

Island  
ral Society

THE PROVIDENCE AFRICAN SOCIETY'S SIERRA LEONE  
EMIGRATION SCHEME, 1794-1795: PROLOGUE  
TO THE AFRICAN COLONIZATION MOVEMENT<sup>1</sup>

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Captain Paul Cuffee's pioneering role in African colonization, notably his transporting of thirty-eight American black settlers to the British colony of Sierra Leone in his own vessel in 1816, is well known to scholars of Afro-American history. Generally overlooked, however, is an unsuccessful emigration scheme undertaken by Rhode Island freedmen two decades earlier. In November 1794 the African Society of Providence dispatched one of its officers, James Mackenzie, to negotiate arrangements for the settlement of American freedmen. The colony's governor and council accorded Mackenzie a sympathetic hearing, and promised farm land and town lots to accommodate twelve families. That no members of the African Society subsequently emigrated to Sierra Leone was principally, if not entirely, due to the refusal of Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a prominent member of the Congregationalist clergy and a well-known advocate of black emigration, to furnish the prospective colonists with the character references required by the governor of Sierra Leone. The consequence was a grievous disappointment for New England blacks, and the loss of a valuable increment of colonists for the struggling Sierra Leone settlement.

Little firsthand information is available concerning the Providence African Society and contemporaneous black organizations in New

1. The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University and the Public Record Office, London, obligingly provided Xerox copies of the documents quoted in this paper. I am indebted to Thomas R. Adams and Franklin S. Coyle for information and assistance in my research in the Brown papers, and to Christopher Fyfe for citations in the Public Record Office. Gerald W. Hartwig assisted in the library research. An Indiana University Faculty Research Grant subsidized typing expenses and certain research expenditures. Heide Wightman typed the penultimate and final drafts. I am grateful to Charles S. Bird, Peter J. Coleman, Tommy T. Hamm, Daniel F. McCall,

England; much more is recorded by and about the white abolitionists who espoused African colonization schemes for a variety of motives. Reverend Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), who denied his support to the members of the Providence African Society, was a highly respected and influential clergyman. He was renowned for having devised his own system of theology and for holding independent views on many issues. Following his appointment in 1770 as minister of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, he became an outspoken opponent of the slave trade, one of Newport's chief commercial interests. Reverend Hopkins's sermons and tracts condemning slavery and the slave trade reached a wide audience in New England and the Middle Atlantic states, and were influential in winning public support for the manumission of slaves and the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>2</sup>

The foremost antislavery spokesman in Providence was the noted Quaker businessman and philanthropist, Moses Brown (1738-1836), youngest of four brothers of the state's most prominent family. He was the chief spokesman for the antislavery legislators in the Rhode Island General Assembly, who in 1787 enacted a law making participation in the slave trade illegal for citizens of Rhode Island. Moses Brown likewise was the chief organizer of the Providence Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded in 1789, of which Reverend Hopkins was also a charter member. Reverend Hopkins was to make persistent efforts to enlist Moses Brown's support for African colonization.<sup>3</sup>

2. For Hopkins's life, see Edwards A. Park, *The Works of Samuel Hopkins, D. D. . . . With a Memoir of his Life and Character* (three vols., Boston 1852), I, and John Ferguson, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Samuel Hopkins, D. D.* (Boston, 1830). Hopkins's autobiography, *Sketches of the Life of the Late Reverend Samuel Hopkins, D. D. . . . Written by Himself* (Hartford, 1805), is chiefly devoted to his career in the ministry and makes no mention of the colonization ventures described below. Hopkins's place in American intellectual history is conveniently summarized in Merle Eugene Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1964), 28-29.

3. Mack Thompson, *Moses Brown: Reluctant Reformer* (Chapel Hill, 1962), chs. 5 and 9, and James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations. Vol. I: The Colonial Years* (Providence, 1968), 82-83. Elizabeth Donnan, "Agitation against the Slave Trade in Rhode Island, 1784-1790," in *Persecution and Liberty: Essays in Honor of George Lincoln Burr* (New York, 1931), 473-482, describes Moses Brown's and Reverend Hopkins's collaboration for the years cited. For broader perspectives on the individuals and issues discussed in this paper, consult Michael Kraus, "Slavery Reform in the Eighteenth Century: An Aspect of Transatlantic Intellectual Co-operation," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LX (1936), 53-66, reprinted with revisions in his *The Atlantic Civilization: Eighteenth Century Origins* (Ithaca, 1949), 144-158; Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965), 97-98; Mary S. Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America . . . 1619-1800* (Boston, 1901), 40-65; Archibald Alexander, *A History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa* (Philadelphia, 1846, reprinted in New York, 1969), ch. 3; and Henry Noble Sherwood, "Early Negro Deportation Projects," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, II, 4 (March, 1916), 484-508.

Reverend Hopkins was one of the first abolitionists on either side of the Atlantic to propose the resettlement of black freedmen in Africa, advocating emigration both for their own advantage and for the contribution they could make as agents for the evangelization of the African continent. In 1773, Hopkins and another Newport Congregationalist clergyman, Reverend Ezra Stiles, afterward president of Yale College (1778-1795), launched an appeal for funds to support the expenses of a theological education for two Fanti-speaking members of Hopkins's congregation, John Quamine and Bristol Yamma, in order that they might be sent to West Africa as missionaries. Quamine was the son of a prosperous African trader at Anomabu on the Gold Coast who in 1754 or 1755, when he was about ten years of age, had been entrusted to the captain of a Rhode Island vessel to bring to America to further his education. The shipmaster instead sold Quamine into slavery. Less is recorded about Yamma. He was of the same "nation" as Quamine and had also purchased his freedom, except for a fifty-dollar debt which Reverend Hopkins arranged to pay.<sup>4</sup>

Hopkins and Stiles succeeded in raising sufficient funds, including a generous contribution from a Scottish society for propagating Christian knowledge, to send Quamine and Yamma to study with Reverend John Witherspoon, the president of New Jersey College (later Princeton). Reverend Hopkins's personal contribution of one hundred dollars may be characterized as conscience money, inasmuch as the sum represents the price he had realized from the sale of a slave he had owned in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, prior to accepting his Newport pastorate.<sup>5</sup> Quamine and Yamma made encouraging progress in their studies, and in 1776 Hopkins and Stiles made a new appeal for funds on their behalf, and proposed similar training for

4. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 130-131; Ferguson, *Hopkins*, 87; and Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D. D., LL. D.* (three vols., New York, 1901), I, 363-366. Additional information on Quamine, including the text of a letter from Reverend Philip Quaque, an English-educated Fanti missionary on the Gold Coast, is recorded in Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 134-135.

5. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 133-134, 138; Ferguson, *Hopkins*, 83, 86. Stiles, too, was a slaveholder. In 1756 he sent a hogshead of rum to Africa on a venture and thereby acquired a ten-year-old boy whom he named Newport. Stiles did not free his slave until June 1778, when he departed for New Haven and Yale University. Newport and his family afterward followed Stiles, and Newport became his paid servant. See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New Haven, 1962), 125, 309-310, 451-452. The decision to send Quamine and Yamma to Princeton in part reflects the narrow sectarianism of the time; some of the subscribers to their educational fund were concerned that they would be overly influenced by Reverend Hopkins's doctrines if they remained in Newport. One clergyman asserted that it would be better for Africans to remain pagans than be converted to Hopkins's teachings. Dexter, *Ezra Stiles*, I, 414.

another freed African, Salmar Nubia. The latter was about twenty years of age and a member of Reverend Stiles's Second Congregational Church. Nubia was described as belonging to a windward coast (West Africa from Senegal to Liberia) society "a great distance from the sea." "He retains his native tongue to a considerable degree."<sup>6</sup>

Another African befriended by Reverend Hopkins in this period was a gifted young slave named Newport Gardner, or Occramer Marycoo, who had been brought to America in 1760 when about fourteen years of age. Marycoo had taught himself to read and write English. He composed music and earned money toward the purchase of his freedom by giving singing lessons. No less remarkable, he systematically practiced his mother tongue all his life to retain fluency. Marycoo was not granted freedom by his master, Captain Caleb Gardner, until 1791; his and Nubia's involvement in African colonization in the 1820s is described below.<sup>7</sup>

Before John Quamine, Bristol Yamma, and Salmar Nubia could complete their religious instruction, the onset of the American Revolution rendered impossible their return to Africa. Quamine died in the fall of 1779 serving on a privateer in the attempt to win prize money to redeem his wife from slavery.<sup>8</sup> Reverend Hopkins left Newport during the British occupation. When he returned after the Revolution, he renewed his activities on behalf of Rhode Island freedmen.

Although much of Reverend Hopkins's correspondence was destroyed by fire several years after his death, surviving letters published by Edwards A. Park attest to his sustained interest in African colonization and evangelization. Hopkins's program is set forth in a letter to Moses Brown written on 29 April 1784:

There has been a proposal on foot for some time, that a number of blacks should return to Africa, and settle there; that a number who have been under the most serious impressions of religion, should lead the way, and when they are fixed there, should improve all opportunities to teach the Africans the doctrines and duties of Christianity, both by precept and example.

6. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 135-136. Ferguson, *Hopkins*, 186, records John Sulmar Nubia.

7. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 154-155; Ferguson, *Hopkins*, 90-91; and Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence, 1954), 12. Ferguson identifies Marycoo's owner as Captain James Gardner. Charles S. Bird suggests Marycoo was probably a Soninke; both Bird and Daniel F. McCall speculate that his highly developed musical skills indicate that he may have belonged to the *griot* caste, which includes the bards or troubadours of West African societies.

8. Dexter, *Ezra Stiles*, II, 378. Reverend Stiles's diary records the baptisms of three children born to Quamine and his wife Dutchess. *Ibid.*, I, 207; II, 16, 376.

Hopkins goes on to describe the type of vessel appropriate for such an expedition and the trade goods and gifts needed to purchase land from African rulers. Hopkins's appeal to Moses Brown for support for such a venture makes a not-so-veiled reference to the Brown family's acquisition of wealth in the slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

Hopkins's ideas for African colonization were similar to those mooted in England by Granville Sharp and the other abolitionists who had espoused the cause of the Black Poor, the thousands of destitute freedmen inhabiting the slums of London and other cities. Many of the Black Poor had been abandoned by their masters following the landmark ruling of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in 1772 that slavery was contrary to the laws of England. Others included unemployed African seamen, and some had come from America where they had fled Southern plantations to seek asylum with the British army during the Revolutionary War.

Granville Sharp took the initiative in formulating plans in 1786 for the establishment of an independent, self-governing Province of Freedom in West Africa. He and other influential abolitionists persuaded the British government to supply transport vessels and underwrite other expenses. The expedition's fitting-out was subject to unforeseen delays and mismanagement during the fall and winter of 1786. When the transports finally sailed in April 1787, they carried some three hundred Black Poor, accompanied by more than sixty English women and contingents of white officials, clergy, and artisans to assist in founding and administering the settlement, in all a total of 411 men, women, and children.<sup>10</sup>

News of the English colonization plans soon circulated widely in New England, and the interest it aroused among blacks was fanned to excitement by a speaking tour undertaken by William Thornton, an American Quaker who returned from England in the winter of 1786. Thornton spoke to crowds of blacks, and within a few weeks of his arrival in New England claimed that two thousand freedmen were ready to follow him to West Africa. Unhappily, Thornton was less persuasive in his appeals to Massachusetts legislators to appropriate

9. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 139. Moses, Nicholas, and Joseph forswore the slave trade following a disastrous voyage in 1764-1765, during which there was a slave uprising and over half the slaves died. John Brown continued in the trade and was the cause of considerable embarrassment to Moses when he became one of the leaders of the abolitionist movement in Rhode Island. Hedges, *Browns of Providence Plantations*, I, ch. 4.

10. Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962), 13-19.

public monies for the projected expedition, and he obtained little success in private fund raising.<sup>11</sup>

Thornton spent several weeks in Newport in February and March 1787, and more than seventy members of the African Union Society expressed their willingness to join him. In a letter of introduction to Moses Brown, Reverend Hopkins observed that Thornton appeared "too flighty and unsteady" to head such a venture. Hopkins took the occasion to remind Moses Brown of his own proposals for resettling American blacks in Africa, and expressed the hope that "some gentlemen who are able" would underwrite a trading voyage to West Africa and advance the prospects of colonization by purchasing land for settlement purposes, a restatement of the proposals he had made to Brown three years before.<sup>12</sup>

Granville Sharp's Province of Freedom was founded in May 1787 among the Temne people near the mouth of the Sierra Leone River, and survived only two and a half years. Many of the Black Poor and the whites who accompanied them were struck down by disease, while others became disheartened and abandoned the settlement. And in December 1789 the colonists had the ill fortune to become entangled in a conflict between slave traders and neighboring Temne, with the result that the latter burned Granville Town and dispersed the remaining settlers.<sup>13</sup>

News of the colony's progress had meantime been eagerly awaited in New England, but few details had been forthcoming. Reverend Hopkins wrote Granville Sharp in January 1789 to obtain information, and likewise to inform him of the growing interest in African colonization in New England.

11. Gaillard Hunt, "William Thornton and Negro Colonization," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, XXX (1920), 41-42, 58-59. Eighty free blacks unsuccessfully petitioned the Massachusetts legislature in January 1787 for funds to return to Africa. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York, 1964), 96. Fourteen years earlier, in 1773, four slaves who addressed a petition to a Massachusetts legislator asking that slaves be granted one day a week to work on their own behalf so that they might purchase their freedom declared their intention to form a settlement on the coast of Africa once they had gained their freedom. Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston, 1971), 254-255. Years before, two free blacks made it on their own. In 1735 a Rhode Island couple who had saved £200 or £300 sailed to "their home country, Guinea, where their savings gave them an independent fortune." William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England* (two vols., Boston, 1891), II, 451-452.

12. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 139-140. The African Union Society was founded in 1780 with the stated purpose of improving the physical and moral welfare of Newport blacks. Three years later, the membership gathered at Newport Gardner-Occramer Marycoo's house to reorganize as a religious society. Robert Glenn Sherer, Jr., "Negro Churches in Rhode Island before 1860," *Rhode Island History*, XXV, 1 (January, 1966), 10.

13. Fyfe, *Sierra Leone*, 19-25.

In Massachusetts, all the Africans are made free by their Constitution, and many have obtained their freedom in this State [R.I.]. But their circumstances are, in many respects, unhappy, while they live here among the whites; the latter looking down upon them, and being disposed to treat them as underlings, and denying them the advantages of education and employment, &c., which tends to depress their minds and prevent their obtaining a comfortable living, &c. This and other considerations have led many of them to desire to return to Africa, and settle there among their brethren, and in a country and climate more natural to them than this. Particularly, there are a number of religious blacks, with whom I am acquainted, who wish to be formed into a distinct church or religious society, and to have a black appointed as their pastor, (and there is one, at least, who is thought qualified for that office,) and then to go, with all the blacks who shall be willing to move with them, to Africa, and settle on lands which they think may be obtained of some of the nations there, from whom some of them were taken, and whose language they retain; and there maintain the profession and practice of Christianity, and spread the knowledge of it among the Africans, as far as they shall have opportunity; at the same time cultivating their lands, and introducing into that hitherto uncivilized country the arts of husbandry, building mills and houses, and other mechanic arts, and raising cotton, coffee, &c., for exportation, as well as for their own use. This plan I have had in view for some time, and have wished and attempted to promote it. But no way has yet been opened in America to carry it into execution; there being no means yet found to defray the charge of sending a vessel to Africa with a number of blacks, to find out and procure the most convenient place for such a settlement.<sup>14</sup>

Hopkins asked Sharp to provide information concerning the colony's progress to date, the terms on which the settlers held land, their form of government, religious institutions, and other particulars, and requested information on how American blacks might join the settlement. In his reply to Hopkins, dated 25 July 1789 (four and a half months prior to the burning of the settlement), Sharp related that he had previously responded favorably to similar requests from the New York and Philadelphia abolition societies that free lots of land would be provided for at least six hundred newcomers.<sup>15</sup>

14. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 140-141. It seems likely that the group of religious blacks to which Hopkins refers are the members of the Newport African Union Society. Hopkins's renewed interest in African evangelization may have been stimulated when Stiles learned from a correspondent in Scotland in the summer of 1788 that the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge would make a new contribution to the missionary scheme interrupted by the Revolutionary War. Dexter, *Ezra Stiles*, III, 327.

15. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 142. Information concerning the responses of the other societies to Sharp's generous offers is lacking. Hopkins was a corresponding member of the New York and Philadelphia abolition societies, and thereby kept current of their activities.

The destruction of the Sierra Leone colony in December 1789 was to cancel Sharp's generous offer to American freedmen. When the settlement was refounded in the spring of 1791 Sharp was no longer the chief arbiter of the colony's destinies; the management had passed to the directors of the Sierra Leone Company, a joint-stock trading corporation invested with a royal charter.<sup>16</sup>

One of the chief factors accounting for the success of the refounded settlement — Freetown, as it came to be known — was the remarkable contribution of the more than 1100 Nova Scotians transported to Sierra Leone in 1792. These were former slaves from the American South who had taken refuge with the British army during the Revolutionary War, and who after the war had been transported to a disappointing haven in the cold forests of Nova Scotia. Once settled in Sierra Leone, the Nova Scotians' strong social cohesion, skill as farmers and artisans, and unshakable determination to found new homes in Africa were crucial determinants in the growth of the refounded colony.<sup>17</sup> Favorable reports concerning their fellow Americans' progress must have stimulated considerable discussion among New England freedmen, but the problem of financing transportation to Africa continued to loom insurmountable. Reverend Hopkins appended a special appeal on behalf of black emigration to the published version of the sermon he delivered in May 1793 at the annual meeting of the Providence Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In this address Hopkins elaborated on his previous proposals emphasizing the contributions a colony of American blacks would make with regard to the evangelization of Africa and the suppression of the slave trade, and in an interesting new departure he advanced two additional arguments designed to elicit new sources of support, arguments which would be repeated many times in the future by proponents of emigration schemes. These were his assertion that the expelling of all blacks from the United States would be of inestimable advantage to the American body politic, and that an African colony would provide significant commercial advantages for the United States:

These United States are able to be at the expense of prosecuting such a plan, of which these hints are some of the outlines. And is not this the best way that can be taken to compensate the blacks, both in America and Africa, for the injuries they have received by the slave trade and slavery, and that which righteousness and benevolence must dictate? And even

16. Fyfe, *Sierra Leone*, 25-27.

17. *Ibid.*, 31 ff., and John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870* (Evanston, Ill., 1969), 27 ff.

selfishness will be pleased with such a plan as this, and excite to exertions to carry it into effect, when the advantages of it to the public and to individuals are well considered and realized. This will gradually draw off all the blacks in New England, and even in the Middle and Southern States, as fast as they can be set free, by which this nation will be delivered from that which, in the view of every discerning man, is a great calamity, and inconsistent with the good of society, and is now really a great injury to most of the white inhabitants, especially in the Southern States.

And by the increase and flourishing of such a plantation of free people in Africa, where all the tropical fruits and productions, and the articles which we fetch from the West Indies, may be raised in great abundance, by proper cultivation, and many other useful things procured, a commerce may take place, and be maintained, between those settlements and the United States of America, which will be of very great and increasing advantage to both.<sup>18</sup>

If Congress could not be induced to underwrite such a colonization venture, Hopkins suggested that the several state abolition societies should unite in common purpose, a recommendation that presaged the subsequent organization of the American Colonization Society. Hopkins added:

The General Court in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts did, some time ago, make a resolve to the following purpose: That when a place can be found in Africa, where the blacks in that State may settle to their advantage, they would furnish them with shipping and provisions sufficient to transport them there, and with arms sufficient to defend them, and farming utensils sufficient to cultivate their lands. If all the States in the Union, or most of them, would take the same measure, such a design might be soon and easily carried into execution. Nothing appears to be wanting but a proper, most reasonable *zeal*, in so good a cause.<sup>19</sup>

Zeal and determination were not lacking on the part of Reverend Hopkins and his associates. In a letter to Reverend Levi Hart in New Haven dated 29 July 1793, Hopkins reported that Bristol Yamma and perhaps another freedman might visit Sierra Leone in the fall, spend the winter, and investigate the possibility of American black emigration. Hopkins makes no mention of how Bristol Yamma would obtain passage to Sierra Leone, but reference in the letter to the colony's thriving condition was attributed to an unnamed Newport

18. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 146. Hopkins's discourse and the appendix are reprinted with other writings in Samuel Hopkins, *Timely Articles on Slavery* (Miami, Fla., 1969).

19. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 147.

man who had lived many years in that part of West Africa.<sup>20</sup> Possibly Reverend Hopkins planned to enlist the aid of this individual — a slaver, undoubtedly — or his associates. The project miscarried; Bristol Yamma did not visit Sierra Leone, and died in North Carolina in January 1794.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of a Dane accompanied by a black freedman from Saint Croix occasioned a flurry of excitement among the blacks in Rhode Island in the fall of 1793. The two men proposed to charter a vessel in Providence to carry blacks from Saint Croix to found a colony in West Africa, purportedly under the auspices of the king of Denmark. Reverend Hopkins interviewed the men concerning their plans and predicted that the venture would "come to nothing," as proved the case.<sup>22</sup>

The opportunity for James Mackenzie to visit Sierra Leone at the close of 1794 was a consequence of the growth of American legitimate commerce following the outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793. Commerce raiding by British and French warships and privateers soon made West African waters unsafe for the merchant vessels of the belligerents. The Sierra Leone Company lost a number of its vessels, and the provisionment of its colony and coastal trading establishments became precarious. American shipowners, together with those of other neutral nations, quickly responded to the unprecedented opportunities in West African trade afforded by the wartime conditions. New England merchants opposed to slave trading successfully innovated a nonslave or "legitimate" commerce; they thereby provided a long-sought opportunity by which American freedmen could initiate direct contacts with West Africa. James Mackenzie took passage to Sierra Leone on the *Charlotte* in November 1794 on one of the first legitimate trading voyages sent out from Rhode Island.<sup>23</sup>

The *Charlotte's* voyage represented the initial venture in West African legitimate commerce for the Providence firm of Brown, Benson, and Ives, owned by Nicholas Brown, Jr. (Moses Brown's nephew), George Benson, and Thomas P. Ives. Nicholas Brown's venture in legitimate commerce doubtless had his uncle's enthusiastic

20. *Ibid.*, 149.

21. *Ibid.*, 148-149.

22. *Ibid.*, 149.

23. The genesis of American legitimate trade is recounted in ch. 2 of my *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters, and African Middlemen: A History of American Legitimate Trade with West Africa in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, 1970).

support, while George Benson was counted among the leaders of the abolition movement in Rhode Island.<sup>24</sup> The voyage was delayed several months fitting out, to the great annoyance of the *Charlotte's* master, Captain Martin Benson, who exhorted the owners to make all haste to take advantage of the opportunities to trade with Africans on parts of the West African coast abandoned by European shipping. Captain Benson's previous experience in West African commerce was presumably obtained in the slave trade. Brown, Benson, and Ives for their part were hesitant to undertake a voyage for which ivory, gum copal, dyewoods, palm oil, and like commodities would be the chief returns and for which there was a limited American market. In the end, they decided to make Sierra Leone the primary objective of the voyage in the expectation that a cargo of American rum, tobacco, lumber, and foodstuffs might be sold for English bills of exchange, a hope that was in fact realized.<sup>25</sup>

The *Charlotte* sailed for Sierra Leone on 4 December 1794. Unbeknown to the promoters of the voyage, the colony had suffered severe losses in late September when a French squadron sacked and burned Freetown and dispersed the colonists. Six of the Sierra Leone Company's vessels were captured in the harbor, and two others were taken on the coast. The French depredations and the settlement's ensuing privations were to ensure the success of the *Charlotte's* trading voyage.<sup>26</sup>

James Mackenzie sailed on the *Charlotte* as second mate. How he came to be selected as the Providence African Society's representative is not known; he may have had previous seafaring experience, Captain Benson's ungenerous opinions notwithstanding. It seems likely that he owed his place on the vessel to Moses Brown and George Benson, who must have persuaded the other partners to overrule Captain Benson's determined opposition.

Captain Martin Benson, who kept the *Charlotte's* log and a personal journal and corresponded with the owners in the course of the voyage, did not hide his displeasure at having Mackenzie forced on him. In a journal entry penned the day after sailing Benson recorded in his

24. Hedges, *Browns of Providence Plantations*, I, 20, 83.

25. Brooks, *Yankee Traders*, 28, 55. The *Charlotte's* cargo was valued at just over £5,000, the chief items being 189 casks containing 15,000 gallons of New England rum valued at £3,100, and 39 hogsheads of tobacco worth £480. Ship *Charlotte* Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence [hereafter *Charlotte* Papers]. Hedges, *Browns of Providence Plantations*, unaccountably omits any reference to this and subsequent African voyages undertaken by Nicholas Brown, Jr., and his associates. See note 40 below.

26. Brooks, *Yankee Traders*, 55.

characteristically florid prose: "One of my companions is a poor miserable Creature and promises to be of no Service to our voyage," adding sententiously, "'Oh that a Man would put an Enemy into his Mouth to Steal away his Brains!'"<sup>27</sup> After a few days at sea the *Charlotte* encountered two weeks of storms and heavy gales which strained the hull and caused salt water damage to much of the cargo. Writing to his employers following the *Charlotte's* arrival in Sierra Leone after a protracted fifty-day passage, Benson complained that he had been forced to keep a regular watch himself "for want of a second mate acquainted with his duty, or willing to learn."<sup>28</sup>

On arriving off the Sierra Leone River the evening of January 23, the *Charlotte* encountered a rival trading vessel from Providence commanded by a Captain Jacobs. A newcomer to the coast, Jacobs feared to attempt the dangerous passage at the river's entrance with night coming on. He stood off the coast, and as a result his vessel was driven to leeward by the prevailing winds and currents; this cost Jacobs the market, for he was five days beating his way back up the coast. Captain Benson meanwhile risked all on his experience and seamanship to make port in the darkness, a feat which, he modestly relates, the inhabitants of Freetown thought impossible.<sup>29</sup>

Once anchored off Freetown, the ship's company was informed of the French squadron's destructive raid the previous September. Captain Benson had warm praise for the colony's remarkable recovery from the disaster, commenting in a letter to his employers, "This settlement Phenix-like is rising Superior to its former lustre, nor can the powers of darkness prevail against [it]."<sup>30</sup> Benson was nonetheless elated to learn that due to the losses of supply vessels the Sierra Leone Company was in great need of tobacco for its trading operations in the rivers north and south of the colony. Enterprising Yankee that he was, Benson determined to capitalize on the colony's misfortunes and force the company to purchase his entire cargo; otherwise he was faced with the prospect of a long and dangerous passage to the Gold Coast.

When Benson presented his demands to Zachary Macaulay, the

27. Benson Journal, entry for 5 Dec. 1794, *Charlotte Papers*. Some of the journal entries following are imprecisely dated, and may have been written or redrafted subsequent to the events.

28. Benson to Brown, Benson, and Ives, Freetown, 30 Jan. 1795, *Charlotte Papers*. Benson characterized his vessel as "manned like Noah's Ark with two of every sort — two Sobers, two Sotts, two passables, and two miserables."

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.* Benson demonstrates his favorable attitude toward the colony in another observation in a letter dated 10 March: "The Spirit of Perseverance which prevails here, will baffle every effort to destroy [the colony]."

acting governor, the latter initially refused to consider any such arrangement because the colony had been well stocked with rum by another Rhode Island vessel two weeks previously. A test of wills ensued and negotiations extended over five days, including a Sunday during which Governor Macaulay refused any discussion of business. The nights were sleepless ones for Captain Benson, who feared the imminent arrival of Captain Jacobs or another American vessel known to be on the coast. Benson's dislike of Mackenzie intensified when he learned that the latter had informed Governor Macaulay of Captain Jacobs's arrival off Sierra Leone at the same time as the *Charlotte* and that other American vessels were in the offing. In the end Benson's audacity paid off; on January 27 the governor and council capitulated and concluded an agreement very favorable to Benson. A few hours later Captain Jacobs sailed into Freetown harbor.<sup>31</sup>

Captain Jacobs's belated arrival meant considerable embarrassment for Benson, for many of the commodities Jacobs brought were invoiced at lower prices than those in the *Charlotte's* cargo, in some cases thirty percent lower. Benson's mortification was heightened when much of the *Charlotte's* tobacco was found damaged by sea water. But he shrewdly made the best of the situation by offering to replace any tobacco refused by the colonists. As Benson smugly recounted, "On breaking up six hogsheads at the Store, such was the madness of the inhabitants that it was all sold, except 350 pounds which were perfectly rotten and of no value."<sup>32</sup> In this and other cases of cargo spoilage Benson was aided by the complacent attitude of the commercial agent and other officials in the colony who were the beneficiaries of his openhanded hospitality aboard the *Charlotte*.

While Captain Benson negotiated his business affairs, James Mackenzie pursued his mission in the colony. The recorded minutes of the deliberations of the governor and council demonstrate that the Rhode Island freedmen's proposals were accorded careful and sympathetic consideration. The message entrusted to Mackenzie by the African Society of Providence was introduced at the council meeting on January 27 and tabled for consideration. The minutes of February 21 record the letter's contents; it is dated 26 November 1794

31. *Ibid.*, and Benson Journal, entries for 24, 25, 27, and 28 Jan. 1795, *Charlotte Papers*. The governor and council's deliberations over Captain Benson's demands are recorded in C. O. 270/3, Public Record Office, London [hereafter P.R.O.].

32. Benson Journal, entries for 31 Jan. through 14 Feb. 1795, *Charlotte Papers*. At the end of his journal Captain Benson appended an informative memo on the manner of doing business in Freetown.

and addressed to the governor and company of Sierra Leone:

Gentlemen,

We the undersigners hav[*in*]g embraced this Opportunity of informing you of our wishes to emigrate. By the letter of Mr. Granville Sharp, we are informed that there will be equal lots of land given gratis to all & every Householder that will or shall arrive within the space of six years from the commencing of the Settlement conforming to the Rules & Regulations of the Colony.

Therefore Gent for the full investigation to the Rules & Regulations of the Colony we have appointed Mr. James Mackenzie & sent him as our Representative with full power to transact, bargain, & agree to anything Respect[*in*]g our Emigrations; after informing himself of the particulars requisite & necessary for the satisfaction of both parties, he being previously informed of our wishes & inclinations as there is no necessity of dwelling on the matter, Mr. James Mackenzie having received his proper instructions will we have no doubt discharge his duty with fidelity & dispatch hav[*in*]g experienced his attachment for the interest of the coloured people we do expect there will be nothing wanting on his part to effect a Settlement for us.

By order of the African Society

James Mackenzie Secty  
Wm. Olney Secty P. T.

signed Bonner Brown Pres[*iden*]t  
London Spears Vice Pres[*iden*]t<sup>33</sup>

The governor and council noted for the record that the African Society was misinformed about the existence of a standing offer of free land, but resolved to accept up to twelve families of blacks, provide each family with ten acres of land and a town lot on the Bullom shore across the Sierra Leone estuary, and accord them the rights and privileges of British subjects. They stipulated three conditions. First, the heads of each family must produce satisfactory testimonials of moral character, particularly with respect to honesty, sobriety, and industry, these to be signed by Reverend Hopkins and another clergyman of repute, and by the president of the "Abolition Society in Rhode Island." Second, prospective colonists must submit themselves to the laws of the colony and agree to pay the same quit-rent (one shilling annually) as the rest of the inhabitants. Finally, the governor and council categorically absolved the colony of any claims for transportation or other expenses.<sup>34</sup> A council meeting on March 12

33. Council meeting of 21 Feb. 1795, C. O. 270/3, P.R.O.

34. *Ibid.*

added an additional stipulation that lots of land granted on the Bullom shore would be forfeited after two years if a third of the land was not cleared and brought under cultivation.<sup>35</sup>

Minutes of the council meeting of March 19 and 20 record that James Mackenzie was entrusted with a letter to Reverend Hopkins informing him of the council's deliberations and enclosing a copy of the resolutions made concerning the African Society's requests.<sup>36</sup> The minutes make reference to "the Providence Blacks" instead of the African Society. And surprisingly, the governor and council directed the reply to Reverend Hopkins, not the president and officers of the African Society. None of the minutes of the governor and council previously cited mentions the names of Reverend Hopkins, Moses Brown, or any other white abolitionist leader in Rhode Island, or refers to correspondence concerning them. Yet the lack of a communication from Reverend Hopkins would be remarkable, given his long commitment to promoting African colonization. In the light of Hopkins's subsequent refusal to support the back freedmen, it seems likely that the officers of the African Society had neglected to obtain Hopkins's endorsement for their undertaking, or had been refused it for some reason. And the action of the governor and council in bypassing the African Society raises the possibility that Hopkins, and perhaps Moses Brown, sent a confidential message in care of Captain Benson, via an earlier Rhode Island vessel, or to a correspondent in Britain. Or it may be that Mackenzie failed to impress the directors of the colony sufficiently of his — and the African Society's — capacity to handle the responsibilities entailed. Whatever the case, the decision of the governor and council to communicate with Reverend Hopkins rather than the Providence African Society reflects little credit on men of supposed enlightened views and high moral principles. The fate of the Providence freedmen's colonization endeavor was placed firmly under the control of the white abolitionist leaders of Rhode Island.

While Mackenzie met with the governor and council, Captain Benson was engaged in disposing of the remainder of the *Charlotte's* cargo and preparing the vessel for the return voyage. He made additional sales to the governor and council and sold some goods in the colony at retail. Some of the remaining cargo was sold to John Tilly, who was manager of the English slave trade establishment on Bunce Island, twenty miles upriver in the Sierra Leone estuary. The remainder, including 4000 gallons of rum, Benson consigned for sale to

35. Council meeting of 12 March 1795, C. O. 270/3, P.R.O.

36. Council meetings of 19 and 20 March 1795, C. O. 270/3, P.R.O.

Captain Edward Boss of the schooner *James* of Providence, bound for the Gold Coast.<sup>37</sup> One of the commodities Benson had great difficulty selling was tea, for which he blamed Mackenzie: "The Bohea Tea is still on hand, the poorest Negro in the colony will not look at it, since our black ambassador has supplied them with Hyson, which some person in Providence sent out."<sup>38</sup>

To Captain Benson's surprise and discomfort, he was constrained by Governor Macaulay to take James Mackenzie aboard the *Charlotte* for the return passage. In a journal entry made during the closing days of his stay in Sierra Leone, Benson expostulated on the imposition and alludes to "villainous conduct" by Mackenzie, which he asserts had diminished his own worth in the opinion of the colony's directors.

The sending Out a Person in the Ship, not interested in the Voyage, and whose only business was to make friends, and procure an Establishment for himself, has been attended with disagreeable consequences. The Governor and Council were made acquainted with the Number of Vessels Expected from America, which Retarded our Contract until I had absolutely taken leave to embark for the Gold Coast. This man being afterwards detected in his Villainous Conduct, has obviated in some Degree the unfavorable impressions, on the minds of the Governor and Council, which had been made thro' his Means. There are bad men in all Countries, but I hope and believe, for the Honor of humanity, That all Africa cannot produce such an accomplished Villain. My sailors were brought in his debt, without my being consulted, and then threatened to be imprisoned by him, which Obliged me to advance money, and to complete all, he declared to the Gov[erno]r that the Owners had promised him a passage home in consequence of which I was obliged to receive him.<sup>39</sup>

Benson's assertions that Mackenzie loaned money to the *Charlotte's* sailors without authorization and that he supplied the colony with commercial secrets pass unmentioned in Governor Macaulay's correspondence with Reverend Hopkins cited below. Mackenzie may have innocently jeopardized Benson's business negotiations, or he may

37. Benson Journal, entries for 31 Jan. through 14 Feb., 17 March, and accounts appended, *Charlotte Papers*.

38. Benson to Brown, Benson, and Ives, Freetown, 10 March 1795, *Charlotte Papers*. Bohea is a black tea, hyson is green; both are grown in China. Benson also blamed Mackenzie for a half barrel of flour lost during unloading.

39. Benson Journal, entry dated March 1795, *Charlotte Papers*. Members of a ship's company were expected to complete a voyage. The governor was always on guard against men jumping ship, whether goaded by their captains or otherwise, because destitute seamen were a burden to the settlement's slender resources.

have done so deliberately to revenge himself on Benson for the latter's abusive behavior on the outward passage. Whatever the truth of Benson's assertions concerning Mackenzie's behavior during the voyage, they must inevitably have prejudiced Mackenzie's accounting of his stewardship and diminished the likelihood that other black emissaries or emigrant freedmen would sail on a vessel owned by Brown, Benson, and Ives.<sup>40</sup>

The *Charlotte* departed Freetown on March 23 and returned to Providence by way of Turk's Island in the West Indies, where Captain Benson procured a load of salt. Here too Benson records his dissatisfaction with Mackenzie: "Having no Second Mate — that could be intrusted — my tour of Duty has been much harder, than perhaps any other Master from the Port of Providence."<sup>41</sup> The *Charlotte* docked in Providence on 4 June 1795, six months to the day from its departure.

The outcome of Mackenzie's ambassadorship is recorded in two letters from Governor Macaulay to Reverend Hopkins. The first is dated 19 March 1795, and was posted to Providence on the *Charlotte*. In the letter Macaulay reiterates the stipulations that the colony's offer to accept American blacks was limited to twelve families and was strictly conditional upon their presenting "satisfactory testimonials of moral character."

The difficulties which have already arisen, in forming this settlement, from the injudicious admission of persons of doubtful character, have led us to guard more carefully against a similar evil in the present instance. These difficulties have arisen, either from fallacious notions of civil rights, (a thing not to be wondered at in emancipated slaves,) from extreme vehemence of temper, or from low, confused and imperfect ideas of moral rectitude. The first of these may, no doubt, be corrected by enlightening their minds; the second may be curbed by wholesome laws; and the last may be amended and improved by the preaching of the

40. None are mentioned in surviving papers of Captain Martin Benson's subsequent voyages to Sierra Leone in 1800, 1801-1802, and 1805-1806 in the employ of Brown and Ives (George Benson retired from the firm in 1796). Captain Benson first revisited Sierra Leone in March 1796 on the sloop *Fame* out of Boston. See below, note 43. Nor is there mention in the papers of other captains in Brown and Ives's employ who traded in Sierra Leone. Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence; and C. O. 270/3, P.R.O., passim. Captain Benson's allegations of wrong-doing by Mackenzie may be echoed twenty-five years later in the *Third Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, 1820), 25: "Such was the desire of a number of [free blacks] in the town of Providence in Rhode-Island, some years since, to change their abode, that they subscribed a sum of money and deputed one of their own body, to visit the coast of Africa, in search of a territory suited to their purpose. Their wishes were defeated by the dishonesty of their agent."

41. Benson to Brown, Benson, and Ives, Turk's Island, 13 May 1795, *Charlotte Papers*.

gospel: but we should be much better pleased to have an accession of colonists who would strengthen our hands in accomplishing these purposes, than of men who would furnish us with additional employment in that way.

There is another evil, however, which we fear may prevail among those with whom the present application has originated, and which we wish to guard against with more care than even against these. We mean the evil of speculative infidelity. From general circumstances which have passed under our observations, we are led to judge, that the poison of the "Age of Reason" may have pervaded even this class of men. Now, we trust you will agree with us, in thinking that the introduction of one such unbeliever into a colony founded for the express purpose of spreading among the heathen the knowledge of a Savior, might prove an evil beyond all calculation. We are not such bigots as to require subscription to creeds and articles; nor are we such latitudinarians, as to be willingly accessory to admitting into the colony one person who has *learned* to treat religion with contempt. However great the usefulness of such people might be in other respects, we should conceive ourselves to be more essentially serving the cause of God, by forming a colony of the blindest of those blind people who now inhabit this land. We do not look for characters of eminent piety, but we would expect a sober demeanor, good intentions, and a disposition favorable to religion. Without these, no man can make a good member of any community; much less of one established expressly for the purpose of preaching to Africa the acceptable year of the Lord. What we have, then, particularly to request of you, sir, is, that you would refuse your signature to any person's certificate with whom you have not reason to be satisfied in this respect, as well as in every other. Religion is not, indeed, expressly mentioned in the conditions, as necessary to form a part of their character who migrate hither; but as we think you will agree with us in opinion that none can with propriety be entitled to the denomination of moral, of whose characters religion does not form the basis, the omission is of no moment.

We have written on this subject to you alone; but we beg of you to communicate our sentiments to the Chairman of the Abolition Society, and to any other clergyman you may think proper to associate with you.<sup>42</sup>

None of the iniquities catalogued above are raised with reference to James Mackenzie, whom Macaulay mentions only in passing in a cautious and unenthusiastic endorsement: "We think it right to say, that the behavior of Mr. James Mackenzie, as far as we have had the means of observing it, has been proper and becoming."

Macaulay's second letter is dated 20 October 1796, and is a reply to

42. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 150-151.

Reverend Hopkins's communication to the governor and council on the moral character of the Rhode Island freedmen intending to emigrate to Sierra Leone. Edwards A. Park evidently did not find a copy of the letter in Hopkins's surviving papers, but its devastating import is summarily recorded in Macaulay's opening paragraph:

On my return from England in March last, I was favored with your much esteemed letter of the ninth [of] September, 1795, and had also an opportunity of seeing your obliging communications to the Governor and Council. In their name, I beg to make the heartiest acknowledgments for the attention you were pleased to pay to their requests. They feel themselves particularly indebted to you, for the considerateness with which you withheld your recommendation from persons who might otherwise have caused them much trouble; a circumstance, which will lead them to receive with much regard any recommendation which, at any future period, you may be induced to make them.<sup>43</sup>

Macaulay expressed neither disappointment nor regret that Mackenzie's mission should have ended in failure. Elsewhere in the letter Macaulay remarks, however:

You have a copy, if I am not mistaken, of the conditions on which I agreed with Mackenzie to receive free blacks. Should the people around you be disposed to give the requisite assistance to a few families who might wish to migrate, and whom you could safely recommend, they would be received on the same terms.<sup>44</sup>

Reverend Hopkins's refusal to endorse the Providence African Society's venture seems inexplicable after his devoting more than two decades to bringing about just such an opportunity. Whether Hopkins acted as he did because of compelling reasons, or whether his refusal represented a lack of confidence and compatibility between an aging clergyman and younger and more worldly-minded men and women whose interests and ambitions did not conform to Hopkins's views is unknown. Whatever the reasons may have been, it seems extraordinary that Hopkins did not himself seek out other freedmen as Macaulay suggested. Why, for example, did he not select some of the members of the Newport African Union Society and launch an appeal for funds for their ship passages? Denied Hopkins's support at this critical juncture after his assistance and encouragement for so many years, New England blacks must have reflected bitterly on their powerlessness and dependence on white patronage.

43. *Ibid.*, 151. Zachary Macaulay's letter (and Reverend Hopkins's letter?) was sent via Captain Martin Benson.

44. *Ibid.*, 152.

Captain Paul Cuffee's colonizing venture two decades later is remarkable because he employed his own resources and as a matchless example of self-reliance. In 1811 Cuffee made a trading voyage to Sierra Leone in his brig, *Traveller*, and visited England, where he obtained considerable encouragement and support for his colonization plans from highly placed fellow Quakers and other interested parties. Moreover, high officials in the British government, which after 1808 administered Sierra Leone as a crown colony, were persuaded to support Cuffee's proposals to carry American freedmen to settle at Freetown. The War of 1812 interrupted Captain Cuffee's plans, but after peace was made he sailed for Sierra Leone and in February 1816 delivered thirty-eight American black settlers at Freetown, most of whom he furnished with free passage, provisions, and other needs.<sup>45</sup> No other voyages followed. Cuffee died prematurely in 1817, soon after his return to the United States. Thereafter, in the absence of other leaders of Cuffee's initiative and private resources, American blacks desiring to emigrate to Africa were dependent on white-organized colonization groups, notably the American Colonization Society, founded in December 1816.

Two black freedmen who emigrated to Liberia on the brig *Vine*, dispatched from Boston by the American Colonization Society in January 1826, represent a poignant postscript to the thwarted initiative of James Mackenzie and the Providence African Society thirty years before. The men were Salmar Nubia and Newport Gardner-Occramer Marycoo, protégés of the Reverend Samuel Hopkins in the 1770s, and passed over by him in 1795 when the governor of Sierra Leone promised accommodation for American blacks worthy of his recommendation. Now aged approximately seventy and eighty respectively, Nubia and Marycoo sailed on the *Vine* as the elected deacons of a small band of thirty-two Rhode Island colonists. Both men died within six months of their arrival in Liberia.<sup>46</sup>

45. See Henry Noble Sherwood, "Paul Cuffee," *Journal of Negro History*, VIII, 2 (April, 1923), 153-232, and Sheldon H. Harris, *Paul Cuffee: Black America and the African Return* (New York, 1972).

46. Park, *Works of Samuel Hopkins*, I, 155-156. In 1824 Marycoo and eleven other members of the African Union Society had taken the initiative of founding the Colored Union Church and Society, the first separate black church in Newport. Sherer, "Negro Churches in Rhode Island," 10-11. Marycoo's parting injunction to American blacks was, "I go to set an example to the youth of my race. I go to encourage the young. They can never be elevated here. I have tried it sixty years — it is in vain. Could I by my example lead them to set sail, and I die the next day, I should be satisfied." Quoted in *ibid.*, I, 156 note.