



Episode 709, Story 2: Liberia Letter

Tukufu: Our next story traces one freed man's dream to return to Africa. By the early 19th century, the United States was home to increasing numbers of free blacks. In some places, much of the white establishment considered their status with growing alarm. In the south, where the slave system was most entrenched, free blacks were considered a threat to the status quo. Hostility and even violence against free blacks were common. This tension gave birth to the Back to Africa movement. Over the next century, some 16,000 black Americans sailed to West Africa to establish the Republic of Liberia. It was one of the largest organized out-migrations in US history. Vernetia Jenkins of Lynchburg, South Carolina has long been mystified by some old family letters, and their connection to Africa.

Ms. Jenkins: The letters represent hope for a new life for my ancestors.

Tukufu: I'm on my way to see Vernetia and learn more about her story. The history of the Back to Africa movement has always fascinated me. I wrote my first book on the founding of Liberia. So what do you have for me here?

Ms. Jenkins: The letters.

Tukufu: Now, what are these letters?

Ms. Jenkins: These are letters that were written to my great grandmother Mary Vance from her brother Harvey McLeod.



Tukufu: The correspondence spanned from 1875 to 1880. But it is this letter, from 1877, that has caught Vernetia's attention.

Ms. Jenkins: He kept making reference that Liberia is our home.

Tukufu: Now did he move to Liberia?

Ms. Jenkins: I don't know if he made it back. But I know that he wanted to go back. And I know that he was encouraging his sister to go back with him.

Tukufu: What do you know about Harvey McLeod and Mary Vance?

Ms. Jenkins: I was able to trace the family back to 1810...

Tukufu: Vernetia tells me her great grandmother Mary Vance remained in South Carolina, but the family lost track of what happened to Mary's brother Harvey McLeod beyond this 1877 letter.

What would you like for me to find out for you?

Ms. Jenkins: Did Harvey McLeod make it back to Liberia?

Tukufu: It's pretty exciting that you've kept these documents alive. Do you mind if I take the letters with me?

Ms. Jenkins: You most certainly can, as long as I get them back.



Tukufu: You're sure to get 'em back. The idea of quitting America and going back to Africa is as old as when the first Africans arrived here enslaved and in chains, but the organized efforts to take groups of Africans back to the African continent starts at the beginning of the 1800's. Let's just look at the quality of the letters. They're definitely on old paper. The paper is beginning to fall apart and the writing is faded. Let's get into these letters. "Dear sister, hope that god will change your mind to come and go to Liberia, Africa with us." And here again he states "Liberia is our home." It's written from Archer, looks like Florida, December 18, 1877. By this time, Liberia was an independent nation run by free blacks. It's not hard to imagine Harvey McLeod's curiosity about life there. "We all done sent a delegate on to see after the country." It was common to send a representative ahead to report back about Liberia, because migration wasn't easy. "We want to try and get off between now and January next." And he's clearly concerned about keeping the family together. He's asking after other family members. He talks about his mother and says, he didn't see her again until "we all got free." So the family had definitely been enslaved. And here he's trying' to muster the family up. "Let's quit this place and go to Liberia where we can find some freedom." Powerful. I'm headed to the Library of Congress in Washington DC, which holds the majority of records related to the American Colonization Society. I'm meeting historian Marie Tyler-McGraw, who knows the archives well. The guy I'm investigating wrote these letters and he was interested in migrating to Liberia.

Ms. McGraw: Oh yes. That's very interesting.

Tukufu: Can you talk about the process that he would have gone through to migrate?



Ms. McGraw: The process would have involved him getting in touch with an organization called the American Colonization Society, founded in Washington in 1816 by a group of white men who felt that free blacks in America should be resettled somewhere.

Tukufu: Marie explains how the society was supported by different groups for very different reasons. Its founders included Kentucky senator Henry Clay. The society appealed to many free blacks as a way to help them reach an African promised land. But it was also supported financially by southern slave holders who feared revolts by free blacks, and by some northern whites who worried about an influx of black workers.

Ms. McGraw: Before the Civil War the Colonization Society did manage to send almost 14,000 people to Liberia.

Tukufu: Describe the experience of the first migrants sent to Africa by the American Colonization Society.

Ms. McGraw: The first ship was the Elizabeth, which left the United States in 1820. There were 88 people and they had a very difficult time when they got to the west coast of Africa.

Tukufu: Settlers struggled to grow food, and many died from disease.

Ms. McGraw: To a great extent the Americans clung to the coastline and never had much control over the backcountry.



Tukufu: They persevered - naming the capitol Monrovia after the US President James Monroe, retaining American-style dress and architecture, and attempting to convert Africans to Christianity.

Ms. McGraw: They really wanted to recreate the world they had known. And only this time being in charge themselves.

Tukufu: Within a few decades, free blacks - known as America Liberians – had built a republic in Africa...and replaced the society's appointed white agents with their own leaders. So they were ready by 1847 to declare their independence.

Tukufu: As a new, independent nation, Liberia was prepared to welcome an influx of freed men. Even though slaves had been emancipated after the Civil War and given some rights, many African Americans were still anxious to seek greater freedom in a new country.

Ms. McGraw: In the period after the Civil War there were thousands of letters written to the American Colonization Society asking for assistance in going to Liberia.

Tukufu: Marie explains that financial difficulties meant the society was able to help fewer applicants.

Ms. McGraw: Of those thousands of letters, only 2500 people actually went in the 40 years after the Civil War.



Tukufu: Still the letters poured in. A North Carolina man lacking funds to sail from New York wrote, "I have been wanting to go to Africa for 3 or 4 years...times is getting harder and I never will get there." A woman lamented, "I cannot make my living for myself and three children...let me know who to apply to for transportation for I am very anxious to leave this part of the world." And a South Carolina man simply stated "I am willing to desert my home... to enjoy my liberties." How would I find out if Harvey McLeod submitted an application to the American Colonization Society?

Ms. McGraw: He may have written a letter, but the letters and the names are not in any kind of alphabetical order. A faster way might be to look at the ships' manifests for the period of the late 1870's and the 1880's.

Tukufu: Marie's colleague, history professor Eric Burin, has created a database of emigrants to Liberia using US and Liberian census records, and Colonization Society ship manifests.

Mr. Burin: It includes information on the 16,000 black Americans who immigrated to Liberia between 1820 and 1904.

Tukufu: So what can we find out about a specific individual using your database?

Mr. Burin: Name, age, sex, literacy, occupation. If Harvey McLeod is in there we should be able to identify him that way.

Tukufu: Eric says that while overall migration slowed dramatically after the Civil War, the percentage of people migrating from the south rose significantly. Harvey McLeod had lived in Florida.



Mr. Burin: So what we have here are all the immigrants that left from Florida uh, between 1820 and 1904.

Tukufu: 102 migrants left on American Colonization Society ships for Liberia during the period when Harvey McLeod planned to set sail. Harvey isn't listed in any of the manifest records. But, one of his letters was written from Archer Florida, which Eric confirms is in Alachua County.

Mr. Burin: And Alachua County in particular seemed to be an epicenter. Of all the immigrants who left from Florida 43% left from Alachua County.

Tukufu: Was there something peculiar going on in Alachua County?

Mr. Burin: I imagine a local historian would be able to tell you a lot more.

Tukufu: I want see whether there is any trace of Harvey McLeod in Florida records. But first, let me see what I can find in South Carolina, where the family was from. If he was enslaved I might find him using the last name of the slave master, McLeod. There's a John R. McLeod in Sumter County, South Carolina, who has a number of slaves that could be Harvey. And this guy is exactly the right age. He's listed as a fugitive from the state. He actually escaped from slavery. No wonder he wanted to get out of America and go to Liberia. He was already expressing those tendencies to leave, go out and find his own freedom. That is if this is our guy. I'm checking Florida census records from 1870. And there's a Harvey McLeod. He's a farmer, 27 years old, born in South Carolina –and this is interesting - he's living in Alachua County. Now let's see how far we can go with this. Let's go to the next census, 1880. He's still a farmer in Alachua County in



1880. But - after that, he disappears. Did he leave with other emigrants to Liberia? I've come to Alachua County, Florida to meet local historian Paul Ortiz. So the guy I'm investigating was here in the 1870's and he was a farmer. And I'm trying to find out about him and the possibility that he may have moved to Liberia.

Mr. Ortiz: Wow, this is remarkable.....

Tukufu: Paul tells me Harvey McLeod is emblematic of many blacks who first came to Florida. Like Liberia in the early 19th century, the state had promised freedom and a new start.

Mr. Ortiz: Enslaved African Americans found out early on that if they could make it to Florida they had a chance to gain their freedom. You could join the Seminole Indians – these were Native Americans who were themselves fleeing from the British, trying to keep plantation slavery out of Florida. In the years following emancipation, the future looked bright. The year after the Civil War ended Congress passed the Southern Homestead Act. And this act opened up tens of thousands of acres to small farmers. There was this tremendous sense of possibility. Some experts in the African American community referred to Florida as the “negro's new Jerusalem.”

Tukufu: But events in the late 1870s may also explain why Harvey McLeod was writing to his sister after the Civil War about moving to Liberia.

Mr. Ortiz: You had the election of 1876. Some people called it the Great Compromise. Other people called it the Great Betrayal from a black perspective. Essentially the Democrats gave the Republicans the election in return for the end of Federal occupation of the south. The soldiers are pulled out. The Ku Klux Klan is very active in Alachua County. There are a lot of lynchings. The



Southern Homestead Act has been repealed. So for a small farmer like Mr. McLeod, this is going to be a very difficult period of time to make a go of it.

Tukufu: Paul says not all emigrants to Liberia relied on the American Colonization Society.

Mr. Ortiz: There were these informal networks that people tried to use to raise funds to get to Africa.

Tukufu: Jim Powell at the Alachua County Archives has picked up Harvey's trail, and found his signature on a long ago property sale. Okay, this is great. We have him signing a deed in Alachua County, in Florida in 1883. Harvey McLeod, who was once enslaved, was a land owner. He and his wife Amy were selling one acre of their land to the Board of Education for a dollar –basically giving it away. Was he freeing up land in preparation to move to Liberia?

Mr. Powell: Look what I found.

Tukufu: Jim has uncovered a key piece of evidence. But to confirm the information, I'm calling in a research request to my office.

Tukufu: Okay, here's what we know... when the call comes in, it's more than I'd hoped for. Hello? Yes, right. Okay, that's good. I think I've found my man. I'm heading back to tell Vernetia what I've learned. Your question led me on a fantastic journey. And what I discovered about Harvey McLeod was a very powerful story within itself. I tell her that her great grand uncle Harvey escaped from slavery.



Ms. Jenkins: Incredible.

Tukufu: And that he was an independent farmer and landowner in Florida.

Ms. Jenkins: This is amazing.

Tukufu: It is amazing.

Ms. Jenkins: It's phenomenal.

Tukufu: I found the answer to whether Harvey McLeod went to Liberia in a very surprising place.

Mr. Powell: This is another deed book and on this far side you've got Harvey McLeod.

Tukufu: But the name is spelled differently! A clerk misspelled McLeod in official records. It's a slight variation, but explains why I missed him in the census records.

Mr. Powell: But if you'll look, it's the same piece of land between the two.

Tukufu: Same guy, same property, different spellings. This land deed is for the transfer of small portions of Harvey's land to a third party, and its dated 1902. That's 25 years after Harvey was planning to go to Liberia. So Harvey McLeod did not go to Liberia.

Ms. Jenkins: He never made it?



Tukufu: How do you feel about that?

Ms. Jenkins: A little sad because in the letters it just sounded like it was just such a passion that he had, that he wrote from, that it was home and it was like he needed to be back there.

Tukufu: The answer to the question of whether Harvey McLeod went to Liberia or not is only part of what we have to tell you. And now I need you to come outside with me.

Ms. Jenkins: There's more?

Tukufu: You can open your eyes now. So I'm gonna introduce you to your cousin, Eleanor.

Eleanor: This is Harvey McLeod. He's named after your great grandfather.

Tukufu: There's no record of the elder Harvey McLeod after 1903, and his land has all been sold off. But once I discovered the other spelling of his name, I was able to track down his descendants, still living in Florida. Until now, they didn't know Vernetia existed either. This reunion would surely make Harvey McLeod proud – just as he always wanted, the family is together again.