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ROOTS AND ROUTES

The journey embarked upon by Black Loyalists destined for the Bahamas was not marked by a rupture from their past experiences in colonial America, but rather reflected a continuity shaped by conditions of enslavement and their entry into a British colony as persons of color. Like West African victims of the transatlantic slave trade, Black Loyalists arriving in the Bahamas did not come as a tabula rasa, but rather brought with them various ideas about religion, land, politics, and even freedom. Thus, upon arrival in the Bahamas the lessons of the Revolutionary War were appropriated and reinterpreted by Black Loyalist men and women in a variety of ways, often with varying consequences. Such complex transmutations within the Bahamas invite an analytical approach that examines the roots of such thought as it emerged out of the social and political world of colonial British North America.

A brief examination of leading Black Loyalists in the Bahamas demonstrates that the world they lived in was indelibly shaped by the world they left behind. Prince Williams' remarkable story began in colonial Georgia where he was born free, but was later "cheated out of his freedom and sold to an American."¹ Although his slave owner is never mentioned by name, Williams' account reveals that he was forced to serve "this man" when "the British troops came to Georgia." Taking advantage of the chaos of the American Revolution, Williams, in an act of self-assertion, escaped to the British side in order to claim freedom as a Black Loyalist. As Williams tellingly admitted in his claim, "by this circumstance he gained his

liberty and is in a better situation than he would have been if the war had not happened.”² As proof of his loyalty to the British cause, it was noted by the Loyalist Claims Commission that Williams had served six years in the 60th regiment under the command of General Prevost at Savannah. It was also in the environs of Savannah that Williams came into contact with black Separate Baptist preachers George Liele (1752–1825), and Amos Williams (?–1799). With the war ending, Prince Williams was most likely part of the massive evacuation of Loyalists from Savannah to Saint Augustine. Williams eventually embarked on a sea voyage in the 1780s to New Providence in an open boat with another Black Loyalist and Baptist preacher by the name of Sharper Morris.³ Even as he escaped to freedom in the Bahamas, Williams was still identified as a runaway based on the 1785 advertisement published in the *Bahama Gazette*. In the advertisement, Williams was described as a “Negro Man named Prince,” to be found along with another escapee identified as Sambo Scriven, “well known as a Baptist preacher.” Williams’ tenuous and torturous status eventually was resolved but only after he had petitioned the government and defended his claims in the Negro Court. Accordingly, Williams was finally declared free by way of Lord Dunmore’s Certificate, issued in 1793 and recorded for posterity in the Negro Freedoms Register, an addendum to the Executive Council Minutes. Confirmation of Williams’ hard-won free status was further evident in the fact that in 1801 his signature appeared on the property purchased for Bethel Baptist church.⁴

Amos Williams had a similar journey to freedom. Likely an enslaved person living on the Galphin plantation, Williams was first exposed to the doctrine of Separate Baptists from the preaching of George Liele. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Amos Williams fled to Savannah and worshipped at Yamacrow or Brumpton, congregations established by Liele outside of Savannah. Eventually, Amos was evacuated from Savannah for East Florida where he apparently was identified in the Registry Office Records as a Black Loyalist, having received a free pass from Saint Augustine, dated 1784 and authorized under the proclamation order of General McArthur.⁵ Subsequent to his departure from East Florida in 1784, Amos arrived in New Providence where he along with Prince Williams and Sambo Scriven established Bethel Baptist Church.⁶

A third example of a journey to freedom in the Bahamas also relates to the Galphin plantation. In a decision made before Dunmore’s Negro Court on January 2, 1788, “the claims to freedom set up by Hannah a

negro woman formerly the property of George Galphin of South Carolina,” were upheld.⁷ Though the historical record on Hannah is relatively slim, her life story indicates much about the Black Loyalist experience. First, it reveals the fact that despite aligning herself with the British and claiming freedom as a full British subject during the war, Hannah was forced to defend her right to freedom in a court in the Bahamas. Moreover, her connection to George Galphin—most likely her slave owner—also suggests a possible link to the Separate Baptist congregation in Silver Bluff and by extension Bethel Baptist Church in the Bahamas.

Taken collectively, these three cases highlight the complex geopolitical space of the Black Loyalist diaspora. As sojourners, all three had lived in multiple locations throughout the Atlantic world, often moving between and through national boundaries such as Spanish Florida or British-controlled Savannah. As these individuals moved beyond the emerging boundaries of Anglo-America, they carried the ideas that shaped their particular worldviews. In this regard, Black Loyalists were culturally informed individuals operating in a larger Atlantic world in which they not only carried peculiar ideas about faith and politics but also were forced to navigate various colonial boundaries and borders. These beliefs were not static and immutable notions timelessly fixed in the past. Instead, they were shaped and reshaped as much by the people and communities they encountered as by the peculiar sociopolitical environments they experienced in their travels. Utilizing the image of the ship as a fluid space connecting Atlantic ports, this chapter traces the roots and routes of the experiences of Black Loyalists in colonial America and how particular political and religious traditions were eventually transmitted and refashioned to the Bahamian sociopolitical landscape.⁸ Notably, this process of adaptation and transmission to the Bahamian environment was both unique and common to the larger Black Loyalist diaspora. Thus, in order to sharpen the distinctiveness of the Black Loyalist experience in the Bahamas it is necessary to expand our optics to the larger world of the Black Loyalist diaspora. This approach captures the multifarious and multilayered experiences of the Black Loyalist diaspora, underscoring the sinews of ideas and institutions that were carried collectively by royal refugees, without losing sight of local peculiarities. By extension, the narrative will naturally involve placing Bahamian Black Loyalists such as Joseph Paul and Prince Williams alongside others with a similar experience. In this regard, the *rooted* colonial experience of George Liele, David George, John Marrant,

Boston King, and other Black Loyalists will be examined alongside the featured black refugees that eventually were *routed* to the Bahamas. Beyond contextualizing Black Loyalist thought in colonial America, it is equally important to explore the peculiar local terrain of the Bahamas. In this respect an effort will be made to link both the world left behind and the new world that Black Loyalists entered when they were evacuated from various colonial seaports to the Bahamas at the end of the Revolutionary War. In this respect, examining the local conditions that existed in the pre-Loyalist Bahamas will allow for a more measured assessment of the acute and dramatic changes that occurred upon the arrival of Black Loyalists in 1783. In the end, this chapter focuses on the development of religious and secular institutional structures in colonial America and how they were eventually routed by Black Loyalists to the Bahamas, a peculiar slaveholding society on the margins of the emerging Atlantic world.

The roots of Black Loyalist thinking in the Bahamas and throughout the Atlantic were shaped by a number of significant intellectual and religious currents, most notably the Revolutionary War and the religious upheavals of the Great Awakening. Where the revolutionary fervor of the American Revolution broke the bonds of monarchical rule, the revivalism of the Great Awakening worked on leveling the ecclesiastical order in colonial society.⁹ The Great Awakening can best be defined as an evangelical Christian movement that began in the 1740s, initially disseminated by enthusiastic white itinerant preachers in the North, including Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John Wesley. Driven by a deep sense that God's divine power could be immediately experienced by persons from all stations in society, these men preached a redemptive message that not only broke the traditional denominational boundaries and creeds, but also embraced a religious experience open to all believers. By the 1780s the religious fervor had spread to the South. Spurred by the black missionary David Margate (who had arrived in Charleston in January 1775), evangelical Christianity would eventually be embraced by free blacks and enslaved persons living along the swampy waterways and rivers of South Carolina and Georgia. Among the new converts and purveyors of Great Awakening revivalism were black men such as John Marrant (1755–1791), David George (1742–1810), George Liele (1750–1828), Joseph Paul (1753–1802), and Amos Williams (?–1799). These men not only founded chapels in the South, but also led Black Loyalists in the establishment of sectarian churches in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, and the Bahamas.¹⁰

Much of the black evangelical work that would eventually be transmitted across the black Atlantic originated on the Galphin plantation, on the border between South Carolina and Georgia. Of particular importance for the Black Loyalist diaspora was the emergence of George Liele as a leader among free black and enslaved congregants in the Silver Bluff and Burke County frontier area along the Savannah River. Liele had initially been exposed to Separate Baptist teachings through the efforts of his enslaver Harry Sharpe, a devout man who shared the Great Awakening enthusiasm of George Whitefield, Daniel Marshall, and Shubal Stearns. Upon settlement in the Kiokee area in Georgia, Harry Sharpe employed Matthew Moore as a plantation pastor, and encouraged Liele and other enslaved persons to attend gospel meetings. Under Moore's tutelage, Liele was converted to the Separate Baptist faith by age twenty-three. Apparently, Liele also was taught how to read and write. Moore also played a critical role in credentialing Liele as an itinerant preacher. By 1775 Liele was ordained by a ministers' council presided over by Matthew Moore, Harry Sharpe, and Daniel Marshall.¹¹

From the outset it appears that Liele's missionary work targeted the free black and enslaved populations in the immediate area. Liele, in fact, worked with a white missionary, Wait Palmer, in establishing a meeting-house on the Galphin plantation, owned by an Irishman, George Galphin. The plantation was located almost directly across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia, in the area known as Galphinton and Silver Bluff. Though the exact date of the establishment of the church is hard to determine, it is evident that the congregation had been formed a year or two before the Revolutionary War broke out.¹² It was here that George Liele came into contact with David George and Jesse Palmer. Together, these men would not only constitute the Silver Bluff Church—the first in North America directly controlled by blacks—but in the case of George and Liele they would be linked together as itinerant black preachers and Loyalists during the American Revolution.¹³

The outbreak of war in the South dramatically altered the work of black evangelicals and their supporters in the rural areas of Georgia and South Carolina. Silver Bluff, as the incubator for much of the Separate Baptist teachings, was in fact disbanded as a result of the war. Though the fissures of war ruptured the Silver Bluff congregation, the end result was not entirely negative, as it allowed George Liele and others to expand their evangelical work to British-controlled spaces in and around Savannah.

In this way, “the vicissitudes of war drove the church into exile—but only to multiply itself elsewhere.”¹⁴ Indeed, it was in the British-occupied area of Savannah and the outlying regions that Black Loyalists David George and George Liele converged to establish close informal networks of black congregants and lay preachers that would later extend across the Atlantic to Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and the Bahamas.¹⁵ Of significance for the establishment of Separate Baptists in the Bahamas was the influence of these men on Amos Williams. The latter had initially been exposed to the evangelical message of Liele while a member of the Dead River Church, located on the Galphin plantation.¹⁶ During the war, Amos Williams fled to the British lines at Savannah, where he reconnected with Liele and other black itinerants. It was possibly in the immediate vicinity of Savannah and behind British lines that Prince Williams also came into contact with Amos Williams, George Liele, and David George. Such informal ties would take on greater significance once these Black Loyalist men were forced to evacuate Savannah with the British in 1782. Despite being dispersed to various locales throughout the Atlantic world, George Liele, David George, and Amos Williams maintained communication with one another. In a letter written by George Liele to John Rippon, the editor of the Baptist Annual Registry, he mentions correspondence received from friends in Savannah with news that “Brother Amos” had organized a Baptist congregation and constructed a church building for worship services.¹⁷ Clearly, within the Separate Baptist faith, close ties were established between black Baptist preachers dispersed throughout the Atlantic world.¹⁸ Perhaps more telling of the linkages between the Separate Baptist faith emanating out of the Galphin plantation and loyal black Baptists who settled in the Bahamas was the list of names in the Negro Freedom Register, an addendum to the larger Executive Council Minutes of the Bahama Islands. Listed in the Register in 1783 were Cyrus Galphin, Charlotte Galphin, Clarinda Galphin, Chloe Galphin, Jamo Galphin, Cyrus Galphin, and Charlotte Galphin, all recorded as free according to a “Justices Certificate.” This document is important for two reasons: first, it bears witness to the freedom earned by these Black Loyalists who allied with the British during the Revolutionary War; second, it also gives a clear indication that much of the Separate Baptist church at Silver Bluff was reconstituted not just in Jamaica under Liele, but also more impressively and directly in the Bahamas.¹⁹

However, the rapid growth and spread of revivalism among enslaved

and free blacks throughout the Atlantic world was not limited to the influence of George Liele and the Separate Baptist denomination. Indeed, black evangelicals of the Methodist persuasion became carriers of a colonial American religious experience that was later grafted onto Atlantic world sites inclusive of Nova Scotia, Jamaica, Antigua, England, and the Bahamas. Most significantly for the study of Black Loyalists in the Bahamas was the journey of Joseph Paul. Paul's roots began in South Carolina, where as a young boy he had heard George Whitefield preach. Sometime shortly before, or perhaps even during the American Revolution, Paul was moved to New York with his owner Richard Cartwright.²⁰ During the war, Paul was able to purchase not only his own freedom but also the freedom of his wife and three children.²¹ It is also quite possible that during his time in British-occupied New York, Paul would have come into contact with other black evangelicals of the Methodist persuasion such as Boston King (1760–1802), Murphy Stiel, and Moses Wilkinson (1747–?). Though no written correspondence exists between these men, all four were evacuated from New York and recorded in the *Book of Negroes*.²²

Notwithstanding these possible connections, Paul, his wife Susannah, and their three children left New York onboard *The Nautilus* on August 21, 1783 for the island of Abaco. In time, Paul and his family migrated to Nassau, New Providence, where he preached in the open to a congregation of three hundred every Sunday afternoon.²³ By 1791 Paul and his congregants had built a permanent edifice in the heart of Delancey Town (on the corner of Augusta and Hetherfield streets) that was used as both a Methodist meeting-house and a school.²⁴ It is worth noting that even as Paul established evangelical roots in New Providence, much of his congregation was drawn from the Black Loyalist population in New York City and the New England area. William Gordon, an Anglican priest stationed in New Providence, observed the presence of black Methodists, noting that many were originally from New England and included several "Negro Preachers."²⁵

Whereas Paul had acquired roots within a larger swath of the Eastern seaboard of colonial America, it appears that Anthony Wallace had more direct connections with the religious revivalism spreading across Georgia and South Carolina. Likely a follower of Primitive Methodism, as a free black, Wallace was eventually elevated to lay preacher and worked among the Methodists in Charleston before being evacuated with the British to Saint Augustine sometime between 1782 and 1783. Though little detail is