Liberia Bound, Some Got Nowhere

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On a cold December day in 1886, a throng of black people congregated at the Fort Mill depot.

Nearby History

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The crowd, which numbered in the hundreds, held tickets printed on pink paper ornamented with a cut of the United States flag flying in the breeze.

The "tickets" were about 6 by 9 inches and carried this message:

"Children, go to your old home, Sunny Africa — This may be your last opportunity. The train will leave Fort Mill, December 20, 1886, and 36 hours after will arrive in New York where the emigrants will take a ship to Africa, which will sail under the United States flag, protected by the United States government. This fact you need not doubt. Prepare yourself with all the money you can."

The ticket was signed, "Rev. J.C. Davidson, Manager." The tickets for Liberia he had sold for $1.05.

Davidson, a black man, had recruited from the three counties of York, Chester and Lancaster while posing as a Baptist minister.

The train didn't come. Nor did Davidson. The hoax finally cured what had long been known as the "Liberian fever" among black people.

Liberia was founded by former American slaves in the 1820s. The ex-slaves modeled their government after that of the United States and named their capital Monrovia, in honor of the American President James Monroe.

In 1877, following the removal of federal troops from South Carolina and the installation of Wade Hampton as the S.C. governor, there was a revival of interest among black people in emigration to Liberia.

Word spread across South Carolina that the American Colonization Society, which was still in existence, would give assistance to parties who wished to emigrate. Black politicians and ministers began to stir up interest in a mass removal to Africa.

At least a decade before J.C. Davidson's deception, itinerant preachers had stirred the imaginations of black people by painting Liberia as a veritable Garden of Eden.

Some recruiters mostly were interested in collecting enough money for their own passage. Newspapers campaigned to expose the fraudulent actions by publishing accounts of the schemes with the names of the perpetrators. It seemed to make no difference.

Thousands of black people descended on Charleston following rumors that Northern philanthropists were sending ships south in which to transport any black person who wished to return to Liberia.

Actually, only one ship was sent, a clipper ship from Boston that had 159 berths. It sailed with 206 passengers. Fever broke out and 23 of the emigrants died. The ship never returned to Charleston, although the captain had promised to come back for 175 more who had purchased tickets.

Lucy Phifer and her mother, former slaves from Cabarrus County, N.C., went to Liberia. Lucy was bitten by an insect. She lost her foot following an infection.

A plea for money to pay for return passage was made to Esther Phifer White of Fort Mill, the wife of Samuel Elliott White, who would later found the Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. which evolved into Springs Industries.

Esther White sent Lucy Phifer the money. A brick cottage was built behind the White home, a Victorian mansion which was remodeled in 1988, and is now known as the Springs Guesthouse, for Springs headquarters' guests.

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