

BY JOSEPHUS R. COAN

Daniel Coker: 19th Century Black Church Organizer, Educator and Missionary

Introduction

Daniel Coker has been labeled as a "pioneer educator and church-organizer."¹ Behind this label is the story of a restless adventurer, who possessed the priceless virtues of ability to see the needs of his enslaved and oppressed fellowmen and sufficient courage to do something about them. He belonged to that great company of personalities who have devoted their lives to the cause of freedom, equality and justice for Africans in America as well as on the Continent of Africa. Yet Daniel Coker is less well known than some of his contemporaries with whom he labored in the struggle for black liberation and human dignity. Historians have given less attention to his career than they have to some other freedom fighters who lived during his time and subsequent periods. The main reason for this neglect is not hard to seek, for Daniel Coker spent the greater portion of his public career in West Africa. Hence complete records of his adventures have not been available to American writers. Consequently, the story of his pioneering endeavors is limited largely to the American scene of his activities. The purpose of this paper is to give a more complete account of his life and labors at home and abroad, and at the same time highlight some of his significant achievements.

Early Life

Daniel Coker was born a slave about 1780 "on the Eastern shore of Maryland."² His father, Edward Wright, was an "African" slave to a Maryland slaveholder named Coker. His mother, Susan, was a white English woman, who, after her arrival in America, became an indentured servant of the slave owner who held Edward Wright in bondage. Although he was of mixed parentage, Daniel was classified as a slave and given the name "Isaac Wright" after his father. In this paper he will be identified as Isaac Wright until we reach that period of his life when he changed his name. Susan was the mother both of Isaac and of his half-brother whose father was the white slave master. For that reason, the status of this half-brother was both white and free. Isaac was a

¹ George F. Bragg, Jr., *Men of Maryland*, Baltimore: Church Advocate Press, 1925, pp. 42-45.

² Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the A.M.E. Church*, Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891, p. 88.

mulatto with a very fair complexion, so much so that he could pass for white.³

Education

The process by which the slave boy, Isaac Wright, gained his primary education was both accidental and providential. It was accidental in that as a slave, he was not supposed to receive formal education in the colony of Maryland. Providentially, he was exposed to elementary education in spite of barriers. This is how his elementary education came about: His free and white half-brother refused to attend school unless his parents allowed Isaac to accompany him to school and be his servant. In this humble task, Isaac learned from the efforts of his half-brother the fundamentals of elementary education.⁴ With this background he resorted to the method of self-study by which he continued to develop to levels equivalent to secondary and high school education.

Dash for Freedom

As time passed Isaac Wright's self-image became enlarged. He felt that he could not continue to be a slave. He became a fugitive and made his escape to New York State. To make sure that he would not be detected by fugitive slave hunters, he dropped the name, Isaac Wright, and adopted the name, Daniel Coker, which he kept for the rest of his life.

In New York, he continued to study and developed to a point where he was regarded as possessing "more information on all subjects than most black men of his day."⁵ When he became converted it is unknown. It is known that he worked for black Methodists in New York. In so doing he exhibited great leadership ability and fluency as a speaker. Impressed with his gifts and graces, Bishop Asbury ordained him as a deacon about 1800.

Free At Last

After his ordination the Reverend Mr. Coker returned to Baltimore determined to gain his personal freedom from the shackles of human bondage. Legally, he was still a slave, and his master could reclaim him. In order to escape that possibility he made efforts to avoid public appearances. Loyal friends among the free blacks sheltered him for a time. Eventually, four free black men — Charles Hackett, Nathaniel Gillaird, William Watts and George Murray — assumed the initiative in helping him gain his emancipation. These four benefactors provided the money and induced the famous Quaker abolitionist, John Needles,

³George A. Singleton, *The Romance of African Methodism*, New York: Exposition Press, 1952, p. 135. Details of the family background of Daniel Coker were gathered by Bishop Daniel A. Payne from Coker's half-brother, who, in 1852, lived in Greenwich, New Jersey. (The author wonders, however, whether this was Greenwich, Connecticut rather than Greenwich, New Jersey?) An extract of the conversation is preserved in the periodical: *Repository of Religion and Literature*, Daniel A. Payne, Editor. It appears in *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal Church History*, by James A. Handy. Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, pp. 35, 36.

⁴Payne, *History*, *Op. Cit.* p. 89; Handy, *Ibid.* p. 35.

⁵Payne, *Ibid.*

to purchase Mr. Coker from his master with the view of granting him freedom afterward. They had the assistance and hearty support of Reverend Michael Coate, an Elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore.⁶

Up to this point our story of Mr. Daniel Coker has focused on his career from a slave boy to a freedman. From this point on the account will center on some of his adventures which have resulted in his permanent contributions to human betterment. These contributions are regarded as footprints.

Pioneer School Master

After he had gained his freedom, Daniel Coker was at liberty to pursue his divinely inspired vocation. He became the central figure in the educational and religious movements of the city of Baltimore.⁷ In 1807, through the encouragement of free black persons, he opened an "African" school, the popularity of which caused it to be known later as "Daniel Coker School."⁸ He started in the basement of Bethel Church on Saratoga Street as "an institution for children and youth in the elementary branches of an English education."⁹ He began it with an enrollment of seventeen pupils. When he gave it up, the school had one hundred and fifty pupils on roll. In his school Mr. Coker educated scores of young men living in Baltimore. To mention two of them should suffice. One was the poet, Mr. Clark, of Little York, Pennsylvania. The other was the Reverend William Douglas, the talented and well-educated minister of Saint Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and author of a volume of sermons and a history of his own ministry entitled: *Annals of Saint Thomas Church*.¹⁰ The operation of the "Daniel Coker School" for black children and youth was the first of its kind in the city of Baltimore. Viewed from the standpoint that, as a slave boy, he was deprived of the opportunity of formal education, the greatness of his adventures as a pioneer educator cannot be overemphasized. He was a shining example of what can be accomplished when a life is placed at the disposal of God.

Anti-Slavery Writer

In 1810 Daniel Coker wrote a pamphlet, which has made him to be among the first black American writers on the anti-slavery question. The title page of his forty-three page pamphlet was:

A Dialogue Between A Virginian and An African Minister

Written by the Rev. Daniel Coker, A Descendant of Africa, Minister

⁶ Payne, *Ibid.*, R. R. Wright, *Encyclopedia of African Methodism*, 1916, p. 68.

⁷ Handy, *Op. Cit.* p. 36.

⁸ Braggs, *Op. Cit.* p. 62.

⁹ Daniel A. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888, p. 221.

¹⁰ Payne, *History, Op. Cit.* p. 89.

of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. Humbly Dedicated to the People of Colour in the United States of America.¹¹

The Virginian referred to in the Dialogue was a white slave master from Virginia, who held fifty-five black persons as slaves. The African Minister was Daniel Coker himself. The Virginian recognized Daniel Coker as a minister of religion, and as a man above the average in general knowledge and in intellectual ability. He sought an interview with Mr. Coker in order to discuss a federal law that would emancipate slaves. He raised several objections to the enactment of such a law, and he wanted to hear Mr. Coker's views. He based his first objection to such a law on his claim that slaves were the property of slaveholders. The enactment of a law of emancipation, he contended, would deprive slaveholders of their legal property. Therefore, it would be unjust.

The minister, Daniel Coker, met the objection by pointing out the fact that the law which permitted slaves was a sin and was against the law of common sense. For it allowed men to make their fellowmen their personal property. In so doing it took away the *liberty* of a person, which was his inalienable right. Coker continued

"Freeing men, in my opinion, is not depriving anyone of their(his) property, but restoring it to the rightful owner; it is suffering the unlawful captive to escape. . . . It is not wronging the master, but doing justice to the slave — restoring him to himself. The master, it is true, . . . may suffer and that greatly; but it is his own fault, and the fault of the enslaving law, and not of the law that does justice to the oppressed."¹²

To this logical argument, the slaveholder had no answer. His next objection to a law for emancipation was based on his claim that the Bible justified the institution of slavery. In reply, Mr. Coker admitted the fact that such terms as "slaves" and "servants" are found in the Holy Scriptures. But he contended that nowhere does the Bible justify the holding of a person in perpetual bondage. He argued that in a Christian society, as America pretended to be, human relations ought to be governed by the ethical teaching of Jesus as set forth in the golden rule: "As ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." (Matt. 7:12) Mr. Coker's profound interpretation of the Bible was a convincing blow to this point of the slaveholder's argument.

Another argument the Virginian advanced against the abolition of slaves was based on his claim that the result would be intermarriages between black and white and the production of a society of mixed blood people. To this argument Mr. Coker replied that, even with slavery, race mixtures had begun already and mulattos are numerous. The abolition of slavery would hardly affect the process.

The final argument of the Virginian against emancipation was the Virginian's claim that slaves would not accept it. They would prefer

¹¹ The Pamphlet was printed in Baltimore by Benjamin Edes for Joseph James, 1810. It is included in a Compendium of *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, edited by Dorothy Porter, published by Arno Press and The New York Times, New York, 1969. It is found in the Library of Spelman College.

¹² Daniel Coker, *A. Dialogue*, See Note No. 11. pp. 6,7.

to remain with their masters. To this argument Mr. Coker replied that justice required the liberation of slaves. It would be up to them to decide whether they accept or reject it.

The dialogue closed with the confession of the Virginia slaveholder of the evil of slavery and of his promise to liberate all of his slaves. It has great significance for its thoughts on the emancipation. It is valuable for the light it sheds on the breadth and the depth of the knowledge of Daniel Coker and for its revelation on the sharpness of his intellectual ability. The production of this pamphlet makes Mr. Coker a trail-blazer among black writers on anti-slavery literature. It is one of the foot-prints he has left on the sand of time.

The pamphlet has great merit also for the statistical data it contains at the end of the dialogue on the independent church movement among Afro-Americans about that time. First, it gives a list of thirteen black Americans ordained ministers of the gospel. Heading this list were Richard Allen, Pastor of the A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia and Absalom Jones, Rector of Saint Thomas Episcopal Church also in Philadelphia. The other ordained Methodist ministers on the list were: Jacob Tapsico, James Champion and Jeffrey Buley of Philadelphia; Abraham Thompson, James Varick, William Miller, and June Scott of New York. The Baptist ordained ministers were: Benjamin Paul of New York; Mr. Paul of Boston and Jacob Bishop of Baltimore. Listed also was Paul Cuffee, Presbyterian minister of Long Island, New York. The list includes the names of eleven black Methodist local preachers. They were: Thomas Miller, Jacob Matthews and George White of New York; Hanibal Moore, Thomas Dublin, Richard William, James Coal, Thomas Hall, John Wigh and Abner Coker of Baltimore, and George Martin of Annapolis.

Another list gives a total of fifteen independent black churches, distributed as follows: Eleven of these independent African churches were Methodist: two in Philadelphia, two in New York, two in Baltimore and one in each of the following places — Salem, New Jersey, West Chester, Pennsylvania, Wilmington, Delaware, Annapolis, Maryland and Charleston, South Carolina. Besides the Methodist Bodies, the list includes — one Episcopal Church in Philadelphia; two Baptist Churches — one in New York and another in Boston. There was one Presbyterian Church in New York.

A final list given consisted "of the names of the descendants of the African race, who have given proofs of talent." The following are the names of persons, together with their contributions, dates and places:

- Rev. Absalom Jones*, in a sermon on the abolition of the slave trade.
January 1, 1808, Philadelphia.
- Mr. Peter Williams, Jr.*, in an oration, and *Rev. James Varrick*, in a sermon on the abolition of the slave trade, January 1, 1808, New York.
- Mr. Henry Sipkins*, in an oration on the abolition of the slave trade,
January 2, 1809, New York.

Mr. William Hamilton, in an address before the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, January 2, 1809, New York.

Rev. William Miller, in a sermon, and *Mr. Henry Johnson* in an oration on the abolition of the slave trade. January 1, 1810, New York.

Mr. James Forten, a letter addressed to the Congress for the rights of in colored brethren, Philadelphia (no date).

Along with these lists, the author shows the number of African Methodists in the United States in 1809 as being 31,884.¹³

The above data add to the richness of the pamphlet for the light it sheds on the personalities of African descent, and the movements they had put into operation for the causes of freedom in worship and the abolition of slavery up to 1810.

Pioneer Church Organizer

Daniel Coker is best known for his pioneering role as the co-founder of what is known today as the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. As already indicated, by 1810 the independent church movement was well on the way.¹⁴ Daniel Coker became associated with that movement in Baltimore. Dissatisfied with discrimination in worship, a few "free Africans" in Baltimore began a separate Methodist Society in a boot-black cellar that belonged to Caleb Highland. In 1799 the little group purchased a building on Saratoga Street and began to use it as a center for prayer and class meetings. They soon found themselves in financial trouble. They needed a leader who possessed the combined qualifications of ordination and keen intellectual ability. Daniel Coker, who had these qualifications, came to Baltimore and joined the society in 1801. This event marked a new era in the development of the black independent church movement in Baltimore. For Mr. Coker soon became the most influential man of his race in the city. He counselled black members to withdraw from the Methodist Episcopal Church. Under his leadership the separate Methodist Society grew in less than a decade from 360 to 800 members. Mr. Coker planned a financial campaign that realized the sum of \$3,000 for the improvement of the original property purchased by the Society. The group adopted the name "African Methodist Bethel Society."¹⁵ Mr. Coker became their Pastor and served the congregation until 1817. He was responsible for the organization of other branches of the Methodist Society in the vicinity. In 1816, he led the delegation of local preachers to the General Convention in Philadelphia at which time and place the A. M. E. Connection came into being.¹⁶ Through his pioneering leadership in Baltimore, he has earned the credit of being the founder of "the Southern Branch of African Methodism."¹⁷

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 40-43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Payne, *History*, p. 89

¹⁶ Payne, *Ibid.* p. 92; Charles H. Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom*, Washington, The Associated Publishers, Inc. 1969, p. 154.

¹⁷ Quoted by D. A. Payne, in Handy, *Op. Cit.* pp. 35 ff.

During his ministry in Baltimore, Mr. Coker collaborated with and showed great sympathy with Richard Allen in his struggles in Philadelphia to become independent of the control of the White Methodists. Victory came in January 1816 by order of the Supreme Court of the State of Pennsylvania. When Mr. Coker learned of the victory, he declared January 21, 1816 as a Day of Thanksgiving.¹⁸ On this occasion he preached a sermon from Psalm 126:1-4. The text reads:

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shout of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them', The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O lord, like the water courses of the Negeb".¹⁹

In the sermon Mr. Coker compared the Afro-Americans to the ancient Jews, who after captivity, were restored to their former privileges of freedom. He condemned discrimination based on color as practiced among Methodists in Baltimore. He encouraged his audience to follow the example of African Methodists in Philadelphia. He led them to rejoice in the victory of their brethren in Philadelphia and cooperate with them.²⁰ The organization of African Methodists in Baltimore was another footprint left by Daniel Coker.

The General Convention

The General Convention held in Philadelphia on April 9, 1816 was another occasion when Mr. Coker displayed a significant role. On this occasion the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Connection came into being as a denomination. Richard Allen took the initiative for calling this historic Convention. He requested Daniel Coker's help in bringing together the several African Methodist independent Societies.²¹ The purpose of the assembly was to organize these independent bodies of black Methodism into a denomination. The Convention brought together sixteen delegates from various centers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. They came from the following places: five from Philadelphia; three from Attleborough, Pennsylvania; one from Wilmington, Delaware; one from Salem, New Jersey; and six from Baltimore.²² Daniel Coker has been reported as having been the most intelligent man of the entire group.²³ He was the "Brain" of the Convention since the other delegates were almost illiterate.²⁴

In the organization of the Convention, Richard Allen was chosen as chairman. Daniel Coker was made vice-chairman and secretary. The first and most significant action of the body was the adoption of the

¹⁸ Wesley, *Op. Cit.* pp. 141 f.

¹⁹ Revised Standard Version.

²⁰ Wesley, *Op. Cit.* p. 142.

²¹ For the number of independent bodies in existence, see text of note 13.

²² Payne, *History*, pp. 13, 14; Wesley, *Op. Cit.* p. 150.

²³ Payne, *Recollection of Seventy Years*, pp. 220, 221.

²⁴ Bragg, *Op. Cit.* p. 44.

following resolution, which Coker was largely responsible for formulating:

"Resolved. That the people of Philadelphia, Baltimore and other places, who should unite with them shall become one body under the name and style of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; and that the Book of Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church be adopted as our Discipline, until further notice, except that portion relating to Presiding Elders".²⁵

The adoption of this resolution created the Connection. It also changed the names of the several constituent bodies to the denominational name of African Methodist Episcopal. For example, the Baltimore group under the leadership of Daniel Coker changed its designation from "African Methodist Bethel Society" to "Bethel African Methodist Church. Similar changes took place in other centers.

The next item of business for the Convention was the choice of a Bishop. Votes were cast, and when polled, it was discovered that Daniel Coker received the majority of votes. He was declared, therefore, to be Bishop-elect. On the following day, however, Mr. Coker declined, and Richard Allen was elected and consecrated the first Bishop of the new denomination.

There has been some speculation as to the reason why Mr. Coker declined the office of Bishop. According to one view, Mr. Coker was moved by the feeling that Richard Allen deserved the honor more than he.²⁶ According to another view, the darker men of the delegation voiced an objection to Mr. Coker as Bishop on the ground that he was a very fair mulatto. When Mr. Coker learned of what was taking place, he declined.²⁷

Although he did not serve as the first Bishop of the A.M.E. Church, Mr. Coker has the distinction of being the first Bishop-elect. His resignation, which allowed Richard Allen to be consecrated, was a rare act of generosity on his part.

Ministry After the General Convention

After the adjournment of the General Convention, Daniel Coker returned to Baltimore and served as Pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church until the first session of the Baltimore Annual Conference in 1817. His total ministry with the congregation was from 1801 to 1817. When the second session of the Baltimore Annual Conference was held in 1818, Daniel Coker found himself in trouble with the new denomination of which he had played a leading role as co-Founder. At this Conference he was charged with an unknown offense, tried by a committee, found guilty and was expelled from the ministry of the A.M.E. Church. At the next Annual Conference in 1819, he appealed for reinstatement,

²⁵ Payne, *History*, p. 14; Wesley, *Op. Cit.* p. 152.

²⁶ Wesley, *Op. Cit.* p. 153.

²⁷ This view was set forth by Daniel A. Payne in his *Recollections of Seventy Years*. As historian of the Church, due to non-existence of written records, Payne gathered information from living eye-witnesses: Paul Quinn (Later Bishop) Jonathan Tudas and Clayton Durham, pp. 100, 101; Also Wesley, *Op. Cit.* pp. 13, 151.

which was granted.²⁸ So far as the record goes, the year 1819 ended the career of Daniel Coker as a minister of the A.M.E. Church in America. The following year, he went to West Africa as a missionary and never returned.

Missionary to West Africa

The year 1820 marked the beginning of a new phase of Christian ministry for Mr. Coker. In the plan of the American Colonization Society, he saw a supreme opportunity and challenge to become a missionary to West Africa. He was one among the first group of emigrants to sail for the West African coast under the sponsorship of the Society.

The voyage across the sea was made possible through the cooperation of the Federal government with the Colonization Society. The Government made the ship, *Elizabeth* available with Captain Sebor in charge, furnished two agents — Rev. Samuel Bacon and John B. Bankson, and put at their disposal \$33,000 for expenses. The Government also provided the war sloop, *Cyane*, as a convoy for the *Elizabeth*. The agent for the Colonization Society was Samuel A. Crozer. The passengers who sailed along with Daniel Coker on the *Elizabeth* were eighty-eight free Afro-Americans who were to become settlers in what is known today as Liberia.

The major part of the story of Mr. Coker's pioneering activities is told in his *Journal* and in a few letters he addressed to friends back home after his arrival to his final destination. The following is the full title-page of this valuable document:

*Journal of Daniel Coker, a descendant of Africa, from the time of leaving New York in the Ship, Elizabeth, Capt. Sebor; on a voyage for Sherbro, in Africa; in company with three agents and about ninety [actually eighty-eight] persons of colour. Agents: The Rev. Samuel Bacon, John B. Bankson and Samuel S. Crozer. With an Appendix. Baltimore. Published by Edward J. Coale, in aid of the funds of the Maryland Auxiliary Colonization Society. John D. Toy, Printer, 1820.*²⁹

The Voyage

The Ship, *Elizabeth*, with its passengers embarked for Sherbo Island, situated south of Sierra Leone on the West coast of Africa. The Island had been selected by the missionaries, Samuel J. Mills and Ebenezer Burgess, who had been guided to the spot by an African named John Kizzell.³⁰ The ship sailed from New York on the afternoon of February

²⁸ Payne, History, pp. 28, 29; Wesley, *Op. Cit.* pp. 169, 170.

²⁹ This document is preserved under the cover of a book entitled: *Paul Cuffee, Peter Williams, Daniel Coker, Daniel H. Peterson, and Nancy Prince*. It is a Kraus Reprint, which is a Division of Kraus Thomson Organization, Limited, Nendeln/Liechtenstein. Printed in Switzerland, 1970. (Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University)

³⁰ The surname is spelled differently in the several documents, such as "Kezzel" and "Kizell". In this paper the pattern of Rev. Matei Markwei, an A.M.E. Minister in Sierra Leone is used.

John Kizzell, an indigenous African, was brought as a slave to America where he obtained an education. Later he returned to his own people, built a church, and became a preacher among them. He became a zealous friend and guide to the missionaries S. J. Mills and E. Burgess, and accompanied them from Sierra Leone down the coast to Sherbro Island. See Appendix of Coker's *Journal*, p. 48. Also quoted by Benjamin Brawley in *A Social History of the American Negro*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971, p. 174.

6, 1820 after having been delayed for a day due to icy waters. Thousands of spectators, black and white, stood on the shore and watched the departure. On the high seas some days were calm; others were rough. On the way the sight of a wretched and abandoned ship created some excitement among the crew on the *Elizabeth*. After twenty-three days at sea, they first caught sight of land, which were two of the Cape Verde Islands.³¹

The First Disembarkment

The party anchored at Freetown, Sierra Leone on the ninth of March. The government permitted a temporary landing of fifteen days while efforts were being made to find the designated spot on the Sherbro Island. In Freetown the Agents expected to find John Kizzell, who was to have led them to Sherbro. But Mr. Kizzell, who had no idea of the day on which the emigrants were to arrive, was at his home village on the Sherbro Island. Agent John Bankson went to the Island to find Kizzell.

During the period of waiting, preparations were made to sail in the direction of the Island with the hope of meeting Agent Bankson and John Kizzell on the way. Captain Sebor, who feared the possibility of being stranded in waters too shallow for the *Elizabeth*, hesitated about leaving the port at Freetown. The problem was solved when Agent Bacon purchased for \$3,000 a British schooner that was able to sail in shallow waters to the shore of the Sherbro Island.

On March 17, both the *Elizabeth* and the schooner set sail from Freetown for Sherbro. The next day they met Agent Bankson, who reported to them the good news that he had seen Mr. Kizzell, and that preparations had been made for their temporary settlement in his village, Campellar, on the Sherbro Island. With this message the *Elizabeth* and the schooner continued to sail until they came within about twenty-five miles of the Island. Here the Captain anchored the *Elizabeth*. Passengers and goods were loaded on the schooner, which sailed to the Island, where they found Mr. Kizzell waiting. They disembarked on March 19, 1820, forty-one days after the party left New York.

On the voyage the agents depended very much on Mr. Coker. It was he who took the initiative and organized a church on board and conducted religious worship services. He prevented a mutiny from happening among the emigrants. He labored with the agents in laying out plans for settlement when they found a suitable place.

The entries of Coker's *Journal* reveal his genuine missionary motive. Through the reports of Paul Cuffee, Samuel J. Mills and Ebenezer Burgess he had some knowledge of the benighted condition of his brethren

³¹ See Entries to Coker's *Journal*.

in the Fatherland. These reports had convinced him of the urgency of the task of the redemption of Africa. He was sure that it was God's will for him to participate in the evangelization of the Continent. Day after day he prayed for divine guidance, for a safe arrival in order that he might witness to the gospel and plant the Christian Church among his brethren on the Continent.

His *Journal* and letters reveal his deep concern for the welfare of his wife and children whom he left in the United States. He urged the Managers of the Maryland Auxiliary Society and influential friends to continue persistently in prayer on his behalf, send him material support as often as possible, and send his family at the first opportunity.³²

Early Experiences

Forced to delay for eight days in Sierra Leone, Mr. Coker spent some time in making profitable observations. He went ashore a day after the arrival. As he walked through a market he saw men and women engaged in selling various kinds of products. He met a few black settlers who had come over with Paul Cuffee. Conversations with them gave him some idea of conditions in the Colony. On Sunday morning he conducted worship services on board the *Elizabeth*, with Agent Bacon as the preacher. The service was attended by settlers. In the afternoon Mr. Coker preached the sermon for a service held in a Baptist Church. He had the pleasure of dining with a black minister of an unknown religious body. The lovely home of the host and the rich food he served so lavishly deeply impressed Mr. Coker.

The realization that the slave trade was still in operation in the area became for Mr. Coker a painful disappointment. He found out to his sorrow that recruitment of slaves persisted in spite of laws that prohibited the importation of slaves in British possessions and in the United States. He rejoiced, however, that British and American ships were patrolling the seas, intercepting slave ships and liberating captured slaves. He thanked God that the Spanish slave ship had been captured and brought to Freetown, and the cargo of slaves liberated.

Experiences at Sherbro

On the arrival of the settlers at Sherbro, they found that Mr. Kizzell had made preparations for them in his village, Campeller. Although he had not heard from America since Mills and Burgess departed, he had built small houses for the newcomers. He supplied them with food. He gave them advice on how to deal with the indigenes, and what to do about the rainy season. To Agent Bankson he warned, if he and his companions came with Christ in their hearts, it is well that they had

³² It appears that Mrs. Coker with the children were among the second group of colonists that sailed early in 1821. Lott Cary, the Baptist Missionary, who was among this group, wrote a letter after his arrival in Sierra Leone in which he indicated that among the casualties of that voyage was the small child of Mrs. Coker. See Cary's letter, dated March 18, 1821 in *Lives of Virginia Baptists*, By James B. Taylor, 1937, p. 406.

come; if not, it would have been better if they had stayed in America.³³

Justice of the Peace

Shortly after the beginning of the temporary settlement in Campeller, the three agents left the settlers in charge of Mr. Coker. Agent Bacon went back to Freetown to have a conference with the Governor. Agents Bankson and Crozer travelled back and forth from the *Elizabeth* which was anchored about twenty-five miles from the shore. In the absence of the agents, Mr. Coker became the Justice of the Peace for the colonists. In this capacity he had to deal with cases of misdemeanors. A case in point was an occasion of theft committed by one of the colonists. At first, the thief did not want to recognize the authority of Mr. Coker. On this occasion, Mr. Kizzell made it known to the thief and other colonists that Mr. Coker had his full support in maintaining law and order. The thief was tried, found guilty and given corporeal punishment.³⁴

On the first Sunday after the arrival of the settlers, Mr. Coker held two religious services and organized a Sunday School with about twenty African children. He made Nathaniel Peck, a colonist from Baltimore the Superintendent of the Sunday School.³⁵

With the view of getting permanent location for the colonists, Mr. Coker, accompanied by Mr. Kizzell, visited several of the Chiefs and Headmen of the area. Their visits to these rulers were met usually with a warm welcome. But the bargaining became fruitless, because slave traders had misled the people to the extent that it seemed impossible to make any progress without offering them rum.³⁶

In a letter dated April 3, 1820 addressed to Jeremiah Watts of Baltimore Mr. Coker gave an idea of some of his travels and the simple life of the people who had shown him kindness and cordiality. Then he wrote:

"Such is their conduct that anyone who loves souls would weep over them and be willing to suffer and die with them. I can say that my soul cleaves to Africa in such a manner as to reconcile me to the idea of being separated from my dear friends and the comforts of a Christian land. But I confess, when I think of you all, it is as much as I can bear. But my brother and sister, if we don't meet soon in this life, we may soon meet in heaven. I expect to give my life to bleeding, groaning, dark benighted Africa. I expect to pass through much, if I should live. I should rejoice to see you in this land; it is a good land; it is a rich land, and I do believe it will be a great nation, a powerful and worthy nation. But those who break the way must suffer much".³⁷

The tone of this letter reveals his determined spirit to give his life for the uplift and enhancement of the lives of the people among whom he had settled.

³³ Quoted by Brawley, *Op. Cit.* p. 176.

³⁴ Entry March 25.

³⁵ Entries, March 25, 26. Also Letter number IV, Nathaniel Peck to his mother, dated, March 27.

³⁶ Brawley, *Op. Cit.*

³⁷ *Journal, Appendix*, pp. 43-44.

In a letter dated March 29, 1820, addressed to "All my dear African Brethren in America," Mr. Coker urged them to come to Africa to help in the spread of the Christian faith. He expressed the hope that they would come to promote unity and not denominational disagreements. If they wanted to be identified with a particular denomination, they should come as "African" representatives of that faith. That is, they should come as African Presbyterians, African Baptists or African Methodists. He wanted to forget all separations which had arisen among black Christians in America.³⁸

As Justice of the Peace, Mr. Coker had the responsibility of caring for the sick. He seemed to have enjoyed good health himself. But as time passed one disaster followed another disaster. Sickness became widespread and death took a heavy toll. In less than two months apart all of the agents died. Agent Crozer died on April 15; Agent Bacon on May 2; and Agent Bankson on May 13.³⁹ In the midst of his troubles, with the sick and the dying about him and entrusted with new responsibilities for the welfare of the colonists, Mr. Coker wrote

"We have met trials; we are but a handful; our provisions are running low; we are in a strange and heathen land; we have not heard from America, and know not whether more provisions or people will be sent out. Yet I thank the Lord my confidence is strong in the veracity of his promises. Tell my brethren to come — fear not — the land is good; it only wants men to possess it. I have opened a little Sabbath School for Native children. Oh, it would do your heart good to see the little naked sons of Africa around me. Tell the coloured people to come up to the help of the Lord. Let nothing discourage the Society of the coloured people".⁴⁰

These words reveal Mr. Coker as a stout-hearted Christian hero. In spite of the perilous crises, he was fearless, undaunted and undismayed.

From Sherbro Island to Yonie

Mr. Coker did not become fainthearted over the loss of many of the colonists. He decided to leave the Sherbro Island and seek a more suitable location. He led his survivors to Yonie. From this point he made a trip to Sierra Leone to consult with Sir Charles MarCarthy, the Governor, about the possibility of getting land near Yonie for permanent settlement. The Governor promised to do his best to assist the emigrants. Yet he advised Mr. Coker to wait for "instructions from the headquarters of the American Colonization Society before he embarked upon anything."⁴¹ While he waited for instructions from Washington, the Governor gave Mr. Coker and his few remaining colonists refuge in the colony of Sierra Leone and did all he could to relieve them from their sufferings. The information that came from the Society's Headquarters in Washington was of a two-fold nature. One point was that the Society

³⁸ Letter Number I, p. 42 of the *Journal*; also Wesley, *Op. Cit.* pp. 171, 172.

³⁹ Rev. Matei Markwei, Article: "The Rev. Daniel Coker of Sierra Leone", in *Bulletin of Religion*, Dec. 1965, Vol. 7, Number 2, pp. 41-48.

⁴⁰ Handy, *Scraps of History*, p. 39; Payne, *History*, pp. 90, 91.

⁴¹ Matei, Markwei, *Op. Cit.*

had appointed new agents to relieve Mr. Coker of his responsibility. The other was that the Society had decided to move the emigrants to Cape Mensurado, which was in the area of what is now a part of Liberia. Mr. Coker worked faithfully with his reduced group of emigrants until the arrival of the new agents. When they came, he relinquished leadership responsibility to them. The new agents moved all the emigrants to Liberia. Mr. Coker remained in Sierra Leone where he spent the rest of his life.

Superintendent of Hastings Village

After the colonists with their newly appointed agents had returned to what is now Liberia, Mr. Coker once more went to see the Governor of Sierra Leone and told him that he wanted to be of use in the colony. Sir Charles welcomed him and immediately appointed him as Superintendent of the village of Hastings, founded in 1819 as a settlement for "recaptured" Africans.⁴² As he worked among the newly emancipated Africans, Mr. Coker's influence grew steadily. He labored vigorously to realize his dream of spreading the Christian gospel and planting the Christian Church among the non-Christians. He went about preaching, teaching and organizing societies for Methodism as he had done in Baltimore years before. At first he worked in close association with the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Later, when a split in the Methodist Society took place as a result of misunderstanding between the recaptives and settlers from Nova Scotia, Mr. Coker became the principal organizer and the first Superintendent of the independent group, which adopted the name "West African Methodists". Superintendent Coker strengthened his new denomination by ordaining to the ministry Prince Stober and Jacob Jewett, who became able assistants during his life time and carried on the leadership after Mr. Coker's death.⁴³

Mr. Coker lived long enough to see Hastings Village grow into a Christian settlement.⁴⁴ Under his leadership the congregation of West African Methodists erected in Freetown a large church edifice built of stone. Beside the pulpit was a marble tablet bearing a memorial of his life and death. The Church building was still used as a place of worship until 1852.

Aside from his ministry as Superintendent of Hastings Village and the founder of the West African Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, Mr. Coker reared an influential family. Two of his sons grew into manhood. Both were educated in the United States. According to Daniel Payne, one of his sons became a successful trader with indigenous Africans of the interior, and at his death endowed his father's church. The other son was living as late as 1861, and was the inspector of police in Sierra

⁴² *Ibid.* The "recaptured Africans" were persons freed from a Spanish slave ship by the British Navy and brought to Sierra Leone where they could begin a new life.

⁴³ Matei Markwei, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Leone.⁴⁵ It has been reported that during his visit to the Colony in 1891 to organize the African Methodist Episcopal Church Annual Conference, Bishop H. M. Turner found two of the granddaughters of Mr. Coker. Their father, Hillery T. Coker died in 1890 one year before the arrival of Bishop Turner.⁴⁶ Matei Markwei holds that Daniel Coker's sons became the stem from which all the Cokers in Hastings spread.

According to Markwei, Superintendent Coker died from an attack of malaria in 1835.⁴⁷ If this early date is accepted as correct, it can be said that he died after giving about fifteen years of faithful service as a missionary and as a citizen of the colony of Sierra Leone. He was the first Bishop-elect of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America, but decline the office. In Sierra Leone he actually served as the first Superintendent of the West African Methodist Church of which he was founder.

The heroic adventures and bold endeavors of Daniel Coker make him a distinguished forerunner of the contemporary movement for black liberation. His footprints may be seen first, as a pioneer educator as well as a trail-blazer in anti-slavery writings. He was a co-founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church which began as a protest against discrimination in worship. He became the first minister of that Church to serve as a missionary overseas. He served as the Justice of the Peace for the colonists on Sherbro Island. He became the Superintendent of Hastings Village in the colony of Sierra Leone. Finally, in that same colony, he became the founder and first Superintendent of the West African Methodist Church.

By way of tribute, Daniel A. Payne wrote: "Daniel Coker was one of the most intelligent, active and heroic spirits that opened the glorious career of the A.M.E. Church . . . Peace to his ashes. Honor to the memory of the man whose heroic labors have shed additional lustre to our ecclesiastical history."⁴⁸

Concerning him Isaiah Henderson adds: "He was acknowledged to be the most learned, eloquent and popular preacher among the early founders of our Church, . . . His highest aim and ambition were to be useful to God and his oppressed people. His patriotism and loyalty to the principles of the Church distinguish him as one of the most reliable and best informed leaders of the race in his day and generation. He swayed his audiences at will by his eloquent and logical presentation of the evangelical gospel. He accomplished a great work for God, which will stand unimpaired by the ravages of time, undiminished by the ages."⁴⁹

The secret of his power can be found in his conformity to the exhortation of the Epistle writer: "Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Payne, *History*, p. 91.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Op. Cit.* p. 68; C. S. Smith, *History of the A.M.E. Church*, p. 174.

⁴⁷ Wright and Smith put the date of his death at 1846.

⁴⁸ Payne, *History*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ Isaiah, Henderson, *The Heroism of Richard Allen Etc.*, pp. 47, 48.

⁵⁰ 2 Timothy 2:3.