Chapter 3 Hands that Picked the Cotton

While Africans resisted enslavement from the very beginning, planters kept tight control over their subjects, making it hard to organize significant rebellions. Since settlements in Mississippi were quite isolated, running away was only a temporary means of resistance for most who tried.

Escape proved more successful than direct conflict, however, and secret runaway swamp communities emerged in the Great Mississippi Swamp North of Vicksburg. Choctaws often helped runaway African Americans, at times becoming part of their secret communities and intermarrying. Following the theft of Choctaw tribal lands in the 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (a treaty that pledged "peace and perpetual friendship"), many affected Native Americans remained behind, wandering throughout the vast Mississippi swamplands, as had their ancestors.

One early, shared community, located near Clarksdale, was known as "Africa." Instructions to find location of this early secret community come from John Hatch, a Clarksdale native, and author of three fictional books on Africa and a later community, New Africa: "Drive down Highway 61 from Memphis, Tennessee, into Mississippi, through 70 miles of mostly cotton fields into the town of Clarksdale. Crossing the Sunflower River Bridge on the highway, there is a road sign reading New Africa Road. Turn parallel to the river and drive a mile or two, then, at the cotton gin of a late-come plantation, turn right to remain on the New Africa road, and you enter Africa."[i]

In the early 1940s, Hatch spent long stretches at the home of his grandparents in the *New Africa* community. Later, his Aunt Rose told him about a much older, nearby community of *Africa*, in the region where "The first white settlers in what would become the Delta, farmed land [that was] cleared for steamboat fuel. After slave imports were banned, slaves were bought in trade and often stolen to work the new land. To ease the labor crunch, Irishmen were contracted (or Shanghaied) to build levees to protect the new farms."

"Maroons" was the name applied to indigenous peoples and those enslaved who sought wilderness sanctuary all over the Americas. These were black people [who] walked away to build new lives, as did the earliest settlers of this community

called Africa. Libby characterized maroons as mostly male, in their twenties, and often bearing "physical and emotional scars from the savagery of plantation life." From records of 101 escaped slaves advertised in the *Natchez Mississippi Messenger* between 1805 and 1808, 85 were male: "By far the most, 48, were aged twenty to thirty, while 28 were nineteen years old or younger, and 15 were over age thirty."[ii]

Some maroons were successful in remaining free while others ran into problems. One early news report tells how in 1844 armed planters near Hanesville "set an ambush on some maroons trapping six, wounding two and killing one."[iii]

Dr. L. C. Dorsey, associate director of the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena, grew up in the Delta near Cleveland and places the "200 year old" establishment of Africa somewhere "south of Clarksdale, between Alligator and Clarksdale." Dorsey visited New Africa in recent years, finding the community was still active: "When you realized how violent the Delta was, it's amazing this was allowed to exist…. and it is sort of overshadowed … almost like it was just quietly kept there. Nobody talked about it. Mound Bayou got all the publicity. Winstonville, another all-black community, also got publicity. I never heard about New Africa until 1968 [when] Amzie Moore took me there."[iv]

WELL BEFORE EMANCIPATION took place, even before the Civil War began, some blacks left the country entirely, returning by choice to their native African continent with the help of some whites. Following earlier revolts in Louisiana and Virginia, the American Colonization Society was founded in 1816. Advocating repatriation, the society created a Liberian colony[v] in 1820, following the British example of Sierra Leone, founded thirty years earlier as a home for freed British and American slaves who fought for Great Britain during the American Revolution.[vi]

The new colonies were located in West Africa or the "Slave Coast," where some sixty million Africans were kidnapped from days of the first recorded slave sale in 1503 until the mid nineteenth century, and where an estimated forty million died before ever reaching their destinations.[vii]

In 1836, Isaac Wade Ross, a Revolutionary war hero and a wealthy Mississippi cotton planter, died at home and willed that proceeds from the sale of his Prospect Hill plantation in Jefferson County be used to pay passage of his slaves to a newly-

created abolitionist colony in Western Africa. However, heirs contested the Ross will and during ensuing legal battles were blamed for the fire and lynched before the Ross will was finally upheld; the first of almost 200 slaves were set free twelve years after the death of Ross.

Described as self-serving by some and as generous by others, Ross reportedly believed freed blacks would harm society, thus making it better for everyone that they return to their native lands, said his lawyer, state senator John Ker. Nevertheless, Ross gave his slaves a chance at opportunity in Africa.[viii]

As Ross drafted his will, memories were fresh of the Nat Turner slave revolt. The rebellion halted the Southern abolitionist movement, and around the country, many states were passing new and more restrictive slave laws.

Challenges to sending blacks to Liberia grew as some free blacks argued repatriation was the same as deportation. One of the most important black leaders of the time, Frederick Douglass, was against any such efforts.

In 1834 the Mississippi Colonization Society sent out two African men "by the names of Moore and Simpson" to look over Liberia and report back. In 1846, Liberia became an independent nation under the paternalistic motto, "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." The U. S. government at first, which had doubts of entertaining black diplomats in Washington, D. C., it was said, did not recognize the new nation.[ix] Yet over several decades 16,400 former slaves left for Africa. Secretary of the Navy, Commander W. F. Lynch, visited Liberia in 1863 to observe (most likely with blinders on): [x]

> The Sinou, a small but placid river, was selected about eighteen years ago by colonists from Mississippi and Louisiana, with a few from South Carolina, who, after acclimating at Monrovia, founded the town of Greenville on the right bank, just above the river's mouth. From the sea this settlement presents an attractive appearance…. Greenville faces the sea and the river flows behind it. It is regularly laid out, and Mississippi Avenue with a row of dwellings on one side and open to the sea on the other, is a delightful promenade.
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> The houses I considered by far the neatest I had seen--two of them were quite handsome two-story ones; and the gardens were in better condition than those of Monrovia. There are about sixty houses and

> between three and four hundred inhabitants in the settlement. The churches are the least reputable features of the place; but although unprepossessing in their exterior, their congregations were creditable in costume and deportment. My visit was at the time of the annual Baptist association, and the members of that persuasion thronging the settlement gave it quite a lively appearance.
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> There are a number of mechanics in Greenville, particularly carpenters, and in the outskirts of the town I saw a steam sawmill, to which lumber was rafted from the river by an artificial canal…. [xi]

Support for the Liberian project came from former president, James Monroe for whom the capital, Monrovia, was named. Robert E. Lee also advocated repatriation, and the first Liberian president was George Washington's nephew, Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington.[xii]

Several other Mississippian planters supported colonization besides Ross, including Stephen Duncan of Natchez, owner of a thousand slaves, and Delta planter Judge James Green, for whom Greenville, Liberia was named. Both were among the first Mississippi planters to send a group of slaves to Liberia.

A THIRD ESCAPE option was to use the services of the Underground Railroad. Ser Seshs Ab Heter of Natchez, coordinator of the Friends of the Forks of the Roads, broadens the definition of Underground Railroad or UGR, defining it as "any form of resistance to chattel enslavement."

"You must not view UGR activity in Mississippi the same as it has been viewed in the traditional sense ... with safe houses, tunnels, lamps in windows, hidden passages," said Heter, who assisted the National Park Service with its National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, "proving the Mississippi River a major Uhuru (Freedom) Route from Memphis to the Gulf of Mexico."[xiii]

Escapees and others, to hide themselves and live as maroons while seeking freedom, used the very stuff of the Delta – its secretive bayous and swamps, caves, canebrakes, cotton towns, and plantation outskirts.

While the Mississippi River was a major route from Memphis to the Gulf of Mexico, a smaller river, the Tombigbee, also had an important role. Where this river

ends in Northeastern Mississippi, near the Alabama state line, as one legend goes, those fleeing were told to continue north.

The Tombigbee River route inspired the mythical "drinking gourd" song that serves as a reminder of the bravery of those who fled their oppressors, no matter the method used.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd,
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Another Tombigbee River route existed in Northeastern Mississippi by the confluence of the West and East forks near Amory in Monroe County, east of Bolivar County near the Alabama state line. Since many North-South rivers flow into the Tombigbee, the song's unknown writer suggested dead trees marked with his own "left foot and a peg foot" would help escapees identify the Tombigbee. By following the dead trees along the riverbank, escapees would be assured of a safe journey free from hounds and hunters, as the legend goes.

The riverbank makes a very good road,
The dead trees will show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Following this legend, escapees were instructed when they met the Tombigbee River's end to continue North over the hills until they came to the Tennessee River.[xiv]

Rumblings of war

When California was admitted to statehood in 1850 as a non-slave state, to make up with the South and respond to systematic Northern defiance of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act via the Underground Railroad, a second Fugitive Slave Act was passed. This Act allowed slaveholders to retrieve slaves in Northern states and free territories. Thus, life only worsened for those seeking to flee enslavement.

Fines and prison sentences were levied on anyone helping runaways, and slaveholders could simply claim a black ran away in order to gain custody. Fugitives were neither permitted to testify on their own behalf nor have jury trials. The extremity of this second Fugitive Slave Act intensified efforts of the Northern abolitionist movement. Northern legislatures later weakened the Act by passing personal liberty laws protecting suspected runaway slaves.

Then in 1859, a legendary uprising took place in Virginia as white abolitionist John Brown and an army of five black and 13 white supporters seized the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), hoping to launch a populist rebellion. Brown was convinced that local slaves would rise up behind him and hoped to establish a new republic of fugitives in the Appalachian Mountains.

Eventually Brown was surrounded and his men had all been killed or captured; but Brown refused to surrender, barricading himself in a small brick building near the armory's gate. The door was battered down and Brown was struck in the abdomen by a Marine's sword.

"While insisting that the raid was too hopelessly and ridiculously small to accomplish anything…the state nevertheless spent $250,000 to punish the invaders, stationed from one to three thousand soldiers in the vicinity and threw the nation into turmoil," historian Howard Zinn wrote.[xv]

Reaction to Brown's raid sent shockwaves throughout the country as whites "assumed that Brown represented the violent sentiment of every Northern man and woman."[xvi] Convicted of criminal conspiracy and treason, Brown was hanged.

There were others who understood Brown and his intentions. Ralph Waldo Emerson, honoring Brown following his execution, wrote "He will make the gallows as holy as the cross."[xvii]

Despite Emerson's commendable eulogy, Brown is often portrayed as a fanatic, and rarely is it told that as a youngster Brown had witnessed a black child beaten and felt powerless to intercede. Or that Brown came from a family of Calvinists (blended with Presbyterianism) who also were "pioneers in forging friendly relations of people of different races," and whose father, Owen, "forbade his family to discriminate against people of color."[xviii]

It was Brown's passion to help slaves that stayed with him throughout his short life, and although the rebellion failed, black community gatherings still commemorate John Brown's martyrdom. In a new look at John Brown, author David S. Reynolds portrays him as a man inspired by the slave revolts, guerilla

warfare, and revolutionary Christianity of the day, thus leading him to take such action:

> Brown grabbed the nation's attention, creating a sudden northern unity … where the Transcendentalists led the way in sanctifying Brown, and infuriating the South, where pro-slavery fire-eaters exploited the Harper's Ferry raid to whip up secessionist frenzy…. Not only did spark the war that ended slavery, but he planted the seeds of the civil rights movement by making a pioneering demand for complete social and political equality for America's ethnic minorities.[xix]

While there are many theories of "how" and "why" the Civil War began, Zinn adds a unique proposal: The United States had become a system agitated by slave rebellion, or at least the threat of such. To prevent popular insurrection would now require an immediate end to slavery – an end to the system that had made the United States the most successful capitalist economy in the world.

Slavery had been supported all along "based on an overpowering practicality," Zinn wrote. By 1790, Southern states were producing a thousand tons of cotton every year. This figure became a million tons by 1860 – as 500,000 slaves grew to 4 million in the same period.

Yet the system was aggravated by slave rebellions and conspiracies, bringing on "a network of controls" in the Southern states that were backed by the legal system, the military and race prejudice of most political leaders.[xx]

Slavery would have to end but this would be no simple task, since to reconstruct an economy dependent upon a slave labor pool "would take either a full-scale slave rebellion or a full-scale war." Zinn compared 1860 views of each possibility: If a slave rebellion occurred, this could get out of hand, with a "returned ferocity beyond slavery" and against the United States.

However, if a war, those who made the war would also organize its consequences – and so it would be Abraham Lincoln[xxi] who freed the slaves, and not John Brown.[xxii]

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[i] John Hatch, "Africa, Love," (Berkeley, Calif.: 2ndsight Books, 2002). Instructions appear on Hatch's website. He explains that maps show the location because the Sunflower River was the only way to move crops, and following the Civil War the Corps of Engineers had to dredge it for freight traffic, at least until a railroad was built in the late 1880s.

[ii] Libby, 54.

[iii] Newspaper clipping in the Clarksdale Public Library. Name and exact date not available.

[iv] Oral history of Dr. L. C. Dorsey. Tougaloo College, Delta Collection.

[v] In 1822 the settlement of American colonists along the Liberian shore began and continued until after the US Civil War. Though tracts of land along the coast were "purchased," the indigenous peoples of Liberia were not happy with the encroachment of the Americans, and waged numerous wars against them. Eventually, the Americans were able to establish themselves, and declared themselves an independent nation in 1847. The "Americo-Liberians" and the "Congo," descendents from those rescued from slave ships, came to dominate the political and economic life of the country even though they represented a minority. They actively discriminated against the sixteen native tribes and in 1980, after over 150 years of hostilities, the Americo-Liberian grip on power was brutally broken leading to prolonged civil war followed by persistant fighting. Source: Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society.

[vi] Huffman, 44-45.

[vii] Ibid., 45.

[viii] Ibid., 53-54.

[ix] Ibid., 49.

[x] Reports were not always this grand. I would guess this was a "fluff" piece.

[xi] Charles S. Sydnor, "Slavery in Mississippi," (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966). Cites Report of Commander W. F. Lynch to the Secretary of the Navy, Sept. 5, 1853, 236.

[xii] Bushrod was criticized for "selling down the river" slaves at Mt. Vernon following the death of George Washington.

[xiii] Interview by author with Ser Seshs Ab Heter of Natchez, coordinator of the Friends of the Forks of the Roads, summer of 2004.

[xiv] "Decoding the Song," from Paths to Freedom: Maryland and the Underground Railroad: Educator's Guide to Follow the Drinking Gourd (online).

[xv] Howard Zinn, "A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present," (New York: Harper Perennial, updated 1995), 181.

[xvi] Bond, 86.

[xvii] Zinn,181.

[xviii] David S. Reynolds, "John Brown, Abolitionist," (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 30.

[xix] Ibid., book jacket notes.

[xx] Zinn., 171.

[xxi] Some revisionist historians, taking a new look P resident Abraham Lincoln, assert that he was part African American and that he was also bisexual. "For years, a whisper campaign has mounted about Abraham Lincoln, focusing on his intimate relationships. He was famously awkward around single women. He was engaged once before Mary Todd, but his fiancée called off the marriage on the grounds that he was "lacking in smaller attentions." His marriage to Mary was troubled. Meanwhile, throughout his adult life, he enjoyed close relationships with a number of men. He shared a bed with Joshua Speed for four years as a young man, and -- as C.A. Tripp details here -- he shared a bed with an army captain while serving in the White House, when Mrs. Lincoln was away. As one Washington

socialite commented in her diary, 'What stuff!'" (*Amazon*: Editorial Review: C. A. Tripp, "The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln," New York: Free Press, 2004.)…. Writes Leroy Vaughn, "J. A. Rogers quotes Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, as saying that Abraham Lincoln was the illegitimate son of an African man. William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, said that Lincoln had very dark skin and coarse hair and that his mother was from an Ethiopian tribe. In Herndon's book entitled *The Hidden Lincoln* the author asserts that Thomas Lincoln could not have been Abraham Lincoln's father because he was sterile from childhood mumps and was later castrated. Lincoln's presidential opponents made cartoon drawings depicting him as a Negro and nicknamed him 'Abraham Africanus the First.'" (Leroy Vaughn, "Black People and Their Place in World History," ebook: Computer Underground Railroad Enterprises, 2003. Vaughn cites Rogers, J. "The Five Negro Presidents," St. Petersburg, FL: Helga Rogers Publishing,1965; Bakhufu, A., "The Six Black Presidents," Washington, D.C.: PIK2 Publications,1993.)

[xxii] Ibid.