

SAM MARTIN

Travels to Liberia and Back

An unusual will.¹ Sam Martin was born about 1808 or 1809 in Kentucky.² He was owned during the early decades of his life by John Martin, who moved to Clark County, Kentucky in 1784 after having achieved the rank of Major during the Revolutionary War. John, who became the first sheriff of Clark County, was one of the largest slaveowners in the county.³ In the 1830s, several years prior to his death, he wrote a will that included a very unusual provision—an offer to send any of his adult slaves to Africa:

At the expiration of eight years after my death all the negroes above bequeathed are to be offered to the Colonization Society (if they are of age) to be transported to Liberia, and those that are not of age to continue to serve the persons to whom they are allotted until they come of age.⁴ That is to say, the boys until they are twenty one and the girls until they are eighteen years of age when they are also to be offered to the Colonization Society to be transported to Liberia. None of them are to be forced to go and if any are married and do not wish to leave their wives or husbands they are not to be moved from their vicinity but are to be hired out if necessary near them. Those that do not go to Liberia are to continue to serve the person to whom they are allocated until they are willing and do go. When the women go to Liberia they are to be permitted to take any of their children that may be under three years of age if they wish it.⁵

Even though they would be freed in the process, this offer to be sent to another continent was obviously problematic for Sam Martin and the other people enslaved by John Martin. Not only was Liberia an entirely unfamiliar and remote location to them, but they would inevitably have to leave many family members behind.

Sending black Americans to Africa was a concept that gained a degree of traction during the antebellum era. The American Colonization Society, founded in 1816 for this purpose, found some adherents among both pro-slavery and anti-slavery whites. Henry Clay of Kentucky was president of the organization for a number of years; Abraham Lincoln also supported it, until late into his

¹ The principal sources for the information in this chapter are the section about Sam Martin in Arnold Taylor's fascinating book *Suing for Freedom in Kentucky*, the Clark County probate records of John Martin, who had owned Sam Martin (see the Probate Records chapter), and the 1847 annual report of the American Colonization Society. The University of Wisconsin, Madison library has early ship lists for Liberia and records from the 1843 Liberia census but those records are not germane to the cohort of people in this chapter.

² See the footnote below about the ages of Sam and the others in his group of Liberia emigrants.

³ In the 1830 Clark County census, there were forty enslaved people in the John Martin household. This was close to 1% of the total number of slaves in Clark County at the time.

⁴ The offer of emigration apparently applied to all of the approximately forty people that John Martin owned at the time of his death in 1837, most of whom were included by name in his probate records. As described in the will, for children, this was upon adulthood and for all, it was after an eight year waiting period. Eight adults including Sam eventually accepted the offer

⁵ This quotation is from John Martin's will dated March 1, 1833 (Clark County Will Books, volume 9, page 182). John's probate record is also discussed in the Probate Records chapter.

presidency. The concept never found deep support among black Americans, not that many were consulted for their opinion. Frederick Douglass fiercely opposed it.⁶

No attempt was made to repatriate African-Americans to the particular homelands of their ancestors.⁷ Instead, a colony was founded in 1822 on the west coast of Africa for this emigration purpose, Liberia.⁸

After John Martin's death in 1837, Sam Martin eventually ended up in the hands of John's granddaughter Catherine and her husband Moses Morrison, a merchant in Lexington.⁹ Moving to Lexington from Clark County was an unhappy circumstance for Sam. John's instruction in his will that his slaves be allowed to stay near their spouses wasn't honored, at least not in Sam's case. Sam's wife, Cynthia, to whom he had long been married, and their children remained in Clark County, where Cynthia was a slave of Philip B. Winn.¹⁰ Making the situation yet worse, it appears that that Sam found Moses Morrison to be an especially noxious slaveowner.

Philip Winn's son William Winn and John Martin's son Samuel D. Martin made an effort to buy Sam Martin from Moses Morrison but Moses wouldn't sell him.

As subsequent testimony confirmed, Sam didn't want to remain Moses's slave but he also didn't want to go to Liberia. It's not hard to understand his reasons. Emigration would not only take him away from the only country where he had ever lived, the U.S., but permanently separate him from his wife and children.

In 1845, eight years after John Martin's death, a group of seven people who had been enslaved by him agreed to accept the offer to emigrate from Kentucky to Liberia under the auspices of the Colonization Society. Those seven people were: Nelson Martin, 34, born about 1812; Catharine Martin, 28 (born about 1818); William "Billy" Martin, 25 (born about 1821); Laura Martin, also known as Laura Hickman, 22 (born about 1824); Zachariah Martin, 22 (born about 1824); James "Jim" Martin, 22 (born about 1824); and George Martin (22, born about 1824).¹¹

⁶ In 1849, Frederick Douglass wrote about the plan to send black Americans back to Africa in the *North Star*. "For two hundred and twenty-eight years has the colored man toiled over the soil of America, under a burning sun and a driver's lash—plowing, planting, reaping, that white men might roll in ease, their hands unhardened by labor, and their brows unmoistened by the waters of genial toil; and now that the moral sense of mankind is beginning to revolt at this system of foul treachery and cruel wrong, and is demanding its overthrow, the mean and cowardly oppressor is meditating plans to expel the colored man entirely from the country. Shame upon the guilty wretches that dare propose, and all that countenance such a proposition. We live here—have lived here—have a right to live here, and mean to live here."

⁷ An African-American whose family had been in North America for several generations might, of course, have ancestors from multiple parts of Africa (and, for that matter, from Europe).

⁸ The descendants of the African-American settlers long dominated Liberian politics. Even today, English is the official language, although less than 5% of the population are descendants of the African-American settlers.

⁹ After John Martin's death, Sam was initially rented out for several years; the name of the person to whom he was rented isn't known.

¹⁰ In a deposition given in 1860, Philip Winn stated, "I am the owner of his [Sam's] wife, the woman Cynthia, and have been her owner for thirty or forty years. She has always lived at my home at my house. Sam has been married to her since the year 1820 and since his marriage he has been in the habit of coming frequently to my house as her husband." (Quoted in *Suing for Freedom in Kentucky*.) A marriage year of 1820 seems implausible and it was presumably later in the 1820s. In the 1850 Clark County slave schedule, of the sixteen enslaved people owned by Philip B. Winn, Cynthia was the woman shown as born about 1807. The preponderance of evidence indicates that Sam was born about 1808.

¹¹ Alexander Cowan of the American Colonization Society testified in 1860: "[those] who went out in the ship with Sam Martin were besides Sam, Nelson Martin aged 34, Wm Martin aged 25, James Martin aged 22, Geo Martin aged 22, Zacharia Martin aged 22, Catherine Martin aged 28, Laura Martin aged 22. The ages of the persons above named were

Sam, who never wanted to go to Liberia, came up with what he hoped would be a successful ploy. He would agree to join this group as its eighth member, but then hoped to escape (or somehow be rescued).

In January 1846, the eight Martin slaves were taken to Louisville and then by boat from Louisville to New Orleans. They were soon placed on board the barque *Rothschild*. Unfortunately, Sam's plan to flee came to naught, presumably because the Colonization Society was suspicious of last minute escape attempts and guarded against it.¹²

The *Rothschild*, which had been chartered by the American Colonization Society, departed New Orleans for Africa on January 25, 1846. On board were sixty-one slaves or former slaves from the Ohio Valley region, including thirty-five from Kentucky. Sam Martin and the seven other Martin slaves were among them.

Liberia. At the end of the long oceanic voyage, the ship reached Monrovia, Liberia on March 15.¹³ The Colonization Society had selected a piece of land about fifteen miles from Monrovia for those being transported. The tract stretched from Millsburg on the northwest side of the St. Paul's river down to the coast and also up the coast in a northwesterly direction. Because of the contingent from Kentucky, this large parcel was called "Kentucky."¹⁴ The main town in this tract is still known today as Clay Ashland, named after Henry Clay for his role in the Colonization Society and his estate in Lexington, known as Ashland.¹⁵

One might think that, having traveled such a long way across the Atlantic Ocean to the verdant shore of Liberia, Sam would be tempted to take a taste of life in Africa, the continent of his forebears, as a free man. Perhaps so, but not as much as he wanted to return home. Emancipation at the cost of leaving the land of his birth and home of his wife and children was not the freedom he sought. He obstinately refused to even disembark the ship at Monrovia. Because the ship's captain would not be paid unless the African-Americans on board were landed in Liberia, Sam was bodily hauled down into the ship's boat and rowed to shore.

given me by Dr Sam D. Martin." In this same deposition, Cowan gave Sam's age as 37. (Thank you to Arnold Taylor for this information.) The ship departed in 1846 (the list could have been given before departure in 1845). Those who went to Liberia are also named in an 1848 probate record for John Martin.

¹² It's unclear what the details of Sam's escape plan were. Sam always insisted that he never wanted to go to Liberia, which implies that he was confined prior to departing New Orleans. He later stated that he thought William Winn or William Hood would come to New Orleans to rescue him. (If he actually thought that, he was grasping at straws.) Alexander Cowan of the Colonization Society maintained that Sam was willing to go to Liberia, although Cowan would have to say that since it was against the Society's rules to transport anyone to Liberia who was unwilling to go.

¹³ The Colonization Society named Monrovia, which remains the capital of Liberia today, after U.S. President James Monroe, another prominent supporter of the Society and its programs.

¹⁴ 1847 annual report of the American Colonization Society, pages 5-6

¹⁵ The Kentucky tract became a cornerstone for the Americo-Liberian population, the birthplace of the long-dominant True Whig political party in Liberia and the home of two of the country's presidents, according to various sources. The Colonization Society ignored the rights of local tribes to the land, creating one of the sources of the never-ending friction between the community of freed slaves and the indigenous African population. According to Alexander Cowan, the agent of the Kentucky Colonization Society who accompanied the Martin slaves to Liberia in 1846, the population of Clay Ashland had risen to 424 people by 1854, making it the second largest township after Monrovia (as noted in his 1858 book about Liberia).

Once all of the emigrants, including Sam, were ashore in Africa, Captain Lowry had fulfilled his obligation to the Colonization Society. Sam promptly negotiated a return to the ship, promising to work to pay off the cost of his return passage to the U.S.¹⁶

The other seven Martin slaves on this expedition, plus Nelson's free wife Jenny Martin, all apparently remained in Liberia. (One of their group, George, was seen in the U.S., four years later.)¹⁷

The *Rothschild* landed in New York on its return across the Atlantic, where Sam took up work as a house servant for several months. William Winn, having heard that Sam was in New York, arranged in August 1846 to buy title to him from Moses Morrison, who apparently concluded that there was little chance he would ever get Sam back. Sam then returned to Clark County as William Winn's slave, thereby reuniting with his family.

Following his return to Kentucky, Sam sought again to combine his goals of becoming free yet still able to see his family. He attempted to make an arrangement to purchase his own freedom from William Winn, reportedly paying more than \$600 to Winn for that purpose (no doubt over a number of years).¹⁸ In June 1859, he sued William Winn for his freedom, using as his legal grounds that he had been freed when he went to Liberia and also that he was legally a free man as a result of having resided for a time in the free state of New York.

In May 1862, with the Civil War already well underway, Sam won his suit for freedom in Clark County Circuit Court. Although his whereabouts after 1862 are unknown, it's highly likely that he took advantage of his courtroom victory to move north that year. His wife and one or more of his children may have joined him not so long after—escape became radically more possible under the Union Army occupation of Kentucky.¹⁹

The Kentucky Court of Appeals overturned the verdict in favor of Sam in June 1863, returning his legal status to that of a slave.²⁰ By that late date, the legal setback was unlikely to have made much practical difference. Retrieval of a nominally fugitive slave from a free state was no longer a viable option for a slave owner in mid-1863. For any of Sam's family members who remained in Kentucky, their legal status as slaves finally ended with national emancipation in 1865.

¹⁶ After he had made definite arrangements for his travel back to the U.S., Sam apparently went ashore several more times while waiting for the ship to depart Liberia.

¹⁷ Remote and unknown as Liberia would have been to these Americans, they did arrive just in time to see the creation of Liberia as an independent nation in 1847 with a government led by former slaves. It's possible that some of their descendants live in Liberia today.

¹⁸ William Lindsay, a grocer in Winchester, testified in 1859 that he had heard William Winn say that Sam had paid him between six and seven hundred dollars, as noted in *Suing for Freedom*.

¹⁹ If Sam was included in the 1870 U.S. census, it was not under the surname Martin. It's possible that he died before 1870. A Cynthia Martin, born about 1805 in Kentucky, was living in Xenia, Ohio in 1870. She could be Sam's widow. She was living with George Taylor, born about 1820, Laura Taylor, born about 1827, and Carrie Taylor, born about 1858. The three Taylors were also born in Kentucky. (The Taylor surname also appears in conjunction with the Martin family. Catherine Taylor Morrison, the granddaughter of John Martin, and her husband Moses Morrison are the ones who ended up with Sam Martin after John Martin's death. Catherine, whose maiden name was Taylor, was the daughter of Mary Ann Martin Taylor. It's possibly relevant that the George in the household was about the same age as the George mentioned above, who emigrated to Liberia and was known to have returned to the U.S.)

²⁰ The Court of Appeals concluded that Sam Martin's travel to Liberia was not legitimately intended as emigration and that he had therefore been a fugitive slave in New York. The Emancipation Proclamation had already been issued by the time of the ruling but didn't apply to Kentucky.

With a round trip from Kentucky to Africa as only one part of his journey, it can be fairly said that few, if any, of the millions of people who were emancipated from slavery in the 1860s traveled further on their road to freedom than Sam Martin.