

York County's freed slaves followed 'fever' to Liberia

In 1871, a group of York County blacks managed to gather enough money to transport themselves and their families to the African country of Liberia.

Liberia was created as a haven for slaves in 1822 by the American Colonization Society, an offshoot of the abolitionist movement. The Liberian constitution was modeled after the U.S. constitution. The capital was named Monrovia for U.S. president James Monroe, and U.S. currency became the official Liberian currency (until 1986).

It appears that Solomon Hill was the leader of the blacks; certainly he was the most literate of the group. Other former York County blacks who prospered in Liberia were June Moore, Joe Watson, Scott Mason and George Black.

In the summer of 1874, Solomon Hill wrote a letter to Sheriff Glenn in Yorkville. He told Glenn: "I have made one crop, and am nearly done planting another, and I know if a person will half work he can make a good living in Liberia."

Hill said that in the previous year he had raised rice and sweet potatoes. He had plenty for his own use and a surplus for sale.

Hill added new crops and had

good crops of corn and ginger. Ginger, he said, was a staple in Liberia, and he had planted 50 pounds of ginger, from which he expected his harvest to be 500 pounds of dried ginger. He also had an orchard of 2,000 coffee trees, having planted his first 60 trees in 1872.

Hill reported that nearly all the former York County farmers had coffee trees laden with fruit that was worth 20 cents a pound in American currency. He enumerated the other articles produced by the colony: calico, tobacco, sugar, molasses, bacon, salted beef, flour, mackerel, chickens, eggs, turkeys, ducks and milk cows.

Hill then boasted to Sheriff Glenn, "I am better satisfied than I ever was since emancipation, and am worth more than ever before. I have three good framed houses with shingle roofs, and neat board paling around my lot."

He further reported that wild game was plentiful, including the sea cow, deer, squirrels and monkeys: "I have seen as many as a thousand monkeys in one drove. The meat of this animal is highly prized as an article of food."

Hill also had a message for Colonel William H. McCorkle of Yorkville: "... Within five years, if I live, I will be able to send him 4,000 pounds of Liberia coffee, of my own raising, and it is the desire of myself and friends to sell him our crops and ship direct to him."

There is no record that Hill was

able to accomplish his goal of shipping his coffee to Yorkville, but he wrote four years later that he had sold his entire coffee crop to Philadelphia merchants. The optimism of such letters as those written by Hill spread among other southeastern blacks who began making plans to emigrate to Liberia. The largest group set out in 1878.

Some of the 1878 emigrants returned to the United States, unhappy with the conditions they found. Prices had gone up, and most of the newcomers to Liberia lacked adequate money to invest. Besides that, the government was unstable, and there was much ethnic strife.

Word got around about overloaded ships where fever broke out. In one case, 23 passengers died on one ship bound to Liberia after the ship took on 206 passengers when it only had room, water and food for 159.

Finally, unscrupulous travel agents and men posing as ministers of the gospel sold bogus railroad and steamship tickets. In 1886, a man posing as a Baptist preacher, J.C. Davidson, swindled a large number of Fort Mill blacks by selling them worthless tickets from Fort Mill to New York.

This last episode ended what was called the "Liberian fever."

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