

10/14/2003

# When 'Liberian Fever' hit in York County ...

*Hoax cut enthusiasm among area blacks for mass return to Africa*

In 1822 the American Colonization Society was organized by S. abolitionists. One of its aims was to provide a haven for slaves who wished to return to Africa.

The society would purchase slaves in auctions and, if they wished, send them to a newly created country called Liberia. The Liberian constitution was modeled after the

U.S. Constitution, and the capital was named Monrovia for U.S. President James Monroe. (Until 1866, U.S. currency was also used as the official

Liberian currency.)

The Civil War emancipated the slaves, but Liberia was still a lure for American blacks. In 1871, there was a movement that attracted blacks from around here, especially in the Guthriesville, Clover and Fort Mill areas of York County.

Solomon Hill and the Rev. Elias were the leaders in recruiting other blacks.

The Rev. Hill wrote a letter from Monrovia, dated Jan. 3, 1872, that was printed in the Yorkville Enquirer. About the voyage, Hill said the boat left Hampton Roads, Va., with 244 passengers. Two infants died during the 38-day trip. He remarked that they encountered weather so rough at one point that the crew tied passengers to their beds.

Hill was not particularly impressed by Monrovia. While he found that it had shops and attractive churches, the city as a whole exhibited "laziness and negligence." The rich treated their servants almost as if they were slaves, paying very low salaries and oppressing them with heavy burdens.

The government was in great disorder with the president, attorney general, secretary of the public, secretary of the interior, the speaker of the House and the secretary of the Senate all in jail. The charge against them was that

they had stolen money loaned to the republic by Great Britain.

But when Hill got 20 miles from the capital, he reported good land with high production of corn and cotton. "The air is bracing and the water refreshing."

Such letters as Hill's attracted interest in emigration to Liberia. Probably the largest number of York County black emigrants entered Liberia in 1878. A ship named Azor, built for 159, left Charleston in April 1878 with 206 passengers.

Fever broke out, and 23 died. The water supply ran out before the ship reached port. The food was terrible.

Once in Liberia, the survivors found that the best land had been taken. Some of the earlier settlers, however, had done well. Saul Hill, a York County native, had managed to acquire a 700-acre coffee plantation and wrote home about his success. Literature was distributed in the black community often by the ministers in churches, describing Liberia as the "Garden of Eden."

In 1886 a huckster who called himself Rev. J.C. Davidson appeared in York, Lancaster and Chester counties. He sold hundreds of pink railroad tickets with a U.S. flag stamped on them for \$1.05 apiece that presumably would take the purchasers to New York where they could board a ship for Africa. The train never came, and "Reverend" Davidson disappeared. It was a hoax of such dimensions that it effectively ended the "Liberian Fever."

One of the emigrants who managed to get back was Lucy Phifer. Lucy lost a foot after it became infected from an insect bite. She wrote Esther White, the wife of Samuel E. White, founder of Springs Industries. Mrs. White felt sorry for her and sent enough money for Lucy and her mother to return. A brick cottage was built for the two.

"Lucy's Cottage" is behind the Springs Guest House in Fort Mill (also known as the Founder's House). It was modernized in 1988, when the main house was remodeled and two replicas of Lucy's Cottage were built to serve as guest quarters for Springs Industries.

NEARBY HISTORY



Louise Pettus

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.





# er is quiet so far

*public, partisan fronts is remarkable*

COMMENTARY

Cindy  
Ross Scoppe



tempt to quantify the quietude:  
during his first eight months in  
office, McMaster's name has ap-  
peared in this newspaper 48  
times. During the same period of  
his first term, Charlie Condon's  
name appeared 148 times.

the campaign trail. And indeed,  
while Richter and the other Re-  
publican and Democrat candi-  
dates who ran for the office were  
much more aggressive about  
promising to depoliticize the of-  
fice, McMaster made the same  
promise when he visited our edi-  
torial board to discuss his candi-  
dacy.

This is not to say McMaster is  
flawless. Questions have been  
raised in legal circles about the  
connection between at least one