Atlantic Bonds

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Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa.

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Five months after Church Vaughan arrived in Liberia, in May 1853, settlers held an election. It had been six years since Liberia had become an independent republic, its constitution largely modeled on that of the United States except for a few key provisions. Slavery was illegal, for one thing, and only “Negroes or persons of Negro descent” were eligible for citizenship, property holding, or public office. Liberia’s president, Joseph J. Roberts, was a former free Virginian who had emigrated in the 1820s and built up a profitable trading business. For six years before independence, he had served as the American Colonization Society’s governor of Liberia; now he was standing for his fourth two-year term as president. As Vaughan could read in the Liberia Herald, the settler newspaper, Roberts had intended to retire from politics but had been prevailed upon by some of Liberia’s leading men to stand for one more term. His opponent, chief justice of the Supreme Court Samuel Benedict, took little issue with Roberts’s performance as president, but argued that Liberia’s political system would benefit from a change of administration.

Church’s recent allocation of land from the Liberian government entitled him to vote for the first time in his life, though it is unknown whether or not he actually cast a ballot. No one in Liberia’s capital, however, could miss the celebration of Roberts’s re-election that took place after the results were announced. The morning of May 20, 1853, began with a barrage of gunfire heralding the daylong postelection festival. At nine o’clock A.M., a fleet of boats and canoes, many decorated with flags and pendants, arrived from other American settlements and were met at the harbor by a delegation from Monrovia. After landing, the participants organized themselves into groups representing different towns and villages, each with its own banner, and
together with a band of musicians, they marched in procession to President Roberts’s residence. Hundreds of spectators were already assembled outside, cheering as the president and his vice president-elect emerged. One of the banners read, “We are happy without a change.” The crowd’s enthusiasm continued during several speeches, including those by President Roberts and Vice President Stephen Benson. Then, under orange trees opposite the home of one of Monrovia’s prosperous traders, lunch was served at a table set for three hundred gentlemen. Meanwhile, Mrs. Roberts entertained the same number of Liberian ladies at the president’s house. After lunch, the president and vice president paraded in a richly decorated carriage through the streets of downtown Monrovia to the president’s mansion, “followed by the largest political concourse ever assembled in Liberia.” At seven o’clock that night, the crowd was treated to a fireworks display, and they ended the evening singing patriotic songs composed especially for the occasion.

If Church Vaughan had left the United States frustrated that black people there could never truly be free, he had firm grounds for optimism when he stepped foot on African soil for the first time the previous January. Two years earlier, nineteen-year-old Edward Blyden, later to become one of Liberia’s foremost intellectuals, had been so moved when he landed at Monrovia that he had penned a poem, which began: “Liberia, happy land! To thee/The oppressed colored man may flee;/Thy pleasant, thy delightful shore/To him true freedom will restore!” Indeed, within six months of his arrival in Liberia, Church was able to assume more of the rights and duties of citizenship than he had in his twenty-four years in South Carolina. He trained with the militia and was dispatched to military duty; he received a land grant from the government to establish his own homestead; and he was eligible to vote. Moreover, he could make a good living as a carpenter. Yet less than three years after he arrived, when presented with the opportunity to leave Liberia—for a place reputed to be roiled by warfare and slave trading, no less—he took it. Why was he not more attached to his new home?

The answer to this question does not appear in any written record, as Church Vaughan left behind scarcely a trace of his life in Liberia. He may have composed letters to his family, but if so they did not pass through the American Colonization Society’s corresponding secretary, as some settlers’ letters did. In fact, Church did not come to the attention of ACS officials at all. Nor is he mentioned in surviving accounts from fellow settlers, or in the Liberian press. Though it is possible to piece together his experiences based on records of those who knew him, Church himself either kept a low profile

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in Liberia, achieving neither spectacular success nor scandalous ruin, or he produced a paper trail that has not survived.

The latter is certainly a reasonable proposition. In 1980, the long-simmering resentment of so-called “country” Liberians (that is, those indigenous to the area) against the descendants of American settlers finally boiled over. A military coup toppled the government of President William Tolbert, whose True Whig political party had dominated Liberian politics to the benefit of Americo-Liberians for most of the country’s history. Then, between 1989 and 2003, Liberians endured civil war and horrific violence, which killed some 250,000 people and displaced many thousands of others. In Monrovia, archives were looted, and most of the country’s historical documents were lost. More than a decade after the end of the war, archivists and historians are only beginning the painstaking process of reconstructing, and reconsidering, Liberian history.4

Church Vaughan’s alienation from Liberia was likely connected to the same historical process that brought about the country’s devastation more than a century later. As he learned, settler society was in its own way as exclusive and exploitative as the one he had left behind in South Carolina. As in North America, colonialism in Liberia was built on land expropriated from native people. From the beginnings of American settlement, a series of military battles and lopsided treaties had either displaced local Dey, Golah, Bassa, Vai and other peoples or else brought them under the “protection” of the Liberian administration, subject to the foreigners’ laws and unfavorable trading agreements. Liberia’s boosters described this process as bringing civilization to savage Africans, especially since one of their goals was to stop slave trading between local leaders and transatlantic purchasers. Yet Liberians’ use of indigenous labor for their own enterprises came awfully close to slavery itself, as some of Church’s contemporaries pointed out. In South Carolina, Church Vaughan had been neither a slave nor a master, but he knew about labor exploitation and group prejudice. Liberia’s official motto, emblazoned to this day on its official seal, proclaims, “The love of liberty brought us here.” Yet Church may well have wondered—as Liberians in our own time have too—what exactly that liberty entailed, and for whom.

Church’s first sight of Liberia’s shores came in late December 1852, more than four weeks after the Joseph Maxwell left port. Rising over a thousand feet above sea level was Grand Cape Mount, a broad-based, pyramid-shaped hill jutting into the ocean forty miles northwest of Monrovia. Its plateau extends for miles to a chain of still higher and more broken hills, the whole
area covered with a thick forest. A visitor who saw it less than a year after Church did was spellbound: “The Cape and country adjoining appeared to me the most beautiful scene I ever beheld.” For Church Vaughan and the other passengers, the dramatic sight must have seemed like a good omen.

Three days later, on January 1, 1853, they reached their destination: Cape Mesurado, the location of Liberia’s capital Monrovia. “One who has never been in the torrid zone can form no just conception of the exuberance, and I may say, intensity of tropical vegetation,” wrote the missionary Thomas Jefferson Bowen—whom Church would later meet—about landing there three years previously. From the ship, Church and his fellow passengers could see the brown sand of the beach and its bubbling white foam, leading quickly to the Cape Mesurado promontory, which rises some 250 feet “like a heavy cloud of vegetation over the sea.” Arriving during West Africa’s dry season, the new immigrants were already feeling heat and humidity like that of the South Carolina summer, with the addition of the dusty harmattan wind blowing in from the Sahara. As they peered at the horizon through the haze, they must have pondered, as Bowen had, “what strange rivers, towns and people were there in the unknown countries to which we were going.”

Cape Mesurado, named centuries earlier by Portuguese explorers, forms

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the end of an elevated peninsula stretching northwest to southeast, with the Atlantic Ocean more or less on its south and west sides and the Mesurado River to the north and flowing inland. Monrovia itself sits behind the promontory on a ridge along the northern part of the peninsula, best reached by sea through the mouth of the river. But because of the heavy surf and sandbars, ships had to anchor some distance from the shore. Specialized Kru boatmen, shocking the new arrivals with their minimal clothing, rowed toward the ship to take them and their goods over the rolling waves. Just before landing, if the sea was rough, the Krumen might leave their canoes and physically carry their passengers to dry land. Even so, nearly everyone got wet as they ventured through the breakers, experiencing the “novelty” of “being slapped in the face, or on the back, by several white sprays” of water. Monrovians—always glad to augment their numbers—sometimes ventured out in boats to greet the ships, well-dressed and bearing flowers and food.7

Walking from the shore up to town on that first day, Church and the others could see the imprint of three decades of American settlement. Some two thousand people now lived in Monrovia, which contained a state house, the president’s house, warehouses, stores, schools, churches, and a jail. The main thoroughfare, Broadway (these days a boulevard called Broad Street), ran parallel to the river, with cross streets at roughly equal intervals. The town was divided into spacious lots, each intended to accommodate one dwelling, though some were still empty and overgrown. Church’s carpenter’s eye could appreciate the many two-story houses, with lower levels built from stone and used for servants, storage, and businesses, and wooden upper floors for living spaces. But the tropical climate and dense foliage left their mark: brambles crept into every clearing, and wood softened under pressure of the elements. A disappointed contemporary of Church’s grumbled, “I know places in the streets of Monrovia, in which elephants might hide in perfect safety.”8 Yet the grassy spaces meant opportunity for Church, who ultimately would make his living carving American-style buildings into the lush Liberian landscape. For now, though, he and his shipmates faced their own problem of where to live in their new environment—and indeed, if they would live at all.

The passengers on the Joseph Maxwell had been told all along that their new homes would be at Millsburg, a settlement about twenty miles up the nearby St. Paul’s River from Monrovia, where conditions were supposed to be favorable for farming.9 But the houses the Colonization Society had arranged to be built were not yet ready, and the task of accommodating the newcomers fell to its overworked agent, Henry Dennis. Twenty-five years
old and nearly a lifelong resident of Liberia, having immigrated with his family as a child, Dennis impressed observers as “an honest, upright, faithful and attentive agent,” if perhaps too forgiving of the Colonization Society for its paltry pay and disorganization.\(^\text{10}\) He managed to arrange temporary lodging for the new arrivals in an empty warehouse owned by General John Lewis, a longtime settler who simultaneously served as commander in chief of Liberia’s armed forces, secretary of state, a Baptist missionary, and a private merchant. Church Vaughan and the other passengers from the *Joseph Maxwell* made camp there while they awaited their next move.\(^\text{11}\) Eight days later, Krumen rowed the *Joseph Maxwell* shipmates up Stockton Creek, which connects Monrovia to the St. Paul’s River, and then beyond to Millsburg, where they hoped that housing awaited them.

Millsburg had been founded twenty-five years earlier when Dey leaders ceded this sparsely populated river landing for the equivalent of about twenty-five dollars. The town was intended to be a settlement of farming families and a commercial entrepôt. A road connected Millsburg to the interior town of Bopolu, bringing African-produced trade goods into the colony. Yet its distance from Monrovia and high density of deadly mosquitoes—given the river’s low banks at that point—rendered Millsburg a sleepy, very small town. Though 435 immigrants had been sent there by 1844, ten years later there were only 355, spread out on both sides of the river and bordered by a “half town of natives.” By then, settlers were taking up land elsewhere along the St. Paul’s River. A missionary traveling along the waterway in 1851 reported that “the banks had been generally cleared, farms laid out and planted, and comfortable cottages erected—as exhibiting nature in her primitive wildness, but blended with cultivation.”\(^\text{12}\)

The immigrants from the *Joseph Maxwell* experienced more of the primitive wildness than the cultivation, since their accommodations were still not ready when they got to Millsburg. Dennis managed to rent tiny rooms for some of them, in spite of charges so expensive that he was not sure how they would be paid. The rest of the newcomers were assigned hastily built, thatched huts plastered with mud. Though each contained only a single room and a loft, whole families of up to fifteen people were crowded inside. At least it seldom rained; after about May, the huts’ leaky roofs would make it impossible for inhabitants to stay dry, even in their beds.\(^\text{13}\)

Church’s shipmate Marshall Hooper, enterprising as always, tried to make the best of the situation. Though he already owned a house at New Virginia, the nearest to Monrovia of the St. Paul’s River settlements, Hooper did not return there. Instead, he left his wife Rachel and daughter Emily at
New Virginia and accompanied the others to Millsburg, where he applied to Dennis for a formal position as colonization subagent. Though he needed the help, Dennis was wary of hiring Hooper, who could neither read nor write and who, in the agent’s opinion, had been too liberal with the immigrants’ provisions on board the *Joseph Maxwell* and upon landing at the wharf. Another Colonization Society agent, Ralph Moore, had been the subject of Hooper’s complaint on behalf of a group of settlers a couple of years previously. Now he chimed in that Hooper had taken advantage of his fellow *Joseph Maxwell* passengers by buying the gunpowder they had brought with them for twenty-five cents per pound on board the ship, but then selling it back to them after landing for a dollar a pound. Though he hired another subagent, Dennis arranged for Hooper to receive ACS food rations for six months, as the other newcomers did and as he had already done once, in exchange for his assistance in helping the immigrants get settled.14

Two months after they arrived in Millsburg, Hooper composed an anguished letter to his former traveling companion, the colonization official James Lugenbeel, now back in Washington, D.C. After invoking his heartbreak at leaving his children in North Carolina, he bemoaned the immigrants’ current plight: “Twelve have died! Namely, three of Quiney Young’s
children died, Mr. and Mrs. Wadle is dead; Patsy Boon! Old Mr. Wright of South Carolina and Peter Jacobs of South Carolina. William Johnson who was sick before we left Fayetteville is dead and J Johnson’s wife +6!! All the rest are better.”¹⁵ In Millsburg’s squalid conditions, the Joseph Maxwell shipmates had contracted dysentery, aggravated by sickness from the voyage and new infections of yellow fever or malaria. According to J. S. Smith, the settler doctor who had been hired to treat them, two of them also showed signs of tuberculosis, while “the leg of one was bent into a bow by white swelling and large portions of bone coming away.” Soon after, two others died of sun-stroke.¹⁶ Dr. Smith administered morphine and opium to treat the rampant dysentery, but his supplies soon ran out. His own contraction of the disease put a stop to even these limited efforts.¹⁷

Death loomed over Liberian settlers, no matter how long they had been in Africa. The main killer was malaria, whose cause and transmission were only vaguely understood, along with yellow fever and other tropical ailments. Colonization Society recruiters tried to downplay the dangers, and those who lived often attributed their survival to particular hygiene regimens, clothing, or diets. But the mortality rate was astronomical, especially in the first year of acclimation, during which nearly a quarter of all settlers died. Although 4,571 African Americans had immigrated to Liberia during the first twenty-three years of settlement, the Liberian census of 1843 reported only 2,388 people living in that year. By the time Church arrived, more than 7,300 Americans had come to Liberia, but the settler population was still estimated, with improbable optimism, at just over 6,000. Settlers’ spouses, children, friends, and relatives succumbed in such great numbers that in letters home, their accounts of good health seem just as noteworthy as the death notices.¹⁸

The Joseph Maxwell contingent was sickly even by Liberian standards. Two days after they arrived in Liberia, another vessel, the Linda Stewart, dropped anchor off Monrovia, landing 172 passengers who had embarked in Norfolk, Virginia. Some of them were acquaintances of the immigrants from the Joseph Maxwell, having come from Raleigh and Fayetteville, North Carolina. In fact, Marshall Hooper had recruited one of the families onboard, that of twenty-eight-year-old carpenter Sewell Pettiford, his parents, and two other relatives.¹⁹ While everyone rejoiced in their safe landing, the colonization agent Dennis was overwhelmed, especially because he was already working to house and provision fifty-six settlers from the ship Oriole, which had arrived two months earlier. With General Lewis’s warehouse already full, Dennis managed to accommodate a hundred or so members of the

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Linda Stewart group in the Liberian senate’s chambers, loaned by President Roberts. The remaining seventy were sent to the Colonization Society’s “Receptacle” at New Virginia.20

Later, as he and Sewell Pettiford became friends, Church probably heard about conditions in the receptacle, which were even more fetid and unhealthy than at Millsburg. Originally built in 1847 to house captives liberated from slave ships, the receptacle already looked by the 1850s like an “old, shabby brick building” of one story, with a garret on top. The main floor was divided into twelve rooms of about eight by ten feet, with entire families of up to ten people crammed into each one. Gaps between the floorboards let in mud and insects, and the smell of rotting rations and human waste permeated the air. One small window adorned the exterior wall of each room, but lacking glass, it had to be closed during rains and at night, “thus making a suitable dungeon for a murderer,” in the words of one appalled observer. The only furniture provided in each room was a rough bedstead made out of saplings, which shared space with barrels, boxes, cooking utensils, provisions, and whatever else the settlers brought from America. Food stores and chamber pots sloshed together under beds where the sick lay.21

Yet even there, new immigrants survived better than in Millsburg. By mid-March, only one of the settlers from the Oriole and three from the Linda Stewart had died, compared to twelve from the Joseph Maxwell. By the end of the next month, a total of twenty-one of Church’s 149 shipmates had perished. Agent Henry Dennis was unable to explain the appalling mortality, other than that “Millsburg is not a healthy place.”22 Most painfully, Church lost Peter Jacobs, one of his traveling companions from South Carolina and the father of his new friend Arabella Jacobs.

Church may have been spared the terrible conditions at Millsburg himself, though. When nearly all of the Joseph Maxwell passengers had proceeded upriver, six of them stayed in Monrovia to await more housing.23 Historical records do not name them, but they probably were men of working age, able to earn a living in the urban economy, and traveling without families. James Richardson, a freedman from Georgia, must have been one of them, since within a year he married Matilda Lomax, a widowed, longtime settler living in Monrovia.24 Another was probably Church Vaughan. Even after he was eventually assigned farmland along the St. Paul’s River, remaining in the capital would have appealed to Church, who had spent all his life in town and had no interest in farming. In Liberia’s capital he could earn a living as a builder of houses and furniture. He also could witness the fullness of settler
society and begin to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, for the first time in his life.

Less than three months after Church arrived in Liberia, most of its adult male settlers were called to militia duty. The republic’s legislature had authorized a punitive expedition against African leaders at Cape Mount who were reported to be ignoring Liberian authority, attacking their neighbors, and harassing Liberian traders. Though military service was new to Church, seven years later he and his friend Sewell Pettiford would be described in Yorubaland as “Afro-American sharp-shooters, who harassed [their enemies] a good deal with their rifles.” On this occasion or later in the military service that was compulsory for all Liberian men, Church learned to handle a gun. He also began to understand the conflicts that pitted settlers against the Africans they were displacing.

Arriving in January, Church had just missed the annual celebration of Matilda Newport Day, during which, every December, settlers reenacted their earliest battle with local Africans. Within months of the first immigrants’ arrival in 1822, the Dey leader King Peter, still rueing the land sale he had been forced to make, had organized a coalition of nearby African groups to destroy the colony. Though heavily outnumbered, the better-armed settlers repulsed the invasion. The tide turned, allegedly, after a woman named Matilda Newport used her pipe to light one of the cannons—an event that probably never took place but is nonetheless depicted on a monument still standing in downtown Monrovia. By early 1853, as Liberians prepared for yet another battle against Africans, they must have told newcomers like Church about their military history. Settlers took pride in having extended their territory along the coast and in establishing relatively secure trade routes to the interior. They also could claim credit for their role in curtailing the slave trade from Liberia’s shores, a process connected, in their view, to the expansion of Liberian authority over local people.

When the initial contingents of African American settlers and Colonization Society agents had arrived at Cape Mesurado in the 1820s, they were appalled by the trade in human beings carried on practically within their sights. Great Britain, France, and the United States had outlawed Atlantic slave trading, but New World demand for enslaved Africans remained strong, especially in Cuba and Brazil. Although most of the captives forcibly taken to the Americas in the 1820s originated elsewhere in Africa, perhaps as many as two thousand were exported per year from the less-than-one-hundred-
mile stretch of coastline between Grand Cape Mount in the north and Monrovia in the south. These war prisoners, victims of raids, and condemned criminals were supplied by African political leaders to a number of locally based, foreign-born traders who were well adapted to the illegal trade. Since slave ships could no longer linger on the African coast picking up captives as they became available, dealers like the Spaniard Don Pedro Blanco and his French-Italian agent Theophilus Conneau became semipermanent residents in Africa. From their trading “factories” at the mouth of the Gallinas River near Sierra Leone or southeast of Monrovia at New Cesters, they carried on business with African suppliers, amassed captives in jail-like barracoons, negotiated their sale with visiting ship captains, and received payment from slave importers in Cuba.

African American descendants of slaves, some of them freedpeople themselves, had not come to Africa to tolerate the slave trade. In a series of battles in the 1820s and early 1830s, Liberians attacked and destroyed the barracoons in their vicinity and imposed antislave trading treaties on local chiefs, though these were often ignored. In 1832, the Colonization Society’s administrator Joseph Mechlin refused to return a Dey king’s captives who ran away to the colony while awaiting sale. After a retaliatory attack by Dey forces and their Gola allies, a force of settler volunteers marched on their enemies and burned their towns. Seven years later, Liberia’s Governor Thomas Buchanan organized a force of seventy-five volunteers to attack a slave factory south of Monrovia at Little Bassa. Peyton Skipwith, a Liberian from Virginia who participated in the attack, recounted that “we went down and broke up the factory and brought away all the effects say in goods and destroyed about fifty puncheons [of] Rum . . . the effect in goods &c to the amt of ten thousand Dollars. After we had taken the goods or a part we had to contend with the natives which fought us two days very hard but we got the victory and form a treaty before we left with one of the chiefs but not with the other and only got four slaves so we cannot say that we concluded a final peace.” Buchanan reported with satisfaction, however, that his forces managed not only to capture the barracoon, but also took possession of a slave ship, the Euphrates, and exacted from two local chiefs an agreement for colonial jurisdiction over their territory.

To the great frustration of colonization agents and Liberian settlers, however, the U.S. government offered them little support in fighting the slave trade. This is not surprising, given the political volatility of slavery in America, but it contrasts sharply with the attitude of the United Kingdom. To enforce its 1808 ban on international slaving, the British government
sent its navy to patrol the African coast, intercept slave ships, and land the captives they rescued at its colony in Sierra Leone. Moreover, British diplomats secured treaties by which France and other major European powers agreed to abolish their slave trades, with Portugal pledging to end slave trading north of the equator. In order to enforce those treaties, Britain exacted from France, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and several other countries the right to search suspected slave ships and detain those found to be slavers. Between 1817 and the end of 1840, the British Navy intercepted 468 slave ships, landing approximately sixty-seven thousand “recaptives” in Sierra Leone. Moreover, as the Liberian settler Peyton Skipwith reported that year to his former master in Virginia, “Within the last month . . . the Large [slave trading] Establishment of [Pedro] Blanco has been destroyed by one of his Majesties ships of war. It is said that they took one thousand slaves from that factory and destroyed and taken to the amount of one hundred thousand Dollars. Kennet [Canot’s] factory, under the same firm, has been given up by him to one of the cruisers with one Hundred slave and put himself under the protection of the English. He has been since that to the Town of Monrovia and was admitted to come on shore and he has proceeded to see the ruins of that splendid slave factory at Galenas that was belong[ing to] that rich man Blanco.”

Lacking Britain’s enthusiasm for antislavery and sensitive over the issue since even before the War of 1812, the United States government refused to allow British naval officers to search American-flagged vessels. Instead, Americans promised to send their own ships to police the Atlantic—which happened rarely and without much effect. Consequently, slavers of all nations carried the Stars and Stripes, which they ran up their masts as protection against British searches. As Liberia’s Governor Buchanan protested in 1839, “The chief obstacle to the success of the very active measures pursued by the British government for the suppression of the slave-trade on the coast is the American flag. Never was the proud banner of freedom so extensively used by those pirates upon liberty and humanity, as at this season.” Settler Peyton Skipwith agreed, fulminating to his former master in Virginia that “I see daily the Star Spangled Banner unfurled on the coast of Africa as a protection for the slaver to keep the British man of wars from taking them[,] which we think as a hand full of people to that of the United States a disgrace to her Banner.” Under pressure from Britain, the American government agreed in 1842 to reorganize its navy’s previously haphazard antislavery patrols and maintain its own naval squadron on the African coast. Over its entire eighteen-year life span, however, the American antislavery squadron
never consisted of more than eight vessels, and it captured only thirty-six slavers. In contrast, the British averaged nineteen ships on patrol at any one time, and between 1843 and 1861 they captured 595 slave ships.36

Liberians called for a stronger U.S. naval presence off their coast not only to deter slavers but also to support their claims to political sovereignty. British traders from Sierra Leone had refused to pay customs duties on goods purchased in Liberian territory, on the grounds that the Colonization Society did not constitute a national or colonial government. When Liberians and the ACS sought reinforcement from the United States, Secretary of State Daniel Webster clarified instead that Liberia was not an American colony and U.S. armed forces would not assist in regulating Liberian commerce. Without further recourse, Liberian leaders declared independence from the American Colonization Society in 1847. As an independence gift, Britain’s Queen Victoria gave the Liberian government a steamer, the *Lark*, “to assist in destroying the slave trade on our coast,” the *Liberia Herald* explained, “and for the protection of our revenue.” It became the sole vessel in the Liberian Navy.37

Shortly after independence, President Roberts arranged for the purchase from African leaders of Gallinas and New Cesters, both regions notorious for slave trading, along with territory at Cape Mount. In seeking loans from Americans and Europeans in order to make it possible, he argued that settler control over a continuous stretch of coastline was the only sure means of suppressing the slave trade.38 Indeed, immediately after the purchase of New Cesters, the Liberian government gave notice to slave traders that they should stop their business and export no more prisoners. The next year, however, the *Liberia Herald* reported that slaves were often transported in the vicinity of New Cesters and nearby Trade Town, and that the primary slave merchant there, a Spaniard named Don Francisco, “is as deeply engaged in [the slave trade] now as he ever was.” This struck at Liberian antislavery values and national pride. As the settler newspaper editorialized, “If we are able to break up that establishment [the Spanish slave fort] and yet suffer it to remain, . . . we will most certainly be accused of winking at the slave trade. Yet to say we are not able to remove a few slavers is humiliating.” Over the next several months, tensions mounted at New Cesters, with attacks on Liberians and their property and chiefs refusing to deliver those whom the Liberian authorities accused of the crimes.39

“No insult or wrong will as soon fill their ranks with volunteers, as the suppression of slavery,” the settler and missionary John Day, then based just inland of Grand Bassa at Bexley, asserted about his fellow Liberians. In
March 1849, after President Roberts returned from a trip to France, “we were all commanded to get ourselves in order for the war, as we had to contend against an African tribe, called the New Cesters tribe,” one of the settlers later recounted. Some 350–400 volunteers were mustered at Monrovia for an expedition accompanied by President Joseph Roberts, commanded by General John Lewis, comprised of two regiments, and transported by the French steamer Espado. At New Cesters, opposing African troops were no match for the Liberian onslaught and cannon fire from the French steamer. The slave trader Don Francisco fled his establishment, leaving it empty. Over the following week, the Liberian regiments proceeded to settlements known as Joe West’s Town and Trade Town, where another Spanish trader surrendered and promised to release some two thousand slaves to the Liberians at a later date.

The victorious Liberian forces returned to Monrovia with a renewed sense of their power and mission. Solomon Page, one of the volunteers, wrote that “We were successful during the war, something which I did not expect or anticipate before we went.” Another boasted, “A great many told me when I was in America that we could not take the Spanyards. We have got them in our town waiting for tryal. It proved as in all of the wars that God is on our side & if he be for us who can be against us. We have been oppressed long enough. We mean to stand our ground & contend for our rights until we die.” John Day pointed out that this victory over slave traders was also a victory for Liberian territorial expansion. Eleven new headmen had put themselves under the “protection” of the Liberian republic, he reported, and many more were talking of doing so. “Our civil jurisdiction will now extend far and wide,” he concluded. The editor of the Liberia Herald noted the enormous cost of the expedition, but asserted that its achievements were worth the outlay. “We cannot expect peace and quietness while the slave trade is going on near us,” he wrote. “Nor can we hope to exert our full influence upon the surrounding tribes until the accursed traffic is wholly destroyed. When that most desirable object is accomplished, we shall then breathe freely.”

Soon, in fact, the suppression of the slave trade was largely accomplished, especially from the Windward Coast. In 1850, under strong British pressure, the Brazilian government passed legislation to enforce its treaties against slave trading, effectively ending the largest section of the Atlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century and leaving Cuba as the last remaining slave importer in the western hemisphere. Just a month before Church’s arrival in Liberia, British naval forces destroyed a barracoon on the southern Sierra Leone coast, forcing its director, a slave trader named Crispo, to flee.
in his nightshirt. Slaving from Liberian ports had ended, and in Sierra Leone it was drastically reduced.43

By the time Church landed in 1853, settlers’ clashes with nearby Africans centered not on slaving but on access to trade routes and territorial authority. Liberians insisted that Africans under their jurisdiction trade preferentially with merchants from the republic, rather than with British or other traders, provoking resistance from those whose fortunes suffered. Before he had left South Carolina, Church had heard from a relative in Philadelphia about an attack on the Liberian settlement at Fishtown in Bassa Cove, southeast of Monrovia. Now Liberians could tell him more: in November 1851, Kru-speaking people under the leadership of a chief named Grando killed ten settlers there, perhaps with the encouragement of British traders in the area. Two months later, a company of 550 Liberians and the same number of native troops launched a retaliatory attack so successful that, in the words of President Roberts, “It will convince the aboriginal inhabitants of every part of the Republic of the ability of the Government to maintain the majesty of the laws, and punish crime wherever committed within its jurisdiction.”44 Then-journalist Edward Blyden had not accompanied the Liberian troops, but instead had been assigned to guard duty in Monrovia while they were away. Though he recounted to a correspondent that “we have to struggle sir, to maintain our liberty,” he was sure, like Solomon Page, that “God is on our side.”45

Church had only been in Liberia for two weeks when settlers celebrated “with appropriate honors” the anniversary of the battle against Grando and the reoccupation of Fishtown.46 Six weeks later, Liberians again mobilized to enforce Liberian authority over local Africans, this time at Cape Mount. As Matilda Lomax, the widow who would soon marry one of Church’s shipmates, wrote to a correspondent in Virginia, the chiefs “have been intruding upon the Republick and [are] fond of arbitrary authority, in stopping the mart from coming in & that rouse[d] the citizen[s] & at last cause[d] the officers in chiefs to make a positive conclusion and they went to war.”47 But this conflict was more complicated than simply exerting colonial domination and protecting trade, and it revealed to Church and others that the end of trans-Atlantic slaving did not necessarily mean the end of forced labor or human trafficking.

Territory at Grand Cape Mount and Little Cape Mount had been purchased by the Liberian Republic shortly after independence. Few Liberians had settled there yet, though some conducted trade in the area. (These days, the beachside town of Robertsport, named after President Roberts, sits at
Cape Mount.) Still, local Dey, Vai and Golah groups had come under the “protection” of the Liberian government, which asserted the right to adjudicate their disputes. When Boombo, one of the Vai chiefs, launched repeated attacks on his Golah neighbors, they called on the Liberians for support. President Roberts organized several meetings of the local chiefs in 1851 and ’52, but Boombo continued to disregard his authority; “indeed at one time,” according to the Liberia Herald, “his reply to the Government was insulting.” In late 1852, he finally went too far: extending his raids into Dey country, close to some of the Liberian settlements, “burning towns and villages, and murdering scores of the inoffensive inhabitants,” Roberts charged, “as well as robbing several factories established there, owned by merchants of this place.” This the Liberians would not tolerate, and in December 1852, as Church Vaughan sailed across the Atlantic, Roberts requested that the legislature authorize a military expedition to Cape Mount in order to either convince Boombo to make peace, or to expel him from the country.48

President Roberts told officials of the American Colonization Society that the cause of Boombo’s aggression was “a restless disposition to make war for the sake of plunder.” But shortly after the legislative resolution passed, he learned that the issue was more complicated than previously thought. The Cape Mount chiefs had another motivation for their raids, “strongly intimated by some of the country people, to obtain captives for a purpose — next of kin to the slave trade.”49 Though slave trading per se from the Liberian coast had come to an end, New World demand for labor had not, nor had mechanisms for supplying vulnerable people to meet that demand. The same British government that was working to enforce its ban on Atlantic slave trading, and that had abolished slavery in the entire British Empire in the 1830s, was now facing a severe shortage of labor in its sugar-producing West Indian colonies. In one of a number of initiatives to replace enslaved workers, the British government had granted a London-based commercial firm called Hyde, Hodge, & Co. a contract to supply African laborers to plantations in the British West Indies. Along with Boombo at Little Cape Mount, another chief based at Grand Cape Mount, known as George Cane, was also waging attacks against Dey and Golah people. Agents of Mssrs. Hyde and Hodge had visited Grand Cape Mount and offered George Cane ten dollars—formerly the cost of a slave—for each person the chiefs there could supply. In early 1853, word reached Liberian authorities that Cane intended to sell his prisoners as “emigrants” to the British firm. A month before the expedition to Cape Mount, President Roberts issued a proclamation mandating strict observance of the law governing passports and forbidding the
sailing of any vessel with emigrants without first landing at Monrovia, where passengers would be interviewed.50

When word of Roberts’s proclamation reached the British government, several members of the House of Lords insisted on the respectability of Mssrs. Hyde, Hodge & Company and the care taken by Her Majesty’s Government to prevent the system from becoming one of slave trading. In his very diplomatic explanation, President Roberts stressed that he would never suspect the company’s agents of engaging in anything resembling slave trading, and Liberians certainly had no intention of interfering in the legitimate procurement of voluntary laborers. (In fact, the Monrovia agent for Messrs. Hyde, Hodge, & Company was none other than Roberts’s brother-in-law General Lewis.) “But the government had good grounds for believing that attempts would be made, by certain chiefs, to force persons to emigrate without the facts being known to the emigration agents.”51 And indeed, it was Boombo and Cane who were the objects of the Liberian expedition, which sailed for Little Cape Mount on March 1 with 250 men, Vaughan probably among them.

This time Edward Blyden was part of the militia, and he wrote a detailed account of his week-long adventure for the *Liberia Herald*. The mobilization began with great excitement in Monrovia, as the beating of drums and assembly of soldiers with their knapsacks and muskets attracted a crowd of spectators. Some of the soldiers were new recruits such as Church and Sewell Pettiford, and they awkwardly boarded the canoes that conveyed them to the schooner *Lark*, waiting at anchor. After a northward passage in which, predictably, many suffered from seasickness, they landed at Cape Mount. President Roberts sent a messenger to Boombo’s town to invite him and George Cane to meet him on the beach, suggesting that he would be unarmed. “But it is evident that they did not expect to find so large a company of armed men as they did, from the expression of surprise which the countenance of Boombo assumed as he approached the soldiers whose glittering bayonets rendered their appearance at once grand and terrible.” The Liberians then accompanied the chiefs inland about three hours’ march to occupy Boombo’s town. Over the next two days, as President Roberts summoned and then interviewed nearby headmen about the abuses committed by Boombo and Cane, the two chiefs tried several times to escape. Only George Cane managed to do so, early the third morning as the militiamen prepared to detain them for trial. Boombo and fifty-three others were taken against their will onto the *Lark* and hauled back to Monrovia.52 After their hearing in Monrovia, Boombo was sentenced to make restitution for prop-
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erty damages, pay a five hundred dollar fine, and endure two years’ imprisonment. Though George Cane remained at large, Roberts declared victory as he had in 1851: “They [the natives] are now convinced on all sides of the ability of the Government to maintain its authority, and to punish any who may be disposed to violate these engagements.”

Few Liberians were aware that Boombo and George Cane’s crimes were connected to British labor recruiters. The Liberia Herald reminded readers that Boombo broke his promises to the Liberian government “by carrying on predatory wars, destroying towns and murdering and carrying into captivity hundreds of inoffensive men, women and children.” But Blyden, who as a journalist and diplomat would later advocate for better relations between Liberian settlers and local Africans, was already beginning to doubt the typical settler portrayals of African barbarism. Though he was horrified by evidence of “the cruelty and bloody deeds of Boombo,” he also was impressed by the elaborate barricade surrounding the chief’s town. “This fortification appeared wonderful to me,” he wrote, “and as I gazed upon the massive structure, I could not but admire the inventive genius of the natives, and reflect upon the unfairness of those who represent the native African as naturally indolent, and living in a state of ease and supineness.” Church, too, may have already begun to suspect that reality was messier than in the standard settler depictions. As he set about making a living in Liberia, he could see that it was not only African chiefs who could credibly be accused of keeping slaves.

By mid-April 1853, three months after their arrival in Liberia and a month after the expedition to Cape Mount, nearly all of the surviving passengers from the Joseph Maxwell, even those who had been left in Monrovia, had been assigned land along the St. Paul’s River, opposite where they were then living at Millsburg. The Pettifords and other immigrants from the Linda Stewart, many still quartered in the Colonization Society’s receptacle, were allocated plots at New Virginia and a nearby settlement called Kentucky (which later became known as Clay-Ashland, after colonizationist Henry Clay and his Ashland plantation). As in other colonial societies where indigenous people were forcibly displaced, the challenge for settler would-be farmers was not securing land. Instead, it was controlling enough human labor to make the land productive. While Church opted out of farming altogether, other members of his community rose or fell according to their access to healthy family members, hirelings, or African “apprentices” who
could perform the exhausting work of bringing food or cash crops out of the tropical soil.

As a single man, Church received a town lot in Millsburg, if he chose to occupy it, as well as an allocation of ten acres of farmland, while families were assigned twenty-five acres. But farming was difficult. Compared to other groups of new arrivals, who had to trudge many miles to cultivate their fields and build their houses while they were “on the public,” Church and his companions were well situated, their tracts just a canoe trip across the river from where they had been staying. Still, they had to clear dense vegetation on their plots before they could even plant, a task made more onerous by the absence of draft animals because of sleeping sickness infestation. Many people were still weak or ill much of the time. To make matters worse, by May, when the settlers were finally recovering from most of their initial illnesses, the rainy season began with three weeks of near-continuous torrents—that hardly conducive to building or planting. Nevertheless, in June, the Colonization Society agent H. W. Dennis reported that “our emigrants per Linda Stewart and Joseph Maxwell are now doing well and making rapid improvements on the St. Pauls.” Even so, they would be off the Colonization Society’s six months of support by July, while it would probably be September before the earliest of their food crops—likely the local staple cassava—would be ready to harvest. Only those who had brought enough money from home to purchase food could afford to wait.

For new immigrants looking for signs that they might survive and even prosper, a few who did manage to amass substantial landholdings and grow cash crops such as coffee and sugar cane stood out. Some of the immigrants from the Linda Stewart went immediately to live with their cousin Sion Harris, who had come to Liberia in 1830 at the age of nineteen. Now this “true and independent farmer,” as a correspondent from the Liberia Herald described him, owned 110 acres of land on the St. Paul’s River, had recently built a large brick house, and served as a member of Liberia’s House of Representatives. In the St. Paul’s settlement of Caldwell, William W. Findley, who emigrated from Indiana with his family in early 1851, had recently acquired a forty-acre farm, on which he had built a “pretty” white two-story house, surrounded by a grove of trees. His twenty acres of coffee were said to bring in annually about one dollar per tree. The “most successful sugar manufacturer in Liberia” was Abraham Blackledge, a South Carolinian who had settled along the St. Paul’s in the early 1840s. Within ten years, he was producing approximately 5000 pounds of sugar and 500 gallons of syrup per
year, and had planted some 2,500 coffee trees. He too had built a large brick house, as well as a hand-powered sugar mill.63

Pioneering a farm, on his own, in a “bush” settlement remote from the hustle and bustle of Monrovia, could have held no appeal for a young man used to living in town, however. The twenty-four-year-old Church could support himself better by selling his services as a builder than with farming, which seemed almost impossible under the circumstances. Everywhere in Liberia, people needed carpenters: to build private and commercial houses in Monrovia, to replace the thatched huts for new immigrants at the expanding settlements, and in some cases to establish substantial residences, reminiscent of those the immigrants had known in the American South, along the St. Paul’s River.64 In Monrovia, new settlers were allocated lots with the proviso that they must build a house with a shingled roof and a plank floor within two years or lose the land.65 Schooled in carpentry back in South Carolina, Church knew how to frame houses, stack stairways, create broad front porches, and finish the kinds of buildings African American settlers wanted. He even had learned to fire bricks, a useful skill in a tropical climate so hard on wooden structures.66 Church probably offered one of his shipmates from the *Joseph Maxwell* the use of his farmland in exchange for some of the produce. Then he must have become something like the itinerant carpenter his father Scipio had been in South Carolina, based in Monrovia where steady work could be found, but also traveling up the river for jobs, to see his friends, and to check on his land and crops near Millsburg.

One source of potential clients was Church’s shipmate Marshall Hooper, who seemed to know everyone in the area. Shortly after he arrived in Millsburg, Hooper went to see an old acquaintance, perhaps a relative, now the proprietor of a prosperous farm along the banks of the St. Paul’s River. Allen Hooper had been enslaved to members of the same family as Marshall Hooper, and the two knew each other in North Carolina. In fact, Allen Hooper knew a number of the *Joseph Maxwell* passengers from Fayetteville, including “Old man Robbin” and Patsy Waddle, the elderly couple who had perished soon after their arrival in Liberia, and Marshall Hooper’s wife and daughter. Like Marshall Hooper, Allen had made the Atlantic crossing twice: first in 1848, and again, for a permanent stay in Liberia, in 1850. By the time Marshall came to see him in 1853, Allen had purchased two hundred acres of land and planted a hundred thousand coffee trees; he also cultivated twenty-five acres of sugar cane. As he wrote buoyantly back to North Carolina, “Tell all my colord Brother to come home and take posesion of the land of our Farthers. Tell them to come and let us Build up a great Republice to our Selfs.”67
But who would actually work the landholdings of planters like Allen Hooper? Edward Blyden was probably the newspaper correspondent who visited several large riverside operations in 1852. He singled out Hooper’s estate, christened “Iconium” (the site in modern Turkey of St. Paul’s first missionary journey) as “one of the handsomest places we have ever seen,” with flowerbeds, fields of coffee and sugar cane, and plots of garden vegetables. On a walk around the farm, the journalist noted favorably the “quiet manner [in which] the laborers perform their seemingly agreeable task,” without specifying who the laborers actually were. Samuel Williams, a black preacher from Pennsylvania, obliquely compared Liberian planters like Hooper to those in the American South: “The St. Paul’s farmers are in general, industrious and prosperous. Many very fine plantations are to be seen . . . as good sugar plantations as I ever saw in the neighborhood of New Orleans.”68 Perhaps Rev. Williams was reminded of New Orleans because of the passing resemblance between the broad St. Paul’s River and the Mississippi, or because the St. Paul’s area, like Louisiana (the name of one of the settlements along its banks, in fact), was becoming known for sugar cane cultivation. But one could not invoke New Orleans in 1854 without also raising the specter of slavery. As Liberians insisted, the plantation workers who grew coffee and sugar cane, as well as those who tended many settlers’ food gardens, carried their loads, and worked in their households, were not in fact slaves. Yet they were not other settlers, either; and they bore more than a little resemblance to the unfree laborers of the southern United States.

Liberia had been founded, theoretically at least, to be a place of freedom for captives liberated from slave ships by American cruisers. Between 1820 and 1843, however, the U.S. Navy sent only 287 recaptured Africans to Liberia. Many settled at New Georgia, on the edge of Stockton Creek, where they farmed and sold produce to Monrovia. But in 1846, the American naval squadron captured the slave ship Pons and brought 756 Africans from its hold to Liberia. After enduring the receptacle at New Virginia for some time, they were placed as “apprentices” with settlers, who received an annual allocation from the U.S. government for their support and education.69 This followed an already established pattern: when settlers had attacked nearby slave barracoons, they had also “liberated” captive people into apprenticeship. And Liberians took as apprentices local Africans as well, often children or teenagers, promising them a brighter future than they might have with their economically struggling families while putting them to work. The system was not unlike one that existed throughout West Africa, called pawnship, in which human beings served as collateral for loans with their labor.
functioning as the interest. For Liberians, the difference was that they were offering their apprentices entry into “civilization” by assimilating them into settler society.

By the late 1850s, an observer noted that just about all the settlers he saw made use of African labor, even to carry the smallest of packages. Legally, however, these were neither slaves nor pawns. In 1830 the American Colonization Society had established stiff penalties for any immigrant convicted of slave trafficking, largely in response to rumors that colonists were secretly selling captives to Spanish dealers at the Gallinas River and Cape Mount. Slavery itself was explicitly prohibited in the ACS charter and later in the Liberian Constitution. Moreover, from 1838, the apprenticeship system was regulated by a law requiring that apprentices be registered, provisioned, and paid, and that they have recourse to government officials in case of abuse. Yet few of those “apprenticed” were actually educated, and credible critics alleged that apprenticeship was simply a cover for slavery.

Previously whispered allegations about Liberian slavery became public in 1851, when Commander Frederick Forbes of the British Navy published an account of his recent expedition to the kingdom of Dahomey, more than a thousand miles to the east of Liberia in what is now the Republic of Benin. In two pages of a book otherwise unrelated to Liberia, Forbes, who had captained one of the British antislavery patrol ships, accused Liberians of keeping and trafficking in slaves. “In Liberia there is as much, if not more, domestic slavery—that is, the buying and selling of God’s image—as in the parent States of America, over which flaunts the flag of liberty,” he wrote. “It is difficult to see the necessity or the justice of the negro who escapes from slavery on one side, crossing the Atlantic to enslave his sable prototype on the other; yet such is the case; . . . I doubt if many benevolent Christians in this country are aware that the model Republic is, in reality, a new name and form for slavery in enslaved Africa; and, until the system be altered, totally undeserving of the high support and liberal charity it receives from the benevolence of Englishmen.”

Once the accusations were reprinted in the British Anti-Slavery Reporter and in American newspapers, Liberia’s defenders sprang into action. In the United States, James Lugenbeel and a colleague named Dr. Bacon of the
American Colonization Society quickly produced a report labeling Forbes’s
allegations “utterly groundless.” They protested that Liberians had succeeded
in ending slave exports from their coast, that slavery was illegal under Li-
berian law, and that Liberians had imposed more than forty antislave-trade
treaties on local African groups, at times backing these up with armed force.
In England, longtime ACS supporters Elliott Cresson and Thomas Hodgkin
addressed a letter making the same points directly to Commander Forbes,
who, they added, had never even visited Liberia.77

In his defense, Forbes replied that though he had not visited Monrovia,
he had been stationed for six months at Cape Mount and he knew many
Liberians. “That the citizens of Liberia are guilty of buying and holding
slaves I had ocular demonstration,” he insisted, “and I know personally two
Liberian citizens . . . sojourners at Cape Mount, who owned several slaves.”
Forbes acknowledged that though these were slaves “in the general use of
the term,” they were not in the strict legal sense, “as these slaves were what
are termed domestic slaves, or pawns, and not intended for foreign slavery.”
But the distinction, to him, was moot: “These pawns, as I have stated and
believe, are as much slaves as their sable prototypes in the parent States of
America, and my informants acquainted me that almost all labor in Liberia
was derived from a system of domestic slavery.”78

President Roberts took issue with Forbes’s reasoning, asking in a pub-
lished response, “Is it not ungenerous, unkind, and unjust, in Commander
Forbes, even admitting it were true that he saw two Liberian citizens at Cape
Mount, at that time beyond the jurisdiction of Liberia, engaged as he states,
in the slave trade, to denounce a whole community? No, sir; I thank God,
the Liberians, as a people, certainly, abhor slavery in all its phases, and would
no sooner engage in the nefarious traffic than Commander Forbes himself.”
The editor of the Liberia Herald went, rather unbelievably, even further: “We
emphatically deny the practice of the pawn system in Liberia, or that labor is
derived here from slavery in any of its phases.”79

Yet outsiders continued to point out the similarities between Liberia’s
labor system and American slavery. In 1853, the year Church Vaughan ar-
rived, a Pennsylania African American named William Nesbit published an
account of his four months’ travel in Liberia, with an introduction by Martin
Delany. Although his trip had been sponsored by the American Coloniza-
tion Society, Nesbit became a bitter critic of colonization. According to
him, forced labor within Liberia’s borders was widespread. “Every colonist
keeps native slaves (or as they term them servants) about him, varying in
number from one to fifteen, according to the circumstances of the master,”

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he charged. “These poor souls they beat unmercifully, and more than half starve them, and all labor that is done at all, is done by these poor wretches.” Nesbit’s account devoted a full chapter to slavery. Liberian slaves faced the same kinds of toil as those in America, he wrote, except that they were fed less because they were more easily replaced. A large supply of laborers was available for cheap purchase from their parents, presumably because their own opportunities for earning a living were being eroded by the expansion of Liberian settlement. Nesbit’s characterization of Liberian slaveholders was stark: “They are mostly manumitted slaves themselves, and have felt the blighting effects of slavery here, only to go there to become masters.” This, he scoffed, was in spite of Liberian claims about civilizing Africans. “They [the settlers] profess to have broken up the foreign slave trade, which is far from the truth; but suppose they had done so, is that even a blessing, under the circumstances?” he asked.80

Other observers acknowledged abuses in the apprenticeship system, but fell short of labeling it slavery. Rev. Samuel Williams, who arrived in Liberia shortly before Nesbit’s trip, refuted his fellow Pennsylvanian in his own publication, Four Years in Liberia. Though he had been the one to compare Millsburg with New Orleans, Williams took strong issue with Nesbit’s assertions about slavery in Liberia, reminding readers that slavery was against the law and that strict rules governed apprenticeship. “Nearly all [settlers] have natives as helps in their families, and this is as it should be; but I confess that black people are no better than white people, as many, when they have power, abuse it, and so it is with some in Liberia; wicked persons there do abuse the native youths,” he wrote. Still, like President Roberts had a few years earlier, he insisted that the entire settler population should not be blamed for the transgressions of a few.81

Unlike Allen Hooper and other large-scale planters, Church Vaughan’s surviving shipmates and new acquaintances were in no position to take on “apprentices,” instead making do with family members or occasional hired labor. If death, disease, bad weather, or other misfortunes meant that they did not have enough to eat, they were left with few options. First-generation settlers were not allowed to sell land they had been allocated by the government; only their children could.82 But it was not easy to enter the labor market either. In South Carolina, slavery depressed the wages of free black people like the Vaughans; in Liberia, cheap, quasi-free indigenous labor did the same thing. “Their is Some that have come to this place that have got rich and a number that are Suffering,” wrote the settler Payton Skipwith in 1834. “Those that are well off do have the natives as Slaves and poor people
that come from America have no chance to make a living for the natives do all the work.” In the early 1850s, “native” labor could be hired in Monrovia for a third of the rate charged by settlers—who could not work for less and still afford to buy food. Female immigrants, many of them widows, earned only a small fraction of that. Many Liberians who had started as farmers made their way to Monrovia and turned to trade, a source of wealth for a relative few but one requiring little previous training. Countless immigrants, like Church’s shipmate James Richardson and his new wife Matilda Lomax, became mired in poverty. As another of Church’s contemporaries, the visiting missionary Augustus Washington, put it, “Where one succeeds [in Liberia] with nothing, twenty suffer and die, leaving no mark of their existence.”

With his ability to construct the kinds of houses and furnishings familiar and desirable to American settlers, Church Vaughan did not have to worry much about finding work or competing with native labor himself. If he was growing disillusioned with Liberia, it was not because he personally was in danger of poverty, but for moral and political reasons. He had left South Carolina because he no longer wanted to live in an oppressive society, yet Liberia seemed to be developing its own plantocracy. In the American South, white settlers had displaced native communities like his mother’s and kept Africans and African Americans like his father in bondage. Here, as he was learning, settlers had also displaced natives and were coming close to enslaving indigenous Africans. Liberia’s founders had based their Declaration of Independence and their Constitution on what they saw as the best of American traditions. Yet Liberia’s settlers were also creating an American-style ethnic caste system based on land dispossession and labor exploitation. Did Church want to become a permanent member of that society?

According to letters to white correspondents and testimonials printed in the procolonization press, Liberians would rather endure terrible hardship than leave their adopted country. Susan Capart, who had emigrated from North Carolina in 1850, reported several years later that although she was unmarried and “farming on the smalls . . . doing Very much the same work that I did when I was in America . . . the longer that I live in Africa the better I like it.” Henry Franklin, who left Virginia for Liberia with his aged mother in 1856, wrote to a doctor at home two years later that “I like the country very well indeed & have no reason to return to America, for we believe there is no Country on the Earth can Equal it [Liberia] in the world.” Even “if the President were to fit out a steamship for her express accommodation,” another colonist had asserted in 1853, she still would not return to the United States. These

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stalwart assertions of Liberian loyalty, however, mask a running current of discontent. Some Liberians did in fact want to leave, but their options for doing so were limited.\(^8\) Money had to be secured for passage, and furthermore, there were few promising places to go. Would-be immigrants only had contacts and prospects for making a living in the United States, but in many states, not just southern ones, the entry of free blacks was illegal.

Church’s friends Marshall and Emily Hooper experienced such problems themselves, though in different ways. In 1855, Marshall Hooper made his second return trip to the United States, reprising the role he had played in recruiting Liberian emigrants two years earlier. As before, he hoped to secure the freedom of his youngest son; but again he was disappointed. His efforts may have reduced him to poverty, too, as he appeared in records at this point not as a farmer or trader but instead as a common laborer.\(^8\) Three years later, Marshall’s daughter Emily Hooper was so discouraged that she wrote a letter to her former owner in North Carolina, Sallie Mallett, complaining of the difficult conditions in Liberia. Mallett then requested help from the secretary of the American Colonization Society in bringing the now twenty-two-year-old back to Chapel Hill, where, Mallett asserted, she “had never been accustomed to hard work.” But Emily Hooper would have to sacrifice her freedom in order to return. Since free people of color could not lawfully enter the state, Mallett successfully appealed to the North Carolina legislature to pass “A Bill for the Relief of Emily Hooper of Liberia.” The act provided “that Emily Hooper, a negro and a citizen of the republic of Liberia, be and she is hereby permitted voluntarily to return into a state of slavery as slave of her former owner, Miss Sallie Mallett, of Chapel Hill.” Mallett interpreted Emily’s situation as an affirmation of slavery: that, as a Charlotte newspaper put it, the young woman was “sick of freedom and prefers living with her mistress in the Old North State than to being fleeced by abolition friends (?) in Liberia.” Instead, however, it reveals the depth of Emily’s dissatisfaction with Liberia and the dearth of options for leaving. Emily Hooper did finally return to North Carolina from Liberia, but it was not until 1871, well after slavery had ended for African Americans and immediately after the death of Sallie Mallett.\(^8\)

Church Vaughan may well have remained in Liberia had the opportunity to leave not presented itself. His deliverance, earthly rather than spiritual, came through the Southern Baptist Church, and in particular two missionaries: an African American named Joseph Harden and the white southerner William Clarke. In spite of his first name, Church had no denominational background and probably not much Christian conviction at this point in
his life. But just as emigration from the United States had made unlikely bedfellows—bringing African Americans with hopes for freedom together with white colonizationists who supported slavery—so too did Church’s departure from Liberia, made possible through networks of missionaries in West Africa.

Numerous evangelists were at that time scattered around Liberia, trying to bring Christianity and its accompanying cultural package of “civilization”—including western education, clothing, and household organization—to indigenous Africans and unconverted settlers. Some were Methodists and Presbyterians; about a half-dozen—all African Americans—represented the Southern Baptist Convention, which had recently separated from American Baptists over the propriety of appointing slaveholders as missionaries. Immediately after their organization, Southern Baptists created a Foreign Mission Board and sent their first missionaries to China. Aware that there had been a strong Baptist presence among Liberian settlers since the 1820s, they determined that the little republic would also be a promising site for a mission. The problem was finding missionaries. In spite of their general view that African Americans were not as capable as whites, the Mission Board directors deemed black missionaries to be more appropriate for work in Africa, and they looked for suitable black candidates both at home and already in Liberia. Their best prospect was John Day, a former cabinetmaker from Virginia who had immigrated to Liberia in 1830 and was already an ordained pastor. In 1846 the Southern Baptist Mission Board appointed Day as the superintendent of its Liberia mission, a post he held along with several Liberian government offices until his death in 1859.

Church’s interaction with missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention likely began shortly after his arrival in Liberia. Joseph M. Harden, the African American charged with the Baptist mission at New Virginia, had come to Liberia two years earlier. Now, his efforts to build a suitable chapel for his growing congregation had stalled for want of materials and skilled labor. In January 1853, the Linda Stewart docked at Monrovia carrying nails that Harden had requested from Virginia. At the same time, the carpenter Church Vaughan arrived on the Joseph Maxwell, along with Marshall Hooper, the well-connected denizen of New Virginia who could introduce him to one of his first new clients.

Church and Harden in some ways shared a similar background. Only two months apart in age, both were born free to parents who had known slavery, and both had received a rudimentary education. But Harden had spent most of his youth “bound,” as he described his forced apprenticeship,
to a gentleman in Baltimore as a house servant. At nineteen, he later told his Baptist superiors, he was introduced to religion by a black Methodist woman and baptized in that church, “my father being a Methodist preacher.” Within a few months, however, he converted to the Baptist faith. For the next three years, Harden preached in a congregation later known as the Saratoga Street African Baptist Church, until in 1850 the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention appointed him to be a missionary in Africa.

These days it may be hard to fathom why an African American, let alone one with memories of bondage, would join and promote a church that saw slavery as part of God’s plan for humanity. Yet a powerful strain of African American Christianity at this time also interpreted slavery this way, as a means for bringing black people to the one true religion, which they then could share with their benighted brethren. In this Christian cause, white-run, or even white-supremacist, church organizations could still help them. Like other missionaries, Harden was convinced that Africans needed to become Christian in order to achieve both salvation and civilization, and he had come to Africa to bring it to them. In 1855, for example, he reported to the Mission Board about an African initiation ceremony he witnessed. While his contemporary Edward Blyden had at least recorded grudging respect for “native genius,” Harden condemned what he saw as “a true picture of heathenism in this part of Liberia, and God alone can provide the means of bringing them out of it.”

Harden had come to Liberia with his pregnant wife, but she and the baby died of fever within a year of their arrival. His second wife, the Liberian-born daughter of settler parents, died in childbirth, along with the child, in October 1853. After so much death, Harden harbored a certain fatalism about his mission in Africa. “Africa is not like America,” he wrote to the Foreign Mission Board secretary in 1854. “We have no paved streets or well kept roads to travel on. Vegetation is always green and rank, and having to travel through the bushes during the rains on foot, you can almost at any time wring as much water out of your clothes as if you had been washing them. And then traveling from five to ten miles in an open canoe, through a hard driving rain, will bring on sickness.” But Harden was stoic about his fate: “Dear brother, do not suppose for a moment that I am complaining, far be it from me, for I have long since consecrated myself to God and the Board, and expect to die preaching the glad tidings of salvation. I shall consider it an honor to die in such a cause.”

Missionary work did eventually kill him, but it was not in Liberia. Through the chain of Southern Baptist missionaries stretched between Li-
beria, the United States, and the territory that would later be known as Nigeria, Harden would relocate to Yorubaland, some twelve hundred miles southeast along the West African coast. Harden had no idea, however, that this was in his future—or in Church Vaughan’s—when in mid-1854, he received a white visitor from the United States. Rev. William H. Clarke was passing two months in Liberia en route to Yorubaland. When John Day took him on a tour of the country’s Baptist stations, Clarke met Harden at New Virginia, a mission he deemed “in good condition.”

A young preacher from Georgia, William Clarke had been inspired to become a missionary after meeting Thomas Jefferson Bowen, the Southern Baptist Convention’s first (and at the time only) white missionary to Africa. In 1852, Bowen had been granted land for a mission by the king of the inland Yoruba city-state of Ijaye, but had returned to the United States to raise funds and personnel. Already renowned among Southern Baptists as an intrepid missionary-explorer, Bowen dazzled Pastor Clarke with his stories of a verdant land where sincere, intelligent people could be lifted from barbarism through the Gospel. After Bowen returned to Africa with his new bride and two other missionary couples, Clarke resolved to follow him.

In September 1854, Clarke left Liberia and reached the Bowens in Ijaye. They were on their own, the other missionaries and their wives having died or returned to the United States. Over the next year, though, Clarke’s letters home expressed optimism about the prospects for spreading Christianity. “I have never yet been unkindly received or treated by a single crowd,” he wrote. But like Harden had been in Liberia, he was frustrated with the building projects that formed a necessary part of mission work. “My brother,” Clarke wrote to his Richmond superior about building a chapel and mission house, “you have no idea of our trouble and embarrassments in the prosecution of our labors.” The missionaries’ African agent in Lagos often neglected to forward supplies on time, compelling Clarke to travel to the coast to take care of business. Back in Ijaye, Clarke resented the constant need to supervise construction workers, when he had no experience as an overseer. As he and Bowen made plans for a string of mission stations stretching from the coast further to the interior, he worried about who would do the building. “I suggest,” he wrote back to Richmond, “that the Board consider the propriety of connecting with their mission two, three or four good mechanics of our own denomination, worthy men such as may be obtained in Liberia or Sierra Leone whose duty it shall be to erect suitable buildings for every station.” They could even help with missionary work at the proposed new stations, learning the Yoruba language and thereby being “useful to the missionaries.
in various ways—perhaps as teachers or preachers, thereby uniting two vocations most desirable in a Central African Mission.” They could also train local builders to carry on the necessary construction work. Clarke was so confident of this idea, he reported, that he had sent for a builder from Liberia at his own expense, expecting that if he were “well pleased,” the carpenter would then be joined by some of his compatriots.97

Meanwhile in Liberia, John Day was working on Bowen and Clarke’s behalf to find a missionary for a new Baptist station in Lagos, Yorubaland’s port city. In April 1855, he wrote to Bowen that he had found “an excellent man” for the job: a recently arrived, 49-year-old freedman from Virginia named Washington Johnson. Though he was booked on the next steamer, Johnson must have died or backed out. Instead, by July Joseph Harden was on his way to Lagos. Reverend Day was sorry to see him go: “He is the most studious of our preachers and has a gravity of demeanor which cannot fail to render a minister venerable and an immanence which defies the tongue of slander.”98 Two months later, Church Vaughan and another carpenter, a Vai man whose name was not recorded, followed Harden to Yoruba country, their passage paid by Clarke and Bowen.99

Their agreement was for a fixed term, giving Church the option to return to Liberia at its completion.100 After nearly three years in the African American colony, however, he had seen enough to be ready to leave. Though Liberia did offer an escape from white supremacy and the opportunity for citizenship and perhaps even wealth, settlers’ new lives came at the cost of local people’s old ones. The Americo-Liberians decried slavery and risked their lives to suppress the slave trade, yet they had created a system disturbingly similar to the plantation societies many of them had left behind. Having seen through his family the effects of land dispossession and slavery in South Carolina, Church may have been especially sensitive to their occurrence in Liberia.

But where was he going, and with whom? All Church may have heard about Yorubaland at this point was vague rumors of warfare and slave trafficking—which he would see firsthand soon enough. The British Navy had bombarded the port of Lagos in 1851 in an attempt to suppress the slave trade from there. A few missionaries, most of them British, were endeavoring to bring salvation to African rulers and common people; they and a handful of European traders were the only foreigners in residence. Perhaps Church was intrigued by the idea of living in “real,” uncolonized Africa. Maybe he had some sympathy for the missionary enterprise—though he would not
become a Christian for some time—and surely he felt affection for Harden, whose family would remain in his life for many years to come. William Clarke would soon become his closest companion, and he would remember Thomas Bowen into his old age. For now, though, the missionaries served a strategic and specific purpose: they were Church’s way out of Liberia.