 1775, eight years after Mitchell's death. John Mitchell did publish at least two of his works on America anonymously, including *The Present State of Great Britain in America* in 1767. He spent his last years on an unfinished voluminous work on North American geography that "An American" could have consulted for *American Husbandry*.⁵

Historian Harry J. Carman, however, researched the authorship of *American Husbandry* for the introduction of its 1932 reprint. He eliminated Dr. John Mitchell, Dr. John Campbell (1708-1775, the British agent in Georgia), and Campbell's relatives, the prominent Edmund, Richard, and William Burke, as author, editor, or compiler. Carman pointed out that *American Husbandry* abounds in anonymous quotes taken from writers other than Mitchell, including mistakes about Jamaican sugar production that Young only published in 1772, five years after Mitchell's death. "An American" also quoted from the 1772 English translation of

⁴ Carman, *American Husbandry*, xvi-xxx, xlii, lv-lix; Rodney C. Loehr, "American Husbandry: a Commentary Apropos of the Carman Edition," *Agricultural History* 14 (July 1940): 105-106.

⁵ Carman, *American Husbandry*, xxxix-lv; Lyman Carrier, "American Husbandry: a Much Overlooked Publication," *Journal of the American Society of Agronomy* 11 (May 1919): 206.

Swedish scientist Peter Kalm's *Travels into North America* and included a reference to the Treaty of Augusta Indian land cession of June 1, 1773. Carman felt it odd that, if the notoriously modest Dr. John Mitchell were "An American," that he paid tribute to his own work as he also identified himself as the author of his two previous anonymous works.

The creator of *American Husbandry* does frequently plagiarize from Mitchell's published writings, and he must have known the geographer personally although he repeatedly misspelled the name as "Mitchel." Carman also noted that Courier failed to explain the differences in writing styles between Dr. John Mitchell and "An American". The only real argument, he continued, for Mitchell's authorship came down to asking what other suspect had "Dr. Mitchell's education, ability, experiences, and opportunities and who thought exactly as he did?"⁶ Historian Rodney C. Loehr wrote in 1940, "obviously, the author of *American Husbandry* was a person of some importance, but who was he? Until some fortunate chance reveals his identity, the authorship seems to remain anonymous."⁷

The sole contemporary critic in print of *American Husbandry* described its two volumes as "chiefly of accounts obtained from different persons very differently qualified for information." Therein lay the solution to the identity of "An American." Chapter twenty-five, on Georgia, largely consists of anonymous letters describing the settlement of a great land reserve on the frontier. That writer wrote of being a planter with holdings of 6,340 acres on a small but navigable creek that [eventually] emptied into the Savannah River. It was thirty miles west of Augusta, Georgia and from the main house on the side of a hill, the writer had a view from almost every window of the "river" three miles away. This planter also mentioned having previously lived in Scotland, England, the West Indies, Cadiz, Naples, and Boston but had lived in America for the previous eight years.

The author of the letters stated in two instances that he lived in Georgia but that cannot be the case. The colony's extensive public documents show that such prominent planters as Edward Barnard, John Campbell, Leonard Claiborne, George Galphin, Edmund Grey, William Knox, Joseph Maddock, and Thomas Waters could have authoritatively written about agriculture in the backcountry and along the Savannah River at that time. None of them, or anyone else from Georgia, had the time in America, personal histories, landholdings, location of property, and other details of their lives to have written the letters, however.⁸

The planter either completely invented the details of the plantation or changed some basic fact. The identity of the colony must be the fabrication for, if the letter writer had changed any other details, the difference should still have produced an identifiable Georgia candidate for the author of the letters. These letters must have been written from South

⁶ Loehr, "American Husbandry," 106-107; Carman, *American Husbandry*, 352-353; Edmund and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, *Dr. John Mitchell: The Man who made the Map of North America* (Chapel Hill, 1974), 224, 256-58.

⁷ Quoted in Loehr, "American Husbandry," 109. The Library of Congress card catalog attributes the authorship of *American Husbandry* to connections to Arthur Young and Dr. John Mitchell.

⁸ Robert S. Davis, "Letters from St. Paul Parish," *Richmond County History* 10 (Summer 1978): 21, 33.

Carolina and then edited by “An American” to make them appear as if written from across the Savannah River in Georgia.

Any number of reasons could exist for this deception but the simplest explanation offers a particularly credible answer. For the single chapter on Georgia, An American had little information beyond Dr. John Mitchell’s famous 1755 map showing that the colony shared a long common border on the Savannah River with South Carolina. This author/compiler of *American Husbandry* makes egregious errors about Georgia’s topography, wrongly describing the land in the colony, along the Savannah River from the coast to Augusta and beyond, as devoid of any swamps, marshes, and flatlands, mistakes not made by anyone with credible knowledge of the terrain, then or now. “An American” further wrongly wrote of that ground as covered with a thick black soil.⁹ In different passages of the letters, Georgia and South Carolina each appear as being somewhere else, implying a not completely effort to change all of the references from one colony to the other. By changing the identity of the colony, “An American” could fill his single otherwise erroneous chapter on Georgia. By contrast, the author wrote five chapters on South Carolina.

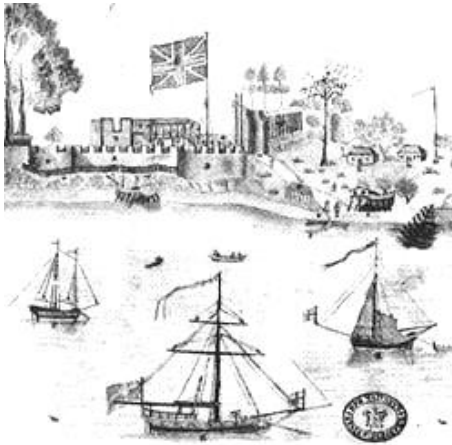
Only one person closely matches what the planter-writer of the letters wrote to “An American” about the plantation, but from South Carolina, John Lewis Gervais (1741-1798). Born in Ganges, Languedoc, France as Jean Lewis Gervais, he hailed from Hameln, Hanover-Brunswick, a German state ruled by George III of Great Britain. He served as a mercenary in military campaigns across Europe. Scottish merchant entrepreneur Richard Oswald (1705-1784) likely first met him while serving as commissary for the King’s armies in the German states. He hired Gervais as his magazine clerk and placed him in charge of his granary in Hameln. The Huguenot former soldier of fortune and his friend John Rossel (ca. 1740-1767) subsequently traveled on both sides of the Atlantic in Oswald’s service, including to the places that the writer of the letters printed in *American Husbandry* claimed to have visited. On June 28, 1764, Gervais and Rossel arrived in Charleston to meet Henry Laurens (1724-1792), Oswald’s American partner in the slave trade and great friend. The four men set upon the goal of establishing one of the large settlements for Hanoverians and other German Protestants on the American frontier that Oswald financed as humanitarian and entrepreneurial ventures.¹⁰

This Richard Oswald, one of the wealthiest men of his day, was a prime factor in Great Britain’s African slave trade that operated from Bance Island in Gambia. In building one of

⁹ Carman, *American Husbandry*, 335.

¹⁰ Henry Laurens to Richard Oswald, July 7, 1764, in Philip M. Hamer, *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 16 vols. (Columbia, 1968-2011), 4: 331-32, n. 3; David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Community, 1735-1785* (New York, 1995), 59-69, 389. Oswald also tried unsuccessfully to establish a similar settlement in East Florida at Mount Oswald, today part of Tomoka State Park. David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens: with a Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens* (New York, 1915), 127; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 100-10, 153-72, and Daniel L. Schafer, “‘A Swamp of an Investment’: Richard Oswald’s British East Florida Plantation Experiment” in Jane Landers, ed., *East Florida’s Colonial Plantations and Economy* (Gainesville, Fl., 2000).

the great trading empires, Oswald transported more than thirteen thousand Africans for sale as slaves in the New World, over eight thousands of who went to market through Laurens. His wealth also came from American sugar, Asian tea, and all else that made Great Britain's economy truly global. Poet Robert Burns wrote satirized the renowned beauty of Oswald's wife and her personal fortune that capitalized Oswald's profitable slave trade and extensive landholdings on four continents. Oswald's reach extended so far that, in his retirement, he famously sought advice on buying Italian marble for his Scottish home from his agent in India who bought his Chinese slaves. This fortune paid for a legendary art collection and a library suited to a scholar like "An American" who knew both French and Latin. His acquaintances included the writers James Boswell, Robert Strange, and Caleb Whitefoord. He knew Benjamin Franklin and thought well enough of him to own his portrait.¹¹

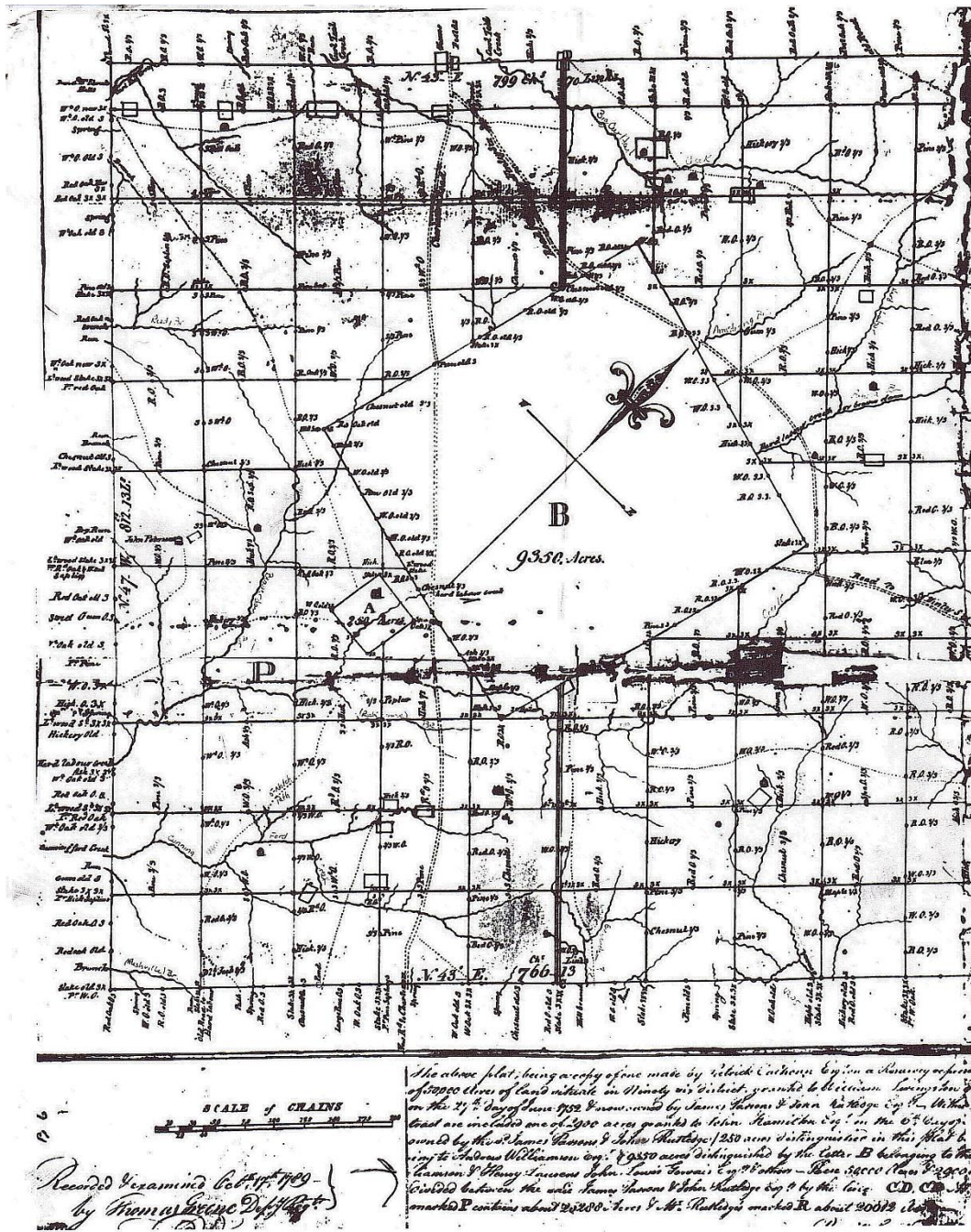


Eighteenth Century engraving of the British compound on Bance Island. (Library of Congress)

Henry Laurens initially sent the two Huguenots to look into his new plantations in Georgia. Rossel subsequently received a commission as a justice of the peace implying that he had planned to stay there. He died at Laurens' Broughton Island Plantation near Savannah on May 12, 1767.¹²

¹¹ Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 67, 69, 294-301, 349, 352, 353-54, 371, 385, 386-92, 445.

¹² Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina*, 215-17; Allen D. Candler, comp., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 39 vols. (Atlanta, 1907-1941), 9: 687.



Plat map depicting the Gervais-Laurens tract in 1789. (Courtesy Llewellyn M. Toulmin)

John Lewis Gervais petitioned South Carolina's colonial government for 5,000 acres near Long Cane Creek and for Oswald an additional 8,000 acres that adjoined the Gervais property on Hard Labor Creek, what in total consisted of all Oswald owned in mainland

America by 1770. The property, today east of the modern community of Verdery in Greenwood County, was approximately thirty miles northwest, instead of west, from Augusta as described in the letters in *American Husbandry*. Hard Labor Creek fits the description of the small but navigable creek that does eventually empty into the Savannah River. From the windows of a house on a hillside near his Haren-housen Branch, Gervais could see the deep and wide Long Cane [Creek], likely the river described as three miles away.¹³

The writer of the letters to “An American” supervised a plantation of 6,340 acres. Gervais, in addition to his initial grant of 5,000 acres, what the surveyor discovered as actually 5,340 acres, also acquired 350 acres from deeds and he applied to the colonial South Carolina government for two other tracts of 150 and 500 acres respectively. Gervais thus would have had claims to 6,340 acres or, depending on clerical errors, misreading, and final surveys, something very close to what he believed amounted to that total.¹⁴

Richard Oswald could also have mistakenly thought of the Oswald-Gervais settlement tract as in Georgia, as his partner Henry Laurens actually had more land and slaves there than in South Carolina. He settled his ailing cousin Captain Oswald Campbell (died 1777) on the Oswald-Laurens-Gervais frontier holdings in an unsuccessful effort to improve Campbell’s health in 1774. “An American” wrote of the letters in *American Husbandry* as extracts produced “from a pretty long correspondence carried on with a view of settling a relation in Georgia (which is since done).”¹⁵ What appears in the letters omits references to the bandits, disease, dangerous animals, conflicts with Native Americans, and other negative aspects of frontier life, likely so as not discourage Oswald from continuing his support for settling the tract with European Protestants. Gervais’ surviving letters to Laurens and Oswald also strike an identical tone to those published in *American Husbandry*. The anonymous writer of the letters described a French neighbor who had sent home for grape vine cuttings and of his own plans for making wine. Louis LeCerc Milfort passed through this area around 1775 and he wrote of French schoolteacher Jean Louis de Mesnil du St. Pierre’s unsuccessful efforts at producing wine from grapes brought from St. Pierre’s native Bordeaux. Gervais too engaged in signification.¹⁶

¹³ James Theodore Rossel and John Lewis Gervais, plat for 5,350 acres (1764), state plat book 8, pp. 296, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia; Brent H. Holcomb, comp., *Petitions for Land from the South Carolina Council Journals*, 7 vols. (Columbia, SC, 1996-1999), 5: 196, 273-74; McDonough, *Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens*, 27.

¹⁴ Brent H. Holcomb, *South Carolina Deed Abstracts 1773-1778 Books F-4 through X-4* (Columbia, SC, 1993), 66, 103; Jesse Hogan Motes III and Margaret Peckham Motes, comps., *South Carolina Memorials: Abstracts of Land Titles*, 1 vol. to date (Greenville, SC, 1996), 1: 26; Holcomb, *Petitions for Land*, 6: 267; Ge Lee Corley Hendrix, comp., *Edgefield County South Carolina Abstracts of Deed Books 1-12, 1786-1796* (Easley, SC, 1985), 9, 10, 31.

¹⁵ Carman, *American Husbandry*, 352; Henry Laurens to Oswald, December 2, 1773, to James Laurens, July 20, 1774, to James Laurens, to Gervais, July 21, 1774, to Gervais, July 21, 1774, and to Oswald, January 4, 1779, in Hamer, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 9: 187, 514-15, 518, 520, 10: 21; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 402; Holcomb, *Petitions for Land*, 6: 160-61.

¹⁶ S. Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 215-17; Lewis LeClerc Milfort, *Memoirs of a quick Glance at my various Travels and my Sojourn in the Creek Nation*, trans. Ben C. McCrary

The letter writer also wrote about receiving an extension for bringing in settlers. Georgia usually required the settlers to come before any allotment of land. The letter writer in *American Husbandry*, however, explained how he had twenty years to find settlers for his reserve but that the new frontier entrepreneurs only received ten to fifteen years.¹⁷ Gervais initially received five years to bring settlers but then, under terms not recorded, South Carolina Lieutenant Governor William Bull signed the grants for the acreage officially counted as 5,000 and 8,000 acres to Gervais and Oswald on October 29, 1765.¹⁸ By 1768, Oswald sold his claim to the original 5,340 acres to Laurens and Gervais and loaned Gervais slaves for the development of the property. He also transferred by mortgage his remaining 8,000 acres to those partners. In all, the total came to some 13,000 acres that, when resurveyed and divided equally in 1774, could also have also totaled 6,340 acres for Gervais' share.

The combined Oswald-Laurens-Gervais tract of some 13,000 acres had more than 240 people living on it by February 1768. Henry Laurens then suggested moving Richard Oswald's slaves from the unhealthy coast to better living conditions there on the frontier for the slaves' "happiness." Oswald eventually willed the mortgage that he still held to the frontier lands to Gervais and Laurens. In 1787, Laurens began an unsuccessful attempt to deed two thousand acres of the Long Cane property as a settlement for North Carolina Moravians, Americans of Central European Protestant ethnicity like those families that Oswald had originally intended to settle there.¹⁹

John Lewis Gervais prospered in the backcountry to become a member of what historian Mary Katherine Davis termed as upcountry South Carolina's "feather bed aristocracy." He named his new home Herrenhausen meaning "master's home place" and complained only that it kept him from Charleston and that, until he hired an Irish cook, he had to eat his own cooking. A Moravian visitor in 1790 described his mansion as "two-storied, makes a rather handsome appearance, but has shutters only in place of windows, in fact we found but few windows in this part of South Carolina."²⁰ Laurens described the plantation as producing

(Kennesaw, GA: 1959), 11-12; Holcomb, *Petitions for Land*, 6: 201; Carman, *American Husbandry*, 349.

¹⁷ Carman, *American Husbandry*, 343; Robert M. Willingham, Jr., *The History of Wilkes County, Georgia* (Washington, Ga., 2002), 124; Mary B. Warren, comp., *Georgia Governor and Council Journals 1772-1773* (Athens, GA, 2004), 167, 168, 172, 180.

¹⁸ Holcomb, *Petitions for Land*, 5: 277, 6: 160-61.

¹⁹ Laurens to Oswald, December 2, 1773 and August 16, 1783, in Hamer, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 9: 187, 16: 267; Mary Katherine Davis, "The Feather Bed Aristocracy: Abbeville District in the 1790s," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 80 (April 1979): 141-142; "A Trip into South Carolina. Account of an Inspection of the Lands intended for a Settlement of the Brethren, by Frederick Von Marschall and Christian Lewis Benzien, in November and December 1790," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 4 (1895): 215.

²⁰ Mary Katherine Davis, "The Feather Bed Aristocracy: Abbeville District in the 1790s," *South Carolina Historical*

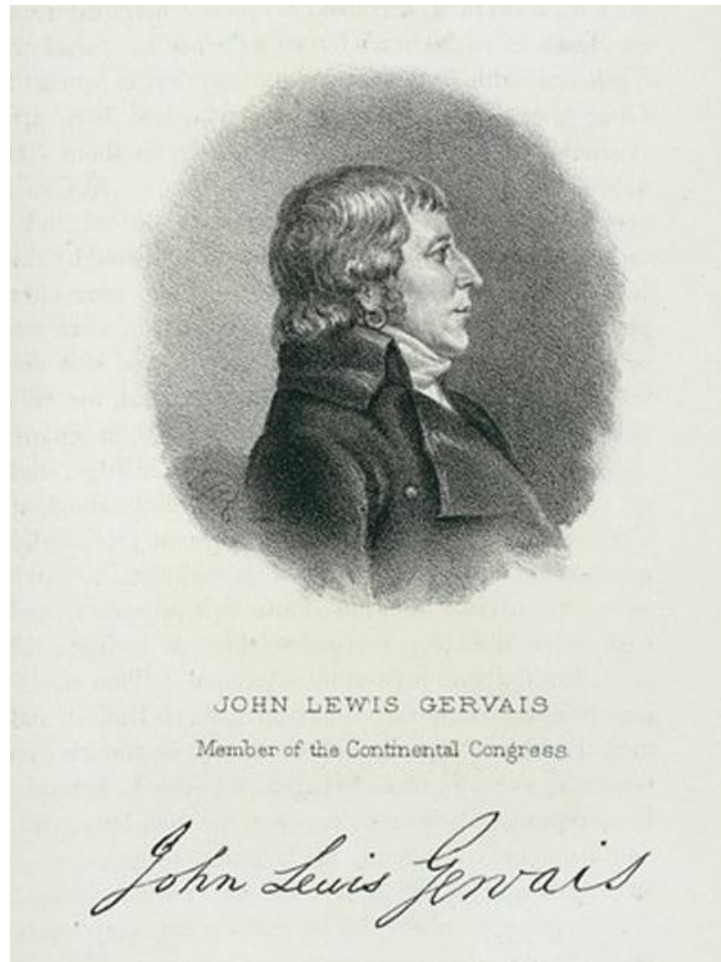
indigo, hemp, wheat, black cattle, sheep, hogs, horses, and potash with a potential for wine and silk, as did the writer of the letters of in *American Husbandry*. At the end of his second year, Gervais's holdings also produced six thousand pounds of hemp. He built a mill and the governor's council that affirmed his continued possession of the land gave him the position of justice of the peace. Famed naturalist William Bartram, later the author of the great travel account of the southern frontier, witnessed a wedding at the plantation. Justice of the Peace Gervais performed the marriage of George Whitefield, nephew of the famous Georgia evangelist of the Great Awakening, and Francis Tyler of Virginia, the sister of the wife of Gervais's prominent neighbors Andrew Williamson and Leroy Hammond, in 1771.²¹

John Lewis Gervais went on to serve in many posts in public service in South Carolina during the American Revolution, including as a contractor for supplies for the military, while also handling business affairs for Henry Laurens during Laurens' long absences between 1771 and 1785. During the war, he lost almost everything he owned, including his slaves, down to the clothes on his back except for his land. Gervais blamed his neighbors who had supported the King for his losses but especially Andrew Williamson and Williamson's secretary Malcom Brown, former officers in the American military whom he claimed had abandoned the cause of the United States to cooperate with the British military. John Lewis Gervais represented his adopted state in the Confederation Congress in 1782-1783 that governed the United States after the adoption of the Articles of Confederation. He played a major role in the location of Columbia as South Carolina's state capital, where a today a street name honors him memory. After the war, Gervais moved to Charleston where he died on August 18, 1798.²²

Magazine 80 (April 1979): 141-142; "A Trip into South Carolina. Account of an Inspection of the Lands intended for a Settlement of the Brethren, by Frederick Von Marschall and Christian Lewis Benzien, in November and December 1790," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 4 (1895): 215.

²¹ Holcomb, *Petitions for Land*, 5: 274; Henry Laurens and Gervais to Council, February 3, 1768, in Hamer, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 5: 582; H. T. Cook, *The Hard Labor Section* (Greenwood, SC, 1923), 11-12; Bobby F. Edmonds, *The Making of McCormick County* (McCormick, SC, 1999), 363; Margaret Watson, *Greenwood County Sketches: Old Roads and Early Families* (Greenwood, SC, 1982), 52-53; Anne C. Gibert, *John Lewis Gervais: A Man of Vision* (n. p., n. d.), n. p.; Edward J. Cashin, *William Bartram and the American Revolution on the Southern Frontier* (Columbia, SC, 2007), 137-38; Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 456. In Julian Alvin Carroll Chandler, et al, *The South in the Building of the Nation: Economic History, 1607-1865* (Richmond, Va., 1909), 181, the Gervais, Laurens, and Oswald tract is described as a plan to take advantage of the British subsidy on indigo on a grand scale.

²² Henry Laurens to Oswald, December 2, 1773 in Hamer, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 9: 187; Llewellyn M. Toulmin, *The Search for White Hall and Revolutionary General Andrew Williamson: The Benedict Arnold of the South" and America's First Major Double Agent* (Columbia, SC: The author, 2012), 58-59; Lockhart, "Under the Wings of Columbia," 176-97; McDonough, *Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens*, 287, n. 55; Gibert, *John Lewis Gervais*, n. p. Dr. Llewellyn M. Toulmin has a copy of a survey of 50,000 acres granted to William Livingston on June 27, 1752 as surveyed by Patrick Calhoun. The origin of this survey is unknown but the copy was made by Thomas Greene, deputy surveyor, and dated October 17, 1789. It shows the 9,350 acre tract as belonging to Andrew Williamson, Henry Laurens, and John Lewis Gervais. Richard Oswald's 1764 plat for the property shows it enclosing 200 acres that belonged to Andrew Williamson. Toulmin, *The Search for White Hall*, 78-80; Richard Oswald, plat for 8,000 acres (1764), state plat book 19, p. 97, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia. The Toulmin work is also published online as "The 'Benedict Arnold of South Carolina' and America's First Double Agent," in



Nineteenth Century Engraving of John Lewis Gervais. (South Caroliniana Library)

Richard Oswald matches the facts known and the speculations about “An American,” the anonymous overall author and compiler of *American Husbandry*, in other ways. From the late 1730s to the early 1740s, Oswald had lived in the area of Norfolk and the Elizabeth River of Virginia. He had lived in the Maryland and Virginia colonies, places once home to the author of *American Husbandry*. By 1764, Oswald had returned to Scotland, one explanation for why “An American” wrote repeatedly of “our colonies.”

Oswald’s fortune paid for more than the publication of *American Husbandry*. He read widely, consulted experts, and acquired an in-depth knowledge of the subjects that interested him. Henry Laurens and John Lewis Gervais surely provided Oswald the information for the five chapters on South Carolina. In Scotland, Oswald actively promoted modern farm management on his lands and he counted pioneer agronomist Arthur Young, American

geographer Dr. John Mitchell, and visionary economist Adam Smith among his prominent friends.²³

A man in Oswald's position also had reason to publish his views anonymously. His acquaintance Benjamin Franklin had appeared before the King's Privy Council on January 29, 1774 to make a plea to keep the American mainland colonies in the British Empire. Those efforts came to naught as the council joined the press in ridiculing the previously venerated Dr. Franklin and even attacked his loyalty to the Crown despite his extensive past services and much sought advice. His son was royal governor of New Jersey.²⁴

Described as reserved in his opinions, Oswald avoided public attention. He used his influence only in private conversation to such a degree that even his modern biographer Historian David Hancock has found it difficult to learn how he felt about some of the major issues of the day. As the compiler of *American Husbandry*, Oswald anonymously made the same arguments that Benjamin Franklin had wanted to give before the council but he did so in his detailed, colony-by-colony thesis. All that Great Britain could want in planting and production, Oswald as "An American" wrote, surely only awaited further profitable development in its New World possessions.

During the American Revolution, royal officials sought Oswald's advice and help on matters that even included Russian advances in North America and the potential for a combined Russian-British invasion of the Caribbean. He obliged although only in private and with promises of anonymity.²⁵ After the fall of Georgia to British arms, Oswald recommended the recovery of at least one of the southern colonies, preferably South Carolina, in order to begin a process of winning Americans to reconciliation with Great Britain as a means of ending the war.

Ironically, the pacifist Oswald, having anonymously published *American Husbandry* as among the first writings of the American Revolution in 1775, also wrote what became almost the last word of the conflict in a criticism of the British military policy in the war, *Memorandum on the Folly of Invading Virginia*. In 1782, King George III called upon him, now almost eighty but still the most knowledgeable man in Britain about America, to approach Benjamin Franklin in Paris on the subject of a formal treaty to finally, formally end the American Revolution. Lord Shelburne, the Secretary of State for Home, Irish, and Colonial Affairs, concurred. The resulting 1783 Treaty of Paris formally ended the American Revolution and Richard Oswald served as the principal negotiator in it from the beginning. Franklin praised his integrity.

²³ Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 59-69.

²⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004) 146-47.

²⁵ Daniel J. McDonough, *Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens: The Parallel Lives of Two American Patriots* (Sellingsgrove, PA, 2000), 217, 253-56. For much of what survives of Oswald's advice to the government see Memoranda of Richard Oswald, 1779-1781, Tracy W. McGregor Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, and the Richard Oswald Collection, 1779-1783, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

Had the British leaders known of his authorship of *American Husbandry*, however, they surely would not have allowed Oswald to participate in the peace negotiations. Critics of the negotiations charged from the beginning that Oswald gave away too much too easily to the former colonies. He sought open trade between an independent United States and Great Britain, even joking with French representatives that he did not mind if the new country became the world's greatest empire as its people spoke English. Had Britain followed his advice, and held to the Treaty's provisions on trade, the two nations would have avoided the War of 1812. He and Franklin predicted the so-called special relationship of the Great Britain and the United States that, starting in the 1830s, has served the two nations to the present day. He even considered joining the new United States by moving to the South Carolina lands he had mortgaged to Laurens and Gervais!²⁶

Henry Laurens briefly participated in the American peace treaty delegation there the lands of John Lewis Gervais on the South Carolina frontier resolves one other mystery. During the American Revolution, Laurens had served as president of the Continental Congress but he became a prisoner in the Tower of London following his capture at sea in 1780. Oswald visited him in prison and helped to post bond for his release, at one time offering his whole fortune as security. After his exchange for Lord Charles Cornwallis, Henry Laurens persuaded Oswald to accept a provision in the treaty requiring the British and Loyalist Americans to return escaped slaves and other property during their evacuation, his only contribution to the treaty negotiations.

This last minute change would be Laurens only contribution to the Treaty of Paris and seems curious that Oswald so readily accepted it. Gervais' slaves, however, had run away during the war and Laurens wrote to him of how this provision could return those of the runaway servants who had found refuge behind the British lines. Gervais still owed Oswald for the slaves and Oswald had even transferred his slaves from British East Florida to Gervais' lands on the frontier in hopes of salvaging that venture and recovering what Gervais' owed. This amendment thus gave some hope to recovering the value of the slaves Oswald had loaned Gervais. Sir Guy Carleton and other British leaders ignored that provision of the treaty, however.

Henry Laurens actually found slavery morally wrong despite the fortune he had made from it, first as Oswald's American partner in the slave trade and then even more wealth he acquired as a successful slave-owning planter, to become one of the richest of Americans. Laurens retired from the slave trade from the decline in the business and tried unsuccessfully to find a partner when he failed to transfer his interest to Gervais. Laurens lost most of what he owned in the war with the notable exception of the land he held jointly with Gervais. His

²⁶ Oswald, *Memorandum on the Folly of Invading Virginia*, 39; Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin: Collected and Edited with a Life and Introduction*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth, 10 vols., (New York, 1905-1907), 10: 396; Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America* (New York, 2006), 296-98, 391; H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2000), 601-3; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York, 2011), 78, 80.

son John died from wounds received in battle on August 27, 1782 after they had finally reconciled over their differences on John's support for recruiting slaves for the American army with offers of emancipation. Whatever he felt about slavery, Laurens dared not speak against it. Passions ran so high because of calls for manumission in the Early Republic that Georgia and South Carolina even threatened to secede.²⁷



Nineteenth Century engraving of the signing of the Treaty of Paris. A portrait of Richard Oswald is over the fireplace.
(Library of Congress)

American Husbandry, through the roles played in its creation by Richard Oswald, Henry Laurens, and John Lewis Gervais rises above the level of just an antiquarian curiosity. It is a rare and extensive, if uneven, account of the economics of British Colonial North America

²⁷ Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York, 2003), 254, 256-57, 359; Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 358-59, 369-71, 388, 409; Laurens to Gervais, March 4, 1784, in Hamer, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 16: 73-74; Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War of Independence* (Chicago, 2012), 86-87, 92; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2006), 136-39; McDonough, *Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens*, 23-25, 27, 217, 263-265; Piecuch, *Three Peoples One King*, 163, 312-13; Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America* (New York, 2013), 84-86.

that has benefited scholars for over two centuries. Knowing the author of *American Husbandry* commemorates Richard Oswald, Scottish born former resident of the British mainland colonies as one of the most important but forgotten founders of the United States of America.

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<http://www.wallacestate.edu/bobdavis.html>