



Peyton Skipwith, Monrovia, Liberia, letter to John Hartwell Cocke, Virginia, 10 February 1834 (detail)

"Monrovia Liberia Febuary the tenth 1834 / Dear Sir I embrace this oppertunity to inform / you that"

LETTERS OF

**Peyton Skipwith**

TO HIS FORMER MASTER, **John Hopewell Cocke**

EMANCIPATED AFRICAN AMERICAN  
COLONIST, MONROVIA, LIBERIA

\_\_\_1834-1846\_\_\_

BREMO PLANTATION  
VIRGINIA, UNITED STATES

Born enslaved in Virginia in 1800, Peyton Skipwith was emancipated at age 33 by his owner, John Hartwell Cocke, who espoused the migration of freed slaves to Liberia, the west African colony founded in 1821 by the American Colonization Society. Cocke sent Skipwith with his wife and six children to Liberia, where they arrived in late 1833 after a 56-day journey across the Atlantic Ocean. The Skipwith family wrote letters to Cocke, their former owner, for over thirty years; these letters are archived in the University of Virginia Library. Cocke's letters to the Skipwith family, however, have been lost. Five of the twelve letters from Skipwith to Cocke are presented here.

Monrovia Liberia Febuary the tenth 1834

Dear Sir

I embrace this oppertunity to inform you that we are all in moderate health at this time hoping that these few lines may find you and yours enjoying good health after fifty Six days on the ocean we all landed Safe on new years day and hav all had the fever and I hav lost Felicia<sup>1</sup> but I thank god that our loss is hur gain as Job Sais the lord gave and he taketh I thank god that he has mad it possible that we may meet to part no more I thank god that we are all on the mend I can not tell you much about Liberia I hav not been from monrovia [capital city of Liberia] yet as it respects my Self and wife we are dissatsfide in this place their is Some that hav come to this place that hav got rich and anumber that are Sufering those that are well off do hav the nativs as Slavs and poor people that come from america hav no chance to make aliving for the nativs do all the work as it respects farming their is no Chance for it unless we would get the nativs to work for us and then you must be wit them and at the Same time when we ought to put in our grain it rains So hard that we dare not be out unless exposing our health their is no chance for farming in monrovia for it is a Solid body of Stones but they Say at Caulwell is achance but Still I find that but few fower it as it respects Stone masons they can get a good price three dollars and ahalf aperch A pearch is for foot high and four foot wide but the Sun is So hot that people from america can not Stand it in the dry Season and in the wet it rains to much their has Some come from america that hav learnt the nativs and they hav hierd them to put up a too Story house eighteen by twenty for twenty galens of rum as it respect Coffe it Sells at 50 Cents per pound I hav Seen the coffe tree and all So Coffe on them their

National Humanities Center, 2007: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). In John Hartwell Cocke Papers, Albert & Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library; reproduced by permission. Published in Randall M. Miller, ed., *"Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family* (Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 58-61, 72-76, 83; Miller footnotes reproduced by permission. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm).

<sup>1</sup> **Felicia**, aged six, died from a combination of the African fever and a fall "from a very elevated bed" onto a nail that drove into her leg. [Miller footnote continues.]

is but a few trees in their gardens and as it respects that which grows wild the natives and monkeys take it the natives do bring theirs to town loaf Sugar Sells at twenty eight dollars per hundred brown Sugars at twenty five dollars per hundred pork twenty five dollars per hundred we have a little fresh beef and it Sells at twelve Cents per pound as it respects the fruit in this Country it is too tedious to mention at this time but new comers dare not eat much of it I have not seen enough of the Country to tell you much more at this time but will tell you more when I see more of the place I want you if you please to write to me by the first opportunity and let me know on what terms I can come back for I intend coming back as soon as I can I must come to close Give my respects to all the family and all so to all inquiring friends my wife all so and children send their respects to you all direct your letters to Monrovia  
Peyton Skipwith

Monrovia March 6th 1835

Dear Sir

I embrace this opportunity to write you these few lines to inform you that I am not well with a blindness of nights so that I cannot see.<sup>2</sup> all the information that I can get from the doctor is that [I] must stop laying stone I have lost my wife<sup>3</sup> she died on July 2d 1834 the rest of my family are tolerable well Sir This is the third letter that I have wrote to you and have received no answer I would be thankful if you would write by the first chance and I do not know of any better chance than to write by Mr. Jos J Roberts<sup>4</sup> I once had a notion of coming home and still have a notion but I want to go up to Sirriline [Sierra Leone] as I am advised by the doctors to quit laying s[t]one for it is injurious to my health & if I get my health by going there I will say there If not will return back to America give my respects to your family also to the people let my Mother know that you have received a letter from me I dont want you to say any thing to [her] about my being blind but let her know that I will return. Dianah



west Africa (present day)



Map of Liberia, 1845 (detail), published for the American Colonization Society

<sup>2</sup> According to the colony's physician, Dr. George P. Todsen, Peyton suffered from nyctalopia, or night blindness.

<sup>3</sup> Lydia (Randall) Skipwith (b. 1804?) died of overexposure and the African fever. [Miller footnotes continues.]

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Jenkins Roberts (1809-1876), free-born mulatto from Virginia, prospered in Liberia as a merchant and a politician. In 1842 he became the first black governor of the colony, and after independence was proclaimed in 1847 he was elected the first president of the Republic of Liberia. . . Roberts accompanied the Skipwiths to Liberia on the *Jupiter*, and on at least one occasion he wrote a letter to Cocke concerning the colony's progress.

send her love to Miss Sally<sup>5</sup> and all of the family and is very desirous of returning back again she wants you to write her word also by the first opportunity let her know how Miss Nancy Cavil and her family<sup>6</sup> I have put myself to a great deal of trouble of searching the servant of Mr Cavil and also that of Mr Haris<sup>7</sup> but I cant find eather of them nothing more but  
I remain yours truly  
Peyton Skipwith

Peyton Skipwith wrote John Hartwell Cocke on 27 April 1836, 30 Jan. & 9 May 1838, and 20 May 1839 [not included here].

Monrovia Nov 11th 1839

Dear Sir

I did write you by the way of the Ship Saluda when she was home Last voyage and exspected to receevd a letter from you and that the Revd [Reverend] Colin Teage should have Brought it to me but he did not reach his home but died in about fourteen days sail of Monrovia which was a great diasppointment to me and friend and also not to receive any inteligence [news] from you nor none of the family as I am always anxious to hear from you all and I thought that the Lord had favoured us by sending a regular packet to sail to and from said ports so as we might never want for an opportunity or have any excuse It has been very sickly here and has occasiond some few deaths of our respectable citizens but I believe the rest of the settlers are enjoying tolerable good health at present with my family the children are still going to school to days & Sunday school that has Lately been establish in the Baptist church of the Town of Monrovia I think that our Laws Lately made by the agent & council are two binding upon the inhabitants, if they can get along with them in the end they may prove a great benifit<sup>8</sup> I think that they have occasion the Inhabitants of Monrovia to see all ready by not suffering [allowing] the spanish trader to come to the colony that they are in better circumstances, as relates to rice, abundance of rice has come in our Market and some of our little retail shops are over run but this would not have [been] the case if the slaver dealer had to have been allowed to come in our town for he would have bought from them faster than they could have obtain it. I have sent you the Liberia Herald and Diannah the Luminary which will explain to you what Laws &c [etc.] and what we about here I no you all are desireous to see me but it is imposible to come home at this time. I am building a house and the rock and wood has to be carried by the hand of men so you must no that I can make but little progress in Building is my reason that I cannot come at this time but perhaps as soon if the Lord Blesses me with health and strenght to finish it then I will make some preperations if a live to visit you once more. John has been bound to me and keeps quite steady and Learn very fast and is glad that he undertook to learn the trade.

A Slaver dealer for sometime had a slave factory at Little Bassa and Gov. Buchanan after he came out orderd him away and said to him that he had no right to deal in Slaves in that teritory and that he must remove in so many days it appears that he agreed to it and that he would not buy no more until he did remove the said factory but the gov. hearing that he did buy contrary to his agreement warn him again if he did not leave the place that he should destroy the

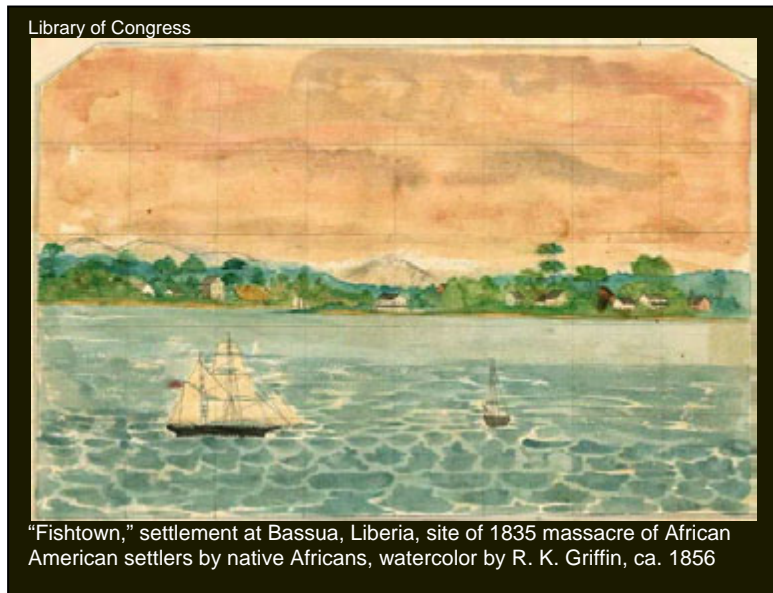
<sup>5</sup> **Sally Faulcon Cocke** (1816-1879), Cocke's daughter who befriended Diana Skipwith (b. 1822?) and Matilda Skipwith (b. 1824?). She later married Dr. Arthur Lee Brent and lived at Cocke's "Bremo Recess" plantation [Virginia].

<sup>6</sup> Probably refers to **Anne Blaws (Cocke) Cabell** (1811-1862), one of Cocke's daughters. In 1831 she married the agricultural reformer and publicist Nathaniel Francis Cabell of Nelson County, Virginia.

<sup>7</sup> Unable to identify.

<sup>8</sup> In order to meet the growing restiveness of the colonists who complained of the Society's arbitrary rule . . . , the debt-ridden American Colonization Society created the Commonwealth of Liberia which linked all of the independent settlements with Monrovia, save the Maryland Colonization Society settlement at Cape Palmas. The Constitution of 1839, effecting the above change, granted greater autonomy to the colonial council . . . [Miller footnote continues.]

establishment and all the property that it contained should be confiscated he would not believe but still remained and we went down and broke up the factory and brought away all the effects say in goods and destroyed about fifty puncheons Rum which was turned loose on the ground say the effects in goods &c to the amount of ten thousand Dollars after we had taken the goods or a part we had to contend with the natives which fought us two days very hard but we got the victory and formed a treaty before we left with one of the chiefs but not with the other and only got four slaves so we cannot say that we concluded a final peace without the other party's consent we were gone fifteen days and only lost one man in the battle and he was a crewman two or



three of our men got wounded but not dangerously but we killed a great many of tribes on both of the parties say of Bargays & Princes as they were the principal head men.<sup>9</sup>

NB\* you will be informed that we did not go from home to interfere with the natives at all and would not have done it if they had not begun it themselves You will give my best respects to all your family—and my Mother.

Nothing Moore at Present But  
Remains Your affectionate  
Friend & well wisher  
Peyton Skipwith

Monrovia April 22 1840

Dear Sir

I received your letter and was very glad to hear from you and was very sorry that you did not see Mr Teage when he was in the states but he is no more he never lived to reach home I also received the letter from Mother and was very glad to hear from her indeed Dianna received her letter also from Miss Sally<sup>10</sup> I am very glad that I can say that my health has been so good that I took my Rifle in hand to go to fight a savage King about three days travel through the forest slept one night in the bush and took his Town the next day about 6, o, Clock with my Capt Mortally wounded and other man, and two others with flesh wounds there we encamped that night and on Sunday and Monday we set fire to the Town and took our line of March for home, and was two days in the wild bush, but a pretty country well watered and timbered I have as much work as I can well attend to at present with my apprentices and others you mention in your letter that you would like to know the prices of stone Masons per day Carpenters &c. the wages of stone Mason can get when work is to be had about \$1.50 per day Carpenter from 75 cts to \$1.00 to \$1.25

<sup>9</sup> In July, 1839, Buchanan dispatched an army of volunteers to chase the slave dealer from his factory. Aided by a British naval vessel, the Liberian force captured the barracoon and set the slaver to flight. Local natives, who were dependent upon the slave trade for income, attacked the Liberians. The two chieftains, Bahgay and Prince, eventually sued for peace and agreed to release slaves they held and to cede jurisdiction of Little Bassa to the colony. Prince failed to honor his promise. [Miller footnote continues.]

\* NB: nota bene (Latin), "note well." [NHC footnote]

<sup>10</sup> Sally (Cocke) Brent, Cocke's daughter.

My daughters have a good time to improve themselves in education for they have nothing else to do much but to go school and I think they will improve Dianna keeps up her night school as yet and also is a teacher in the sunday school of the Baptist Church it would be well if we had some advantage in getting things cheap to this market for every thing that we get is at least from 100 to 200 per cent above cost which will forever keep the inhabitants poor if the steam packets were sent and would sell there things cheap we would like to have them and to increase our population it is something strange to think that those people of africa are calld our ancestors in my present thinking if we have any ancestors they could not have been liked these hostile tribes in this part of africa for you may try and distell that principle and belief in them and do all you can for them and they still will be your enemy It is a fact that agriculture has been carried on very rapidly but we must say a little on the retrogade the gardens are tolerably well furnished with vegetable matter and pretty well supplies the market.

I saw Mr. Minor he come out in the ship Saluda this time and settled with me in full.

apprentice Labour is worth from 50 to 75 cts pr day we have Blacksmith one or two and they have as much work as they can do and more, I think a blacksmith that would follow his trade might make a Handsom living in this country the Blacksmiths say they make from two to three dollars per day I have no work cattle mules nor Horses but there are two or three Jack [male donkey] on the cape and three Horses cows are worth 18 to 20\$ and ox the same again I must say that the greatet war that ever was fought by man was fought at Headington a Missionary establishment about five miles from Millsburg it was said that a savage host of this man that we took occassion to against sent about four Hundred men to attack this place about day Break there was in that Town three americans and they took there stand in the House and whips the whole enemy they killd on the feeld about 20 dead, and god he only knows how many was wounded and carread away it has been said that a great number died but how many I do not no with the lost of one Native man mortally wounded they then perused them and found the Generals body slightly intomed [entombed] about twenty miles from the feeld of Battle his head was taken from his body and now made an ornament in the Hands of the Governor Buchanan the Battle lasted about one Hour fifteen minutes how this was done they had and over quanty of musket loded and had nothing to do but take them up and poor the Bullets in there flesh and they would fall takeing fingers and tearing the flesh assunder<sup>11</sup>

Our selves we have made a company of rifle men and I hold an office in that company the Churches is some somewhat in prosperous state and appear to thrive I send you the Liberia Herald so you can acquaint yourself of the particulars about our goeing to Gatoombahs and what I fail writing you can correct yourself in that I try to write you every thing that I can think of.

there is a man in jail to be hung a crooman for killing an american boy the 2nd friday in May at ten o Clokk this boy was shockenly murderd by this fellow he broke his legs his arms and stabs him in several places and the next obsconded to Junk<sup>12</sup> about sixty miles and there he was

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<sup>11</sup> From 1838 to 1840 the back-country settlements suffered the ravages of constant warfare among the rival tribes. No effective action was taken against the natives who occasionally raided Liberian towns until the time of Buchanan's administration. Following their victory over the Dei tribe, Gola warriors attacked the Millsburg settlement on the St. Paul River. The Bopolo, or Boporo, chieftain who headed the Gola confederacy was one Getumbe, or Gatumbah, the successor to Sao Baso, or "King Boatswain," who had established the Condo confederation of tribes living in the Bopolo hilly region. Getumbe resented Liberian interference in the slave trade and consequently pursued a policy of resistance and raids. The Millsburg incident prompted Buchanan to organize an expedition of two or three hundred militiamen to chastise the Gola invaders. Meanwhile, Getumbe allied with one Gotola, or Gotorah, a Loma chief in the service of the Condo who was believed to be a cannibal. With 700 men Gotola attacked the mission station at Heddington in 1840, but a small body of well-armed Liberians, commanded by Sion Harris, repulsed the attack and killed Gotola.

In a rare show of efficiency the Liberian militia then commenced the campaign against Getumbe's principal fort, drove him from it, and left him to wander in the wilderness. This victory overawed other interior tribes for a time and convinced them to sign peace treaties with Liberia. The country along the St. Paul River, the scene of so much bloodshed, remained underdeveloped for several years after the above events because settlers continued to fear native reprisals.

<sup>12</sup> The Junk River [see 1845 map, p. 2 of these excerpts].

detected and brought back to Monrovia and he had his trial in our superior court at his first setting with two the ablest Judges our town could afford Judge Benedict<sup>13</sup> & Gov Buchanan

Nothing More at Present

Yours

Peyton Skipwith

Peyton Skipwith wrote J. H. Cocke on 29 Dec. 1840, 27 April 1841, and 29 Sept. 1844 [not included here].

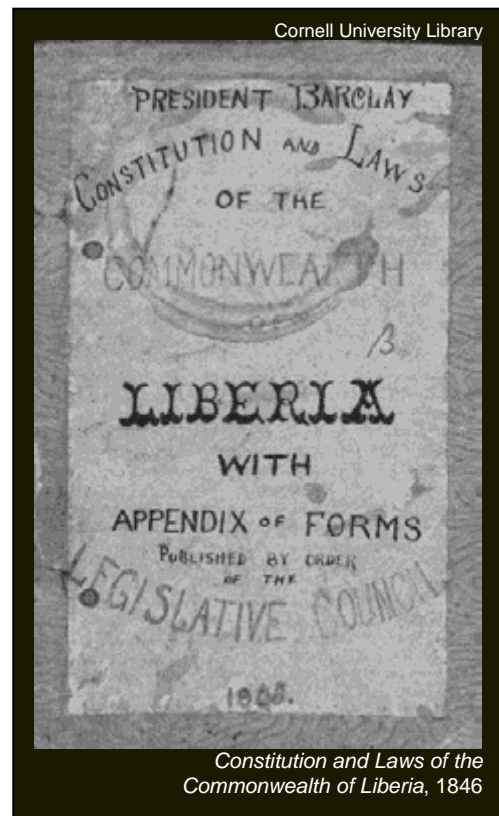
Monrovia June 25th 1846

Dear Genl.

I write you a few hasty lines, by a vessel now about to leave this place for the states.

You earnestly request me to give you the particulars of our Colony. Since the Authorities has thought it proper to declare their independence\* I cannot with confidence say much about the present situation of the Colony. It is not yet determined with the Colonist whether to receive the Constitution sent on by the Board or not. The majority of this place is much in favour of independence, & those at Edina the Leeward Settlement are against it & that bitterly the Council has not consented to deliver the Constitution to the people as yet. It is thought that it will be done in July. It is my belief that the majority of this place will gain the effect of those of Edina & Bassa Cove — and cause them to join heart & hand with them; this is my expectation about the affair. We must be a people recognised by foreign Nations, or else come under the eye of some that will protect us when called upon, you have I no doubt seen that there must be something of the kind done before we can enforce our "Laws"; for it has been already said by the British that we have no right to demand Anchorage Duties &c of them. If we are to remain in the state we are now in, it is deplorable Sir, I am in hopes that when the Constitution are presented that the eyes of the blind will become opened.<sup>14</sup>

Though our love for the society is great we cannot return her that gratitude of thanks that we owe to her. Sir You wish me to give you some information of the different productions. I myself do not farm it at all I have my lot only planted down since here in Africa I have been, & it is all the farming I do. At the present time I feel an inclination to lay aside my trade and go in to farming of it. we have had rather a severe season of it for bread kind. those who turned their attention to farming some time past caused us to weep almost at the idea of paying their exorbitant prices for produce: we pay at his place for Potatoes 1.00\$ Cents per Bushel Corn 25 cents pr. dozen Rice at this time brings 3\$ per



<sup>13</sup> Samuel Benedict (1808-1854), longtime political foe of Joseph J. Roberts, became the first chief justice of the Liberian supreme court. Nothing is known of the incident described in Peyton's letter.

\* In 1847 Liberia declared its independence from its owners in the American Colonization Society and established a republic. [NHC footnote]

<sup>14</sup> In an attempt to control the profitable coastal trade, Liberia levied a six percent ad valorem duty [tax on imported goods based on their value] on foreign traders, but British traders from neighboring Sierra Leone refused to acknowledge Liberian sovereignty or to pay the tax. [Miller footnote continues.]

Bushel. Cassado at the present time is 50 cts. per Bushel and that in specie [gold or silver coins, i.e., cash].

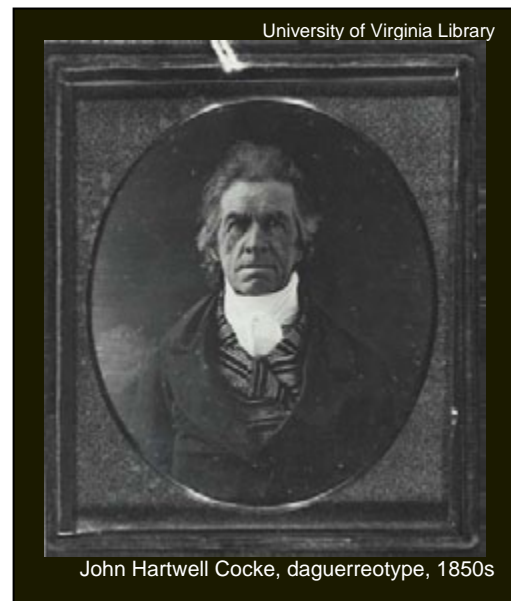
We are blessed with a good soil for raising Corn &c we raises Corn from 12 to 13 inches in lenth and that good and full. Cotton can be abundantly raised here but no person seems to turn their attention to it Coffee grows wild in the woods and can be raised abundantly, if it was attended to. there are only a few individuals who raises said article — and theirs is as promising as Ever I saw coff in the States. You wishes that I should say something about Miss Sally's people I have and can do so a gain Leander<sup>15</sup> is here and is well and all the people that came out with him is here Excepting James Nicholas<sup>16</sup> he left this place for *Jamaca* & I have not been Enable to hear from him since. Richard<sup>17</sup> is now on board of one of the U.S. Ships of War Cruising on this Coast Cousin Peter is at Mashall he went there to see if it would not be an addition to his health. I am very sorry that I did not turn my attention to farming when I first arrived to this Country, but It was Entirely out of my power, as I was alone in a manner & had no male kind to render me assistance. Now I am very well situated and has several apprentices with me Exclusive of some of the Barque Pons Cargo of Congoes<sup>18</sup>

You desired to know whither we Stood in kneed of Bibles. this we do not kneed so much as we do other Books. we have aplenty of bibles here, more than are used. If you deem it necessary you can send on some Valuable Books for my family Such as Historys &c &c Please send me on some writing paper quills & wafers and you will be confuring quite a favour on me As the Revd. A D Williams will be in the states you will be please to send me on some Flour & Pork and any other necessary article you may think will be of service to me

You promised me in your letter that you was going to send my Bro. George\* on to this place at the Expiration of three years & I would be happy indeed to see him and all the people that you have promised to send on. My love to all the family & inquiring friends. I beg to close by subcribing myself to be sincerely

Yours

Peyton Skipwith



NB Please remember my love to Master John Charles Phillip & Merret<sup>19</sup> also Mrs Nancy Cavel<sup>20</sup> & Family Miss Sally<sup>21</sup> also and Miss Coatny.<sup>22</sup> also tell them I am well \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>15</sup> **Leander Sturdivant** (b. 1807?) became a farmer in Liberia and lived with his three children, Diana, Rosetta, and Leander. Cocke deemed the father "a young man of constant character" and the family "one of the best, color'd families I ever knew." [Miller footnote continues.]

<sup>16</sup> **James Nicholas** (b. 1806?) left Liberia to farm in Sierra Leone in 1843 and ultimately went to Philadelphia, Pa.

<sup>17</sup> **Richard Cannon** (b. 1807?), brother of Peter and the cousin of Leander Sturdivant, attempted farming in Liberia before signing on an American naval vessel.

<sup>18</sup> In 1845 the barque *Pons*, bound for Brazil with over 900 slaves, was captured off Kabenda by the U.S. African Squadron. The navy landed 756 survivors at Monrovia. The *Pons* recaptives generated much interest in Liberia as the settlers eagerly reached out to help these distressed individuals. Most of the *Pons* recaptives were Ibo and Congo tribesmen, and many were apprenticed as farmers in the New Georgia community, where they eventually prospered. Some colonists regretted the charity, for the refugees greatly taxed the country's meager resources; several Congo recaptives fled to the woods, where they fed themselves by making nocturnal raids on Liberian stock and crops. [Miller footnote continues.]

\* **George Skipwith**, Peyton's brother, had been sent by Cocke from Virginia to his Alabama plantation to prepare for emancipation and migration to Liberia. George stayed in Alabama for the rest of his life, however, because Cocke did not consider him sufficiently mature to become a free man. A selection of George Skipwith's letters to Cocke are included in this Toolbox in Theme II: ENSLAVEMENT, #4: Driver. [NHC footnote]

<sup>19</sup> **Cocke's sons** [Miller footnote continues.]

<sup>20</sup> Probably **Anne Blaws (Cocke) Cabell**, Cocke's daughter.

<sup>21</sup> **Sally (Cocke) Brent**, Cocke's daughter.

<sup>22</sup> **Sally Elizabeth Courtney (Bowdoin) Cocke** (1815-1872) was the wife of Philip St. George Cocke.