

From South Carolina to Liberia

■ Many black citizens emigrated there in 1800s to establish representative government.

In December 1892, Rock Hill's Dr. William White received a letter heavy with Sierra Leone stamps. The letter was addressed in this fashion: "Dr. Wiley White, Rock Hill, York Co., U.S. America."



Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

Someone had inserted "S.C." in red ink. Inside, the letter was dated Aug. 2, 1892 and a note, "My address is Cape Mount, Liberia, W.C.A."

The writer of the letter was Hall White, who wrote, "We left New York

December 5th, 1886 we landed in Cape Mount January 23rd." In March his family all had fever, and "little Kay" died on March 4, 1887.

Hall White reported that for the first six months they were supported by the Colonization Society. The reference is to the American Colonization Society, an old organization that for many years attempted to return American blacks to Africa if they wished to go. Liberia had been 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 U.S. President James Monroe.

In 1877, following the removal of federal troops from South Carolina and the installation of Wade Hampton as governor, there was a revival of interest among black people in emigration to Liberia. Some managed to emigrate; some never got there, tricked by men posing as agents who absconded with the ticket money. Hundreds of blacks in the Fort Mill area were duped in 1886. Perhaps one-half of those who reached Liberia returned or tried to.

Since Dr. W.J. White was a native of the Waxhaws of upper Lancaster County, and because Hall White, a black man, had the White surname, we can assume that Hall was a former slave who had worked on the White plantation before the Civil War. The letter, which is now in the possession of the Lancaster County Library, reveals that White was anxious to tell the doctor that he was doing well.

White wrote, "Liberia is a hard country for a poor man it was hard for me at first if a man come here with money he can make money as fast here as can anywhere elce in the world we like our new hom is well sattesfied all of the (72) emigrants that come to liberia with me is well sattesfied."

Hall White became a planter and grew potatoes ("the principal bred for a poor man in Liberia") but his pride and joy was in the 3,000 coffee trees he had planted on the side of a mountain overlooking the ocean. Coffee beans "at our door" sold for 25 cents per pound. While some of his trees were barren, he said that a coffee tree planted from seed began to bear in three years and was good for 40 years.

Hall White had two grown sons who owned plantations next to his, and they had 1,000 coffee trees each. He indicated that they had palm trees and harvested palm oil but did not indicate the number of trees. He also reported that in Liberia there were cows, hogs, sheep and goats but did not indicate that he owned any animals.

While stating his satisfaction with his new life, Hall White also revealed that he missed his old friends. He told the doctor, "You must rite my people for me tell all of my friends to rite me both colard and white. You must Rite me often for I have plenty to tell you. Send me something to remember you."

Hall White was one of the successful emigrants to Liberia. So was Saul Hill, a native of York County. Within four years of his emigration it was reported that he had a 700-acre coffee plantation and sold his entire crop to a broker in Philadelphia. The Columbia Daily Register commented on this report by saying that Saul Hill was in good financial circumstances when he arrived in Liberia. Many other emigrants, the paper said, returned to South Carolina in a year or so, "as poor as church mice."

Hall White also revealed his motivation for going to Dr. White by declaring, "Africa is an uncivilized world. Liberia is the negro home where he can live under his own government."

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