



# Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.

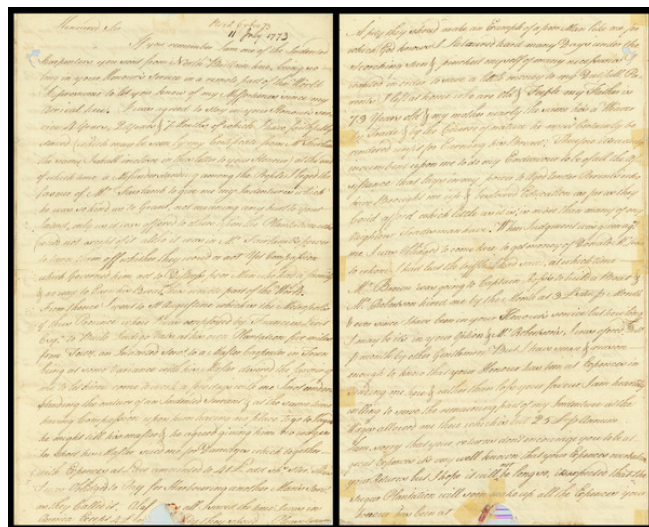
7407 La Jolla Boulevard  
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## (Florida - Slavery and Manumission) [Letter from Malcom Ross dated July 11, 1773 to Richard Oswald Esquire]

**Stock#:** 86624  
**Map Maker:** Ross  
**Date:** 1773  
**Place:** Mount Oswald Plantation,  
Florida  
**Color:** Pen & Ink  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 15.5 x 12.5 inches  
**Price:** SOLD



### Description:

**"Freedom is what all Mankind desires"**

**Remarkable 1773 Letter by an Indentured Carpenter in British Florida**

**Seeking to Buy the Freedom of the Son he fathered with an Enslaved Black Woman**

**One of a handful of extant letters from British Colonial Florida bearing postal markings**

A truly amazing letter by Malcolm Ross, an indentured carpenter working on the Mount Oswald Plantation in British Florida in 1773, to his patron Richard Oswald, a prominent London merchant who later played an important role in the negotiations leading to the Peace of Paris following the American Revolution. In the letter, Ross seeks to be released from the terms of his indenture as a carpenter. After a detailed explanation of his straitened financial situation, Ross segues to a startling request that he be allowed to purchase the freedom of a two-year-old son he has fathered with an African-descended enslaved woman in Florida. After suggesting that his predicament was "common to this part of the world," Ross proceeds to make an impassioned plea to Oswald, admitting that he has publicly denied paternity of the child due to "the Shame of the World." The appeal is best discerned through Ross's own words:

*My second & last misfortune is still worse, I am ashamed to mention it to you (Altho it be common in this part of the World, it's far from being Creditable) yet necessity which is a hard Weapon, forces*



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*me to Devulge a Secret to your Honour that I never did to any Person before & at the same time I am hopfull that your Honour will forgive me for using so much freedom. I had the Missfortune of having a Child by one of your Negroe Wenches who is now a Boy 2 years odd months old & as life is uncertain, more so in this Warm Climate than in Europe I begg the favour of your Honour to sale him to me as reasonable as Possible that the Creature may have his Freedom & have no reason to Curse me after I am Departed [this] life. Freedom is what all Mankind desires, with God's assistance & your's he shall have his. The Wench told that he was mine but the shame of the World caused me to deny which makes me to write to you Privately.*

While a sense of shame over fathering a child with an enslaved woman is palpable in the letter, Ross's determination to purchase his son's freedom reaches a level of eloquence when he declares that "Freedom is what all Mankind desires." Reading between the lines here, Ross's status as an indentured tradesman adds a touch of poignancy to the prevailing hypocrisy of the situation. Certainly Ross's words leap off the page in veritable high relief for the modern reader. While it was not uncommon for white fathers to purchase the freedom of their enslaved children in 18th-century British American plantations, evidence of the practice, through such an intensely emotive private letter, especially from a white indentured laborer to his patron, is very rare indeed. Such a letter stands as a valuable source for historians of slavery, manumission, and mixed race people.

Another aspect worth noting is Ross's unusually high level of education as reflected in his writing, a quality not universally shared by his fellow tradesmen at the time.

**Richard Oswald**

Richard Oswald (1705-1784) was a prominent Scottish-born merchant, slave trader, and advisor to the British government on trade regulations and the conduct of the American War of Independence. He is best known as the British peace commissioner who, in 1782, negotiated the Peace of Paris.

In 1746 Oswald established himself in mercantile business in London. He leased a counting-house at 17 Philpot Lane, where he initially devoted most of his time to the shipping and trading of tobacco. He took on a forage contract for the British Army, having in 1756 the merchant James Buchanan (1696-1758) as guarantor. He also prospered as a contractor during the Seven Years' War, particularly in the supply of bread in the German theater.

In British North America, he had large land holdings and owned enslaved people in Florida, and held estates in both Georgia and Virginia. He ran down these holdings during the American War of Independence. He also owned plantations in the Caribbean. Oswald was instrumental in directing British



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businessmen to promising locales in America for growing rice and indigo. Oswald directed British planter Francis Levett, who formerly worked for the Levant Company, to locations in the colony of East Florida for his plantations, and he urged East Florida's Governor James Grant to make generous land grants to Levett, whom Oswald called his "worthy friend" to whom he owed "particular obligations."

Oswald put together deals with investors who had good connections, raising his own social standing. In his petitions to the Board of Trade and Plantations for the settlement of Nova Scotia plantations, for instance, he demonstrated an ability to bring together groups acceptable to the King. Those he put forward for Nova Scotia included: a former governor (Thomas Pownall); the cartographer John Mitchell; Member of Parliament Robert Jackson; MP and Paymaster for the Marines John Tucker; and a judge of the Marshalsea Court, and cousin of adventurer Sir Michael Herries, Levett Blackborne, who was himself stepbrother to Thomas Blackborne Thoroton, brother-in-law of the Marquess of Granby. This formula of connecting power-brokers was a key to his success.

In 1782, Oswald was selected by Lord Shelburne to open informal negotiations with the Americans, to be held in Paris. Because of his prior experience living in America and his knowledge of its geography and trade, he had been consulted frequently by the British Ministry about matters concerning the war. Lord Shelburne chose Oswald because he thought his selection would appeal to Benjamin Franklin. Oswald shared Franklin's free trade commercial views; he possessed a "philosophic disposition"; and he had previously had a limited correspondence with Franklin. Franklin was impressed with Oswald's negotiating skills and described him as a man with an "Air of great Simplicity and Honesty."

On July 25, 1782, official negotiations began. The preliminary articles were signed by Oswald for Great Britain, and John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens for the United States on November 30, 1782 and adopted in September 1783 with almost no changes.

A portion of Oswald's papers relating to the American Revolution are held in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan.

### **Mount Oswald Plantation**

The Mount Oswald Plantation was established in 1766 when the British government granted Richard Oswald vast tracts of land in Florida. Oswald's agent in America obtained two grants of 20,000 acres each, one named Timouka, located on the Halifax and Tomoka Rivers, and the second, named Ramsey, located on the Mosquito and Indian Rivers. The plantations or settlements were named Mount Oswald, Ferry Settlement, Swamp Settlement, and Adia Settlement. The Mount Oswald Plantation was the most important of Oswald's Florida holdings, with a complex of houses, barns and stables. Hundreds of enslaved



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Africans were brought to Oswald's plantations to clear land for the cultivation of indigo, rice, cotton, and sugar. Oswald remained an absentee owner who managed his Florida plantations through overseers.

**Rarity**

Original manuscript documents relating to the purchased manumission of the children of enslaved African-descended women fathered by white men are extremely rare. While scholars generally recognize the practice was not uncommon, there is a paucity of first person accounts, and the primary sources seem mostly limited to legal documents or third party descriptions by neighbors and business associates, or that of abolitionists denouncing the practice as proof of the evils of slavery. Actual letters by white tradesmen in British plantations seeking to purchase the freedom of their children born to slavery are very rare in the market; such documents from Florida in the 1770s are virtually non-existent in the market.

A recent study of colonial Jamaica covering the same time period as the present Florida letter describes how British white men on plantations who shared a bed with enslaved or free black women rarely documented their situation:

*Because conjugal and other sexual interactions between white men and African-descended women occurred outside the reach of the law, the men never made formal commitments to the enslaved or free women who shared their beds... In the records that have survived, British males who spent time in Jamaica rarely spoke of their conjugal relations with enslaved or free women to anyone outside their intimate circles... References [to the practice] occur primarily in letters written by friends and family rather than in comments made by the man himself. - "Blood Ties in the Colonial Sexual Economy" [in:] Brooke N. Newman, Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica, pages 147-148.*

And a similar observation from another historian writing about enslaved women in colonial Caribbean society emphasizes how few white men openly admitted to sleeping with black women:

*Few men, however, openly admitted to their attractions for and relationships with slave women. The majority were hypocrites... John Stedman intimated that white men actually preferred black women... "the colonists in their amours prefer the Indian, Negro and Mulatto girls"... By the late eighteenth century, the black and, even more so, the coloured woman was well established, in the eyes of the white man, in her role as concubine... Few men, with the exception perhaps of John Stedman and 'Monk' Lewis, openly admitted their attraction to black women. - Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838, page 17 and passim.*



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The present letter would seem to corroborate the above observations while at the same time suggesting reasons why such documentation is so rare: Ross describes his situation as a shameful "secret" that he has denied in public, and only divulges here to Oswald out of dire necessity.

**Florida Postal History Rarity**

Along with its remarkable historical content, the present letter is important as an extremely early example of Florida postal history. A letter with similar postmarks and franking from Sept. 12, 1774, also datelined from the Mount Oswald Plantation, but with decidedly lesser content on sugarcane crops, sold for \$40,000 at the Floyd E. Risvold Sale at Spinks Shreves Galleries in 2010. According to the Risvold sale description that letter was "one of a mere three known examples from the British Colonial period in Florida bearing postal markings." Another interesting detail concerning the peripatetic route of the letter: a note on the letter suggests it was forwarded to Ross's father, David Ross, a weaver in Inverness, Scotland.

The cover bears a pencil note from an anonymous collector in 1969: "Traded New England Stamps 3000 00 in covers." \$3,000 was a princely sum for antiquarian material in 1969 when the price of a new Chevy truck was not much more than \$2,000.

**A transcription of the letter here follows:**

*11 July 1773*

*Honoured Sir*

*If you remember I am one of the Indented Carpenters you sent from North Brittain here, being so long in your Honour's Service in a remote part of the World. I presume to let you know of my Misfortunes since my arrival here. I was agreed to stay in your Honour's service 4 years, 2 years & 7 months of which I have faithfully served (which may be seen by my Certificate from Mr. Fairlamb the same I shall inclose in this letter to your Honour) at the end of which time a Misunderstanding among the People I begged the favour of Mr. Fairlamb to give me my Indentures which he was so kind as to Grant, not meaning any hurt to your Interest, only as it was offered to others upon the Plantation who wou'd not except of it altho it was in Mr. Fairlamb's power to turn them off whither they wou'd or not Yet Compassion which governed him not to distress a poor Man who had a family & no way to Earn his Bread in this remote part of the World.*

*From thence I went to St. Austine which is the Metropolis of this Province where I was employed by Francis Levit, Esqr. to Build Indigo Vales at his own Plantation five miles from Town, an Indented*



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*Servt. to a Master Carpenter in Town being at some Variance with his Master desired the favour of me to let him come to work a few days with me I not understanding the nature of an Indented Servant & at the same time having Compassion upon him having no place to go to I agreed he might till his master & he agreed giving him no wages. In short his Master sued me for Damages which together with Expences at Law amounted to 41 £ odd shs. Ster. Thus I was oblidge'd to pay for Harboursing another Man's Servt. as they called it. Alas [was?] all I saved the time I was in America. Except 4£ [loss of a couple words] they shou'd please [?]*

*A pity they shou'd make an Example of a poor Man like me for which God knows I laboured hard many Days under the Scorching Sun & pinched myself of many necessities I wanted in order to save a little money to my Dutifull Parents I left at home who are Old & Feeble my Father is 73 years old & my mother nearly the same he's a Weaver by Trade & by the Course of nature he must certainly be rendered unfit for Earning his Bread; Therefore it's a duty incumbent upon me to do my Endeavour to be of all the assistance that lays in my power to aged tender parents who have brought me up & bestowed Education as far as they cou'd afford which little as it is; is more than many of my neighbour Tradesman have. When Judgment was given agst. me I was obliged to come here to get money of Donald McLean to whom I had lent the trifle I had saved, at which time Mr. Brown was going to Captain Ross's to build a Boat & Mrs. Robertson hired me by the Month at 3£ ster, p. month & ever since I have been in your Honour's service but how I may be its in your option & Mr. Robertson's, I was ofered 3 £ 10 p. month by other Gentlemen but I have sense & reason enough to know that your Honour has been at Expences in sending me here & rather than loss your favour I am heartily willing to serve the remaining part of my Indenture at the Wages allowed me there which is but 25 £ p. annum. I am sorry that your returns don't encourage you to be at great Expences it's very well known that your Expences overbalance your Returns but I hope it will not be long so, its expected that the sugar Plantation will soon make up all the Expences your honour has been at [loss of a few words due to paper damage] .*

*My second & last misfortune is still worse, I am ashamed to mention it to you (Altho it be common in this part of the World, it's far from being Creditable) yet necessity which is a hard Weapon, forces me to Devulge a Secret to your Honour that I never did to any Person before & at the same time I am hopfull that your Honour will forgive me for using so much freedom. I had the Missfortune of having a Child by one of your Negroe Wenches who is now a Boy 2 years odd months old & as life is uncertain, more so in this Warm Climate than in Europe I begg the favour of your Honour to sale him to me as reasonable as Possible that the Creature may have his Freedom & have no reason to Curse me after I am Departed [this] life. Freedom is what all Mankind desires, with God's assistance & your's he shall have his. The Wench told that he was mine but the shame of the World caused me*



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*to deny which makes me to write to you Privately. I am hopefull that your Honour will be so kind as to write me a few lines by your first Packet to Mr. Robert[so]n to let me know upon what terms I shall Purchase him in so doing I shall gratefully remember your friendly favour & ever prey for your wellfare & at the same time I remain, Your most humble & Obedient servant, Malcom Ross.*

*East Florida / Mount Oswald / Plant . 11th July 1773*

**Detailed Condition:**

Folio. Folded sheet of laid paper, with watermark of lion rampant holding arrows, countermarked GR with crown. 3 1/2 pages of manuscript text. Remnant of wax seal. Docketed on verso: "Malcolm Ross / 11 July 1773 / Mr. Oswald." Further docketed: "This letter to his Father directed thus To Mr. David Ross Weaver to the care of Mr. Wm. Fraser Tailor to the Estate of King mills [?] near Invernesse." Multiple rare and notable ink stamped postal franking, including the rare "CHARLES/TOWN" two-line straightline British Colonial transit postmark and "OC/15" Franklin type circular datestamp, as well as the London arrival "6/DE" Bishop type datestamp.