Abraham Lincoln & the Colony on Ile-a-Vache

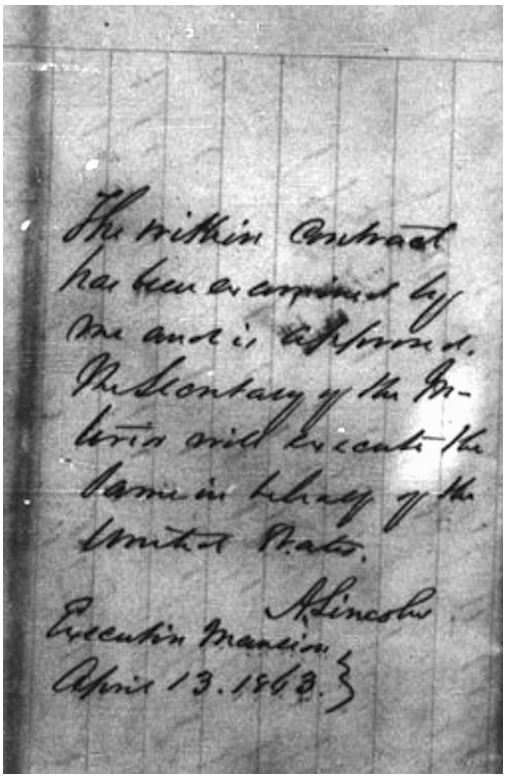
by Robert Bray

It is not my business to make history but to write it, fairly and faithfully.

-D. C. Donnohue

Sometime during the day or evening of Sunday, April 13, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln met privately at the White House with a New York capitalist named Charles K. Tuckerman. After some dithering, Lincoln agreed to sign a contract with Tuckerman (and his partner Paul S. Forbes) to transport 500 recently freed slaves to a place called Ile-a-Vache ('Cow Island'), an almost completely uninhabited 2 x 8 mile island off the southern coast of Haiti, to which republic Ile-a-Vache belonged. The Haitian government, Tuckerman assured the president, had formally agreed to the colonization scheme and would naturalize the emigrants very soon after their arrival. Supposedly, waiting for them on the island were all the necessaries for making a colony: materials and tools for house-building, agricultural implements and seeds, and sufficient stores to sustain life until crops could grow, be harvested and sent to market. That these two crucial conditions for planting a colony would be met- acceptance by the Haitian government and a means of sustenance for at least the first year-Lincoln had to take on faith. For despite earlier failures, he still wanted

colonization, and the prospects of Ile-a-Vache must have looked pretty good. So he signed: 'The within contract has been examined by me and is approved. The Secretary of the Interior will execute the same in behalf of the United States. A. Lincoln, Executive Mansion, April 13, 1863.'[1]



That very day, down the Potomac River at Fortress Monroe (near Hampton, Virginia), a British merchant ship, the steamer *Ocean Ranger*, was at anchor and beginning to embark its human cargo for Haiti and Ile-a-Vache. The more

[1]Lincoln's signature and endorsement of the contract: [Communications Relating to the Colonization Project at Ile a Vache, Haiti - September 6, 1862 - January 18, 1869] Correspondence Concerning the Claim of Paul S. Forbes and Charles K. Tuckerman, 02/20/1863 - 05/28/1868 http://research.archives.gov/description/5677129, **National Archives**; Lincoln's conversation with Tuckerman is recalled in Michael Burlingame. *Abraham Lincoln: a Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2: 395-6, citing Tuckerman's 'Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,' *The Magazine of American History with Notes and Queries*, May 1888, 412-13.

than 400 would-be emigrants[2] consisted of mostly men, along with some women and children, all ex-slaves and 'contrabands of war' who had been coming to the Union lines in increasing numbers since the Army of the Potomac had gained control of northeastern Virginia early in 1862. Now, because of the Emancipation Proclamation (effective Jan. 1, 1863), they and thousands of others were presumably 'forever free.' But no American of African descent could yet be a citizen of the United States, nor had any prospect of becoming such in the near future. To the growing crowds of ex-slaves, said to be around 6,000 in the Fortress Monroe vicinity alone, of immediate importance was the obtaining of work.[3] Their numbers were too great for the limited employment opportunities around Hampton (mostly labor jobs for the Army of the Potomac); and, early in 1863, male ex-slaves still could not enlist for military service. With nothing else on

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[2]The precise number of emigrants is unknown, and the four documented tallies available are inconsistent. The business sponsors of the colony, Paul S. Forbes and Charles K. Tuckerman, wishd to recruit 500 emigrants (and said in writing that this number had embarked), which would apparently have been the *Ocean Ranger's* complement. However, the count given by them to the Lincoln administration, as noted in the text, was 453; while the official passenger list for the *Ocean Ranger* has 424 names, ending with 'Y' and five names out of alphabetical order (and perhaps a page missing, which would take the total to almost the 453 claimed by Forbes and Tuckerman). Complicating matters further, the special agent for the Dept. of the Interior, D. C. Donnohue (see text below), later determined that 'not over four hundred and twenty ever started from Fortress Monroe' (Donnohue to John P. Usher, 3 Jan. 1864). Finally, Donnohue, on the basis of what he called Kock's journal, revised his own total down to 411 (Donnohue to Usher, 4 Jan. 1864). [Communications Relating to the Colonization Project at Ile a Vache, Haiti - September 6, 1862 - January 18, 1869] Correspondence and Reports Relating to D. C. Donnohue, 09/10/1863 - 05/09/1864]National Archives.

[3] Willis D. Boyd, 'The Ile a Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,' *The Americas*, 16: 1 (July 1959), 49.

offer, emigration had its allure. But to where, and for what purpose?

While it is doubtful whether any of the emigrants had heard of Ile-a-Vache, Haiti itself *was* known-as the legendary land where a triumphant slave revolution against the colonial powers of France, England and Spain had led to the establishment the first black republic outside of Africa. Surely, as just-freed slaves themselves, and 'Africans,' the Haitian people would welcome them as brothers. This was the promise held out by the promoters of the scheme, and it proved sufficiently persuasive to get perhaps as many as 453 emigrants on board the *Ocean Ranger*, which weighed anchor and steamed out of Hampton Roads towards Haiti and Ile-a-Vache on April 14, 1863.

Tuckerman was exultant over the successful departure. He immediately wrote to Secretary of the Interior John P. Usher (whose department, oddly enough, had jurisdiction over colonization matters) that he had personally supervised the loading of the *Ocean Ranger* ('fitted up with healthful accommodations of space, air, food, water and other necessaries'). Onboard came 'five hundred free emigrants. . . who have voluntarily consented and desired to go' on what he called this extraordinary 'experiment' in colonization.[4] But, Tuckerman's enthusiasm and faulty arithmetic aside, who

[4] Tuckerman to Usher, 14 Apr. 1863 [for National Archives identifier, see note 1 above].

were these emigrants? As noted above, they were mostly male, mostly young, and mostly from northern Virginia.[5] There were a few kinship groups and a number of complete families daring to make the trial of a new life away from the United States. The Willis family, for instance all of whom had until recently been the 'property'' of one John Jones from Richmond, Virginia: Humphrey and his wife Harriet and their three children–Henry (5), Harriet (3) and Netty (2).[6] What did Humphrey Willis hope he would find for himself his family on Ile-a-Vache? Something beyond abstract freedom: a house that became a home, and, beyond that, what 19th century Americans typically called a 'competence.' That is, the means of sustenance and, eventually, of getting ahead. This was the promise that Tuckerman and Forbes had held out to them. And they had every right to expect its fulfillment.

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The passage out took a little over two weeks.[7] En route, the emigrants soon discovered it was not to be a pleasure cruise. During their recruitment they had been told 'by a yellow man on board' that they would begin the voyage with a trip up the Potomac to meet 'massa Lincoln.' The story was that the president himself would sanction their

[5] Boyd (51) deduces from an analysis of the passenger list that the colonists were in the main from smaller farms in the Tidewater area: '[n]ames of masters indicate that they were not large plantation Negroes, for seldom did more than three or four list the same owner.'
[6] Emigrant passenger list (see note 2 above).
[7] Tuckerman to Usher, 7 July 1863, reports that the colonists arrived at Ile-a-Vache 'early in May.'

going to Ile-a-Vache and bid them bon voyage. When instead the *Ocean Ranger* headed east and south into the Atlantic, there was general disappointment. This 'yellow man' was a mulatto named William Watkins, an employee of Forbes and Tuckerman whose job it was to sell the colonization project. His lie about the visit to Lincoln-'our pretended friend Watkins did not seem disposed to explain to us why we were not taken to Washington City as he had promised'-wasn't the only one he would tell the colonists then and later. Watkins assured them that he had been to Haiti, knew the country, and that 'ample preparations had been made' for their arrival, including 'houses well furnished' and awaiting occupancy. No point in taking more than the clothes on their backs, he insisted, since they wouldn't need coats and so forth in a tropical climate. So the men embarked wearing Union army coats, the women probably clothes also provide by the military. They would, sadly, still be wearing these when repatriated almost a year later.[8]

Also on board the *Ocean Ranger* was one Bernard Kock, a plausible villain 'with the assurance of the devil.'[9] Why he was present (and in charge of the colonists) involves the entire back-story of the Ile-a-Vache project. Much too long a tale to be retold here, suffice to say that Kock, in 1861,

[8] Deposition of twenty colonists before James DeLong, U. S. Consul at Aux Cayes, Haiti, 28 Jan. 1864 (hereafter cited as Colonists' Deposition; D. C. Donnohue to John P. Usher, 5 Jan. 1864 .

[9] Donnohue to Usher, 6 Dec. 1863.

had negotiated with the Haitian government an agreement giving him exclusive rights for ten years to cultivate and timber Ile-a-Vache. Then he devised the original plan of colonizing the island with freed American slaves and sold it to Lincoln, who actually approved the deal with his signature (31 Dec. 1863), only to have the government revoke the contract after Kock's character and business activities came under scrutiny (in fact, he was a crook).

But Kock kept at it. He had previously convinced two New York capitalists (our above-mentioned Forbes and Tuckerman) to invest $70,000 in his scheme, so when the Lincoln administration annulled the first contract with him, he called for his partners' lobbying support. Somehow, as we've seen, Forbes and Tuckerman, got Lincoln to go along with a new agreement, assuring the president that *they* would be in charge of everything. As far as Lincoln knew, and the contract said, Bernard Kock was out.[10]

He should not therefore have been aboard the *Ocean Ranger*, let alone in charge of the expedition. But he was, and by the time Forbes and Tuckerman revealed the fact to Washington, Kock's success at becoming the 'King of Cow Island' was a *fait accompli*. His reign began during the voyage. When the ship was some days out from Virginia, Kock appeared for the first time among the emigrants. He handed

[10] James D. Lockett, 'Abraham Lincoln and Colonization: an Episode That Ends in Tragedy at L'Ile a Vache, Haiti, 1863-1864,' *Journal of Black Studies*, 21: 4 (June 1991), 436-7.

each of them a contract–very likely the same one he had shown to Lincoln–and demanded they sign on the spot. Of course, few of the colonists could read or write and had to be told the contract's terms, the principal of which being that they would be under Kock's command for four years.[11] How could the emigrants not have been surprised and suspicious about the contract being waved under their noses? They may not even have known of Kock's existence hitherto, and now here he was acting like their boss. In the face of their reasonable reluctance to commit to this, Kock threatened not to debark on the island any who would not agree to sign. 'We were dissatisfied and in a most helpless Condition,' they would later tell the U. S. Consul at Aux Cayes (the city that stands about eight miles north-northwest of Ile-a-Vache on the Haitian mainland), and so reluctantly made their marks on Kock's pre-printed forms.[12] The freedmen were now, against their wills, indentured servants who would perforce work on Kock's new plantation. For him and him alone.

Before too many days at sea had passed, smallpox broke out among the passengers. On such a crowded ship, quarantine was impossible, and the smallpox spread in part because of the lack of the very essentials supposedly guaranteed by Forbes and Tuckerman. Quarters were cramped, food and water scarce, and the mulatto Watkins had begun charging 'high

[11] Bernard Kock's Contract with Emigrants.
[12] Colonists' Deposition.

prices' for a drink and a mouthful to eat. By the end of the voyage more than ten percent of the emigrants had contracted the disease, and some of them would die of it.[13]

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1-4 May 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville-

'Major General Butterfield: Where is Gen. Hooker? Where is Sedgwick? Where is Stoneman?'

'My God, My God! What will the Country say! What will the Country say!'

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[13] Colonists' Deposition.

Map of Ile-a-Vache by French cartographer, S. Bellin, 1764

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Landfall at Ile-a-Vache occurred sometime 'early in May' of 1863. In his wooing of Lincoln, Kock had claimed that the island lay twelve miles from the Haitian mainland, and measured thirteen miles in length and seven miles wide.[14] All three figures are inaccurate: the distance from Aux Cayes, the major city and port on the southwestern Haitian main, was no more than eight miles, while the island measured about that same distance between its furthermost points (northwest to southeast), and its width at the point where the *Ocean Ranger* anchored only a little more than one mile. This was in the Bay of Ferret, near the northwest end of Ile-a-Vache (Baye Ferray on the 18th century French cartographer Bellin's map, see illustration). Here the island topography formed a natural hurricane-hole, to the leeward, with a narrow inlet as added protection against high seas. The Bay was also deep enough at 20-30 feet, even close to shore, to accommodate a sea-going vessel like the *Ocean Ranger* (see photo, Bay of Ferret, looking northwest). The colonists would have had a short and easy row from ship to shore, though it must have taken many tedious hours to achieve the transfer of all and their meager possessions. Beyond the curving beach of the bay, the land was forested,

[14] Bernard Kock, printed appeal 'To His Excellency, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States' [1862], 2.

even jungled, rising gently to a ridge perhaps a hundred feet high beyond which lay cultivatable ground.



Ile-a-Vache, the Bay of Ferret, looking northwest toward the Haitian mainland.

Altogether, a pleasing prospect. But the sole thing the arrivants found built there was a crude shed to hold supplies. Where were their promised dwellings? By the terms of his arrangement with the Haitian government, and made explicit in the contracts signed at sea, Kock was obligated to provide each family with

> a comfortably furnished house, thirteen by eighteen feet,
>
> with a six-foot gallery or porch in front with garden plot attached.

He will subsist them in the American manner furnishing them with good

and sufficient and substantial food, consisting partly of pork, beef,

cornbread and vegatables [sic], besides fish. . . .[15]

The difference between this and what the new emigrants actually discovered on arrival was that between Shangri-la and nothing. No preparations had been made for them, nor was there any evidence of building activity that hinted at even the rudest village-to-be. At least for the first months of their stay, they would have to shift for themselves. Relying on the materials at hand, they proceeded to erect huts (see photo) that were

made out of bushes and palmetto trees from 4 - 5 feet high, & about 6

feet wide & 7 feet long, as for shelter from rains, they are no better than

lying in the open rain, they have one board measuring from 6 to 8 inches

wide (some of them have) put up on forks to lay on, a part of their

family have to lay on the ground, exposed to the thousands of insects

prevailing in this country.[16]

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[15] Translation of Agreement between Bernard Kock and the Republic of Haiti [undated]; Kock's Contract with Emigrants.

[16] Captain Tilton Cook's Deposition, Aux Cayes, Haiti, 27 July 1863.



Ile-a-Vache, thatched hut of sticks and palmetto leaves, such as the colonists were forced to build for themselves.

The month of May was too late for planting, assuming that agriculture had really been a serious goal to Kock. For the colonists, obtaining enough food and fresh water was a daily challenge. They fished in order to supplement the small supplies of edibles brought out on the ship. What was left of the flour was moldy, and here was Kock demanding that they *buy from him*, though by contract the New York company hand intended the stores to be shared by all until the colony became self-sufficient. As for water, the west end of Ile-a-Vache today has no rivers (though there may once have been springs and continue to be wells). Bellin's map showed an 'Etang d'Eau douce' (lake of fresh water) just

about a mile to the southwest of the Bay of Ferret; if this label was accurate, the area featured an ample source of sweet water in the 18th century. But it may even then have been brackish or completely saline. And in any case the 'Etang' was too far from the campsite to be a practicable source of water. So, with the rainy season commencing, the colonists must have improvised cisterns of all sorts to supply their basic water needs. At best, though, survival day-to-day was a chancy thing. The best guess is that for their entire time on the island, they lived on the beach, they scavenged, and they suffered.

Bad as these living conditions were for the healthy emigrants, victims of the smallpox fared far worse. By the day of the *Ocean Queen's* arrival, these numbered nearly sixty, and one of Kock's first actions was to quarantine the sick about a mile to the west of the landing site in what he called a 'hospital.' This location is today uncertain; yet it may well have been near or even on Abaka Bay (in the area just to the north of 'le Petit Diamant' on Bellin's map; also, see photo of Abaka Bay), whose half-moon beach fits with the description of the smallpox sufferers forced to lie on a beach under the tropical sun. What the 'patients' of this 'hospital' endured was horrific: '[s]ome twenty died without shelter from the hot Sun they were almost left without any attention whatever, there being no one to keep the musketoes and Sand flies from tormenting them they lay

upon the Sand of the Sea unattended until Some ten or twelve of them had their eyes eaten out by maggots and they died.' [17] If these unfortunates were accorded even a rude burial, no outward sign of their remains, remains.



Ile-a-Vache: northwest end of Abaka Bay, which may have been the site of the colony's Smallpox quarantine.

As May and June gave way to Haitian summer, King Kock became increasingly tyrannical as his colony disintegrated around him–or, more accurately, as it failed to take his desired shape in the first place. Emigrants complained of arbitrary and cruel treatment, enforced by Kock and his

[17] Colonists' Deposition.

henchmen, apparently numbering about a dozen, and all white except for Watkins–and he seems to have died soon after arrival on the island (of smallpox, if there were any poetic justice). One of the overseers–for that is in effect what they were–was 'known to be an escaped prisoner from Fort Warren [in Boston harbor] and a traitor to the U. S. Gov't,'[18] which is hardly reassuring as to the characters of the rest. They would slap a man into what was termed 'the stocks' ('that is to say, their feet and head are tied to pieces of bamboo all night in a hunkering position') for the slightest matter, such as questioning the King's orders, or perhaps for nothing at all.[19] Kock demanded they labor Monday through Saturday, ten hours per day, but what could they work at that helped *their* condition? They had fully expected to be farmers on the supposed plantation (cotton) and gardeners for themselves (grain and vegetables). Denied lumber to build the houses that were supposed to have been built for them before arrival, they were forced to carpenter for the greater glory of the King. This must have seemed like slavery all over again, the more so when Kock failed to pay them. No wonder that many of workers grew restive under such an erratic and arbitrary rule.

[18] D. C. Donnohue to John P. Usher, 4 Dec. 1863.
[19] Tilton Cook Deposition.



Bernard Kock's private currency, printed in the United States and tendered to the colonists for their work.

From the outset, as noted, Kock had charged high prices for food he was contractually bound to provide, taking his personal currency back in exchange (see illustration) but deeply discounting it against the Haitian dollar. Indeed, by July he had pretty much 'backed out' of the contract completely, ignoring his every contractual responsibility–food, shelter and wages–while living large off the colonists' labor and the New York company's money, in 'perfect palaces,' presumably built by the emigrants with lumber brought over on the *Ocean Ranger*, since the proto-colony lacked a saw mill; 'and they enjoying all the comforts that wealth can afford, and little dream of the misery that those poor harmless emigrants have to bear.'[20] When some of the colonists had borrowed boards from the

[20] Tilton Cook Deposition.

lumber supply in order to have something to lie on besides the sand-flea-ridden ground, Kock summarily ordered that every plank be returned. They refused. 'This came very near causing a general insurrection.' Kock, however, had the Haitian government on his side. He 'sent to Aux Cayes for troops and had four of the leaders arrested and conveyed to the prison' in that city.[21]

Though Kock strictly controlled who could land on the island, one eyewitness who did get through and back (sometime in June, 1863) offered a most disturbing report to James DeLong, U. S. Consul at Aux Cayes. Kock, DeLong was told, had brought a small arsenal to his island fastness: 'twenty-four double barreled guns, a quantity of "Enfield" and "Sharps" rifles and Several revolvers.' As there was nothing on Ile-a-Vache to hunt-by report, not even snakes, though there may have been alligators in the east-end bays and swamps-these could have but one purpose: to keep the emigrants in order by force. Kock mounted an armed guard around his house all night, every night, and tried to disarm the few colonists who had brought revolvers from the U.S. as private property (he failed this time in his appeal to Haitian authorities). DeLong was sufficiently exercised by all this to write on June 25th to his superior at the U. S. legation in Port-au-Prince, Henry Conard:

[21] James DeLong to Henry Conard, 25 June 1863 [Library of Congress].

While our beloved Country is bleeding at every Core, and minds of those placed at the head of affairs are taxed with the most important trust ever Committed to the Care of any set of men, and the plains of the South whitened with the bones of thousands of the brave young men of the North, and the Soil Moistened with their blood, Children left Fatherless and Mothers widows, we have among us designing Corrupt men who think of nothing but the Eternal Dollar, and Every advantage Sought to obtain it, no matter how or the Misery they Entail on others--In Gods Holy name when will men learn Truth, Justice and Mercy--[22]

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Of Gettysburg--

[22] DeLong to Conard, June 25, 1863.

'The President announces to the country that news from the Army

of the Potomac. . . is such as to cover that Army with the highest honor.'

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On July 3rd Kock sailed over to the mainland, arriving at Aux Cayes 'armed with Gun and Revolver' and looking 'half frightened to death.' The non-natives again were restless, and Kock was in a tizzy. He once more demanded of Governor Fabre, whose charge included Ile-a-Vache, that he supply soldiers to put down what the King claimed was a general insurgency among his subjects. Fabre again agreed and sent a small military contingent back to the island, where the soldiers made three arrests and took the alleged offenders to the city. After being questioned by the governor, however, no charges were preferred. Perhaps curious now concerning the treatment of people who were ostensibly Haitian citizens, Fabre himself went to Ile-a-Vache on the July 5th, where he soon became 'fully Satisfied that great injustice had been done towards the poor Emigrants.' Fabre learned from them that Kock had, while at sea, through some legerdemain 'borrowed' all the legitimate money they possessed (more than $1,000), giving his own printed money as earnest: he would, he promised, redeem his notes dollar-for-dollar in 'Silver or Gold or Haytian Currency' once they

had arrived and begun the colony. Another promise unkept: '[Kock] now owes them one months pay for labor, and the borrowed money and refuses to pay them unless they take his paper, or forty five cents on the dollar in Haytian currency.' As for their 'borrowed' American currency: sorry, folks, it's not really worth anything in this country.[23]

Consul James DeLong, about this same time, made a visit of his own. King Kock did not welcome him to Ile-a-Vache. *It was his island, he asserted, to do with as he liked. And please to remember, Consul DeLong, that these were his subjects and naturalized Haitian citizens, no longer under the authority of the United States. And you, sir, are an illegal alien. So leave Ile-a-Vache at once, my dear consul, or I shall have these nine Haitian soldiers, my personal guard, make you go!* Thus the King's tenor if not his exact words of greeting. But DeLong defied Kock's bluster, ignored his soldiers, as it were showed the American flag. He went right over to a group of huddled, much-abused colonists, who knew a friendly face when they saw one, and gathered around the consul with tears and pleas and beseeching hands, as if for a savior. DeLong told them gently to hold fast against the King's tyranny while yet bearing 'everything with moderation:' for their deliverance was coming.[24]

[23] James DeLong to Henry Conard, 8 July 1863.
[24] Tilton Cook deposition.

Thus by the middle of July, both the Haitian government and the U. S. diplomatic commission in Haiti realized that the colony was in mortal trouble. DeLong kept his superior in Port-au-Prince well advised, and he in turn forwarded the consul's reports to Washington. Besides official dispatches, rumors made their slow and roundabout way from Ile-a-Vache to the capital. At the end of the summer of '63, the Lincoln administration, especially Secretary of State William H. Seward and Usher of the Interior, had grown keenly anxious about the colony. Usher the more so, in whose portfolio Ile-a-Vache lay. Not that the politicians and bureaucrats worried about the colonists per se (and this included the president, whose single known reference to the African-Americans after they left for Haiti was a quasi-comical remark that the settlers on the island were being savaged by the bites of 'jiggers,' perhaps confusing these tropical sand fleas with the chiggers that had tormented him as a boy in Kentucky and Indiana),[25] but were concerned about who would be blamed if the 'experiment' failed, as increasingly looked likely, and with it any further attempts at colonization on the part of Lincoln-although Seward, never in favor in the first place, had long wished the president would give up the bad and doomed idea once and for all.

[25] Lincoln's remark was recalled by John Eaton, who heard it during a visit with the president at the White House (in the late summer or early autumn of 1863). Quoted in Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: the War Years* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1939), 2: 298.

In October, Usher took the extraordinary step of asking his former law partner and good friend, D. C. Donnohue, to visit Ile-a-Vache as a special agent of the U. S. government and report first-hand about the state of the colony. While there he would have full authority as its administrator.[26] Both men must surely have understood the neither Ile-a-Vache itself nor the men and women upon it belonged to the United States! Yet Usher was determined to save the colonists. Donnohue readily agreed to go and was eager to depart. But, owing to transportation delays out of New York, Donnohue did not reach Haiti and until early December, 1863, and the island on the 15th of the month. He was fortunately unimpeded by Kock, who was off the island, having in the meantime been replaced by the New Yorkers' agent Andrew A. Ripka, who himself had recently abandoned the colony too after being severely beaten by one of the contingent of Haitian soldiers-he had tried to intervene in behalf of a colonist who was being punished. Thus Kock's henchmen and the soldiers continue on Ile-a-Vache, apparently driving the colonists as hard as ever.[27] Special agent Donnohue would have to face down that small army of oppressors.

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[26] Usher to Donnohue, 9, 17 & 19 Oct.; 16 Nov. 1863; Boyd, 53.

[27] Donnohue to Usher, 5 Dec. 1863. Kock left Ile-a-Vache because he had been fired by Forbes and Tuckerman and replaced by Andrew A. Ripka. Forbes and Tuckerman agreed to pay the monarch-in-exile $300 per month while he remained in Haiti, though whether they actually did so is unknown.

Yet he seems to have done so without incident. Among Donnohue's first acts was to take a census. He counted 292 persons still alive and on the island, with 73 more on the Haitian main, making a total of 365. Of these, some thirty were sick and a few were dying in the 'hospital' even as he arrived. There were, he reported to Usher, 225 'Stout active young men' who were able to work but would not do so for the likes of Bernard Kock. Some few had employment on the mainland, and Donnohue proposed helping others do the same, but the men on the island were adamant: they wanted to go back 'home,' as they continued to regard northern Virginia. In fact, every single colonist Donnohue interviewed desired to return to the United States. They despised Kock and the Company but at the same time did not wish to go to mainland Haiti (or remain there, if working temporarily) because they feared enslavement or at best ill-treatment, despite nominally being citizens of the Haitian Republic.[28]

In this his first dispatch to Washington, Donnohue advised that a relief transport ship be sent right away, and, unsurprisingly but also unsparingly, he damned both Kock and New York (Forbes and Tuckerman and a hitherto 'silent partner,' Leonard Jerome) for the deplorable conditions his caprices and their neglect had caused. Of course, he admitted to Secretary Usher, the company had expended a good deal of money over the past several months.

[28] Donnohue to Usher, 3 Jan. 1864.

By the terms of the contract how could they not have? But practically none of it had advanced the welfare of the colonists. Instead, Kock and his henchmen on Ile-a-Vache had spent their New York money on 'hand Cuffs and log chains, and erecting Stocks' and, most shocking of all, for 'building houses for Kocks prostitute' ('an Octoroon that he brought from Washington City').[29] The King had evidently tried to establish his personal 'stately pleasure dome' on the backs of his de facto slaves. By using his bogus private currency to pay workers, when he did pay, that is, and then charging them for supplies, Kock had set up a classic 'company store' trap, since the script was valueless except when redeemed through him in payment for necessities that were, by the original contract, supposed to be provided to the emigrants for free.

Donnohue was first appalled and then furious over what he found on the island. The inhumanity and injustice were as bad as DeLong had said and perhaps had worsened in the months since the consul's visit. His early January, 1864, familiar letters and official dispatches to Usher dripped with sarcasm, and the author knew it, describing his missive of 3 Jan. 1864 (quoted from above) as a 'scathing' indictment. Beyond the execrable reality of colony life, he was angered by the New York company's continuing attempts to

[29] Donnohue to Usher, 3 Jan. 1864; Donnohue to Usher (unofficial), 4 Jan. 1864.

paint a Pollyannaish picture to Usher, Seward and Lincoln. In a letter from Leonard Jerome to Usher back in November, 1863, the financier, in behalf of his partners, averred that the contract with the U. S. had been fulfilled in 'all essential particulars.' When Donnohue read a copy of Jerome's letter, he couldn't contain his contempt in his next missive to Usher.

> [N]o doubt it will be gratifying to Mr Jerome to learn that the
>
> 1st Sabbath after I landed on the Island, the Grand Pavillion
>
> built by the Co.'s money, was Solemnly dedicated to the Worship
>
> of God, and his Cheeks would have crimsoned if he had been
>
> present–and witnessed the appropriateness of the Ceremony,
>
> and would not have thought that beating these people like
>
> brutes was fulfilling his Contract in 'all essential particulars.'[30]

[30] Donnohue to Usher, 3 Jan. 1864; unfortunately, Leonard Jerome's letter is not included among the National Archives documents related to Ile-a-Vache colonization. There is, however, an unsolicited and lengthy report to Usher from one Allston Wilson, an American businessman who was quite familiar with Haiti and had visited the Ile-a-Vache colony at some time during the early fall of 1863. Wilson found the colony's *prospects* splendid (he liked the site, the climate, etc.) and thought that the only real impediment to its success was bad stewardship by 'Governor Kock'. Wilson admitted that the colonists had suffered and had genuine



Ile-a-Vache: Methodist Chapel at Ka Coq.

This 'Grand Pavillion,' an imposing feature, no doubt, of Kock's fanciful pleasure dome, Donnohue had reconsecrated to Christianity, and he implies that the solemn ceremony

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grievances against the Kock management, but he insisted to Usher that most of them were content and much better off than the colony's critics had charged [Allston Wilson to John P. Usher, 31 Oct. 1863]. When Donnohue read a copy of Wilson's report he denounced it as 'nothing more or less than a well devised tissue of falsehood, voluntarily made in the hope that you [Usher] would decline to send an agent' [Donnohue to Usher, 6 Dec. 1863.

helped recall the colonists to the civilization and faith they had left behind in Virginia (one wonders what new use he found for the 'house built for Kock's prostitute!'). To his friend Usher Donnohue could vent: 'How it ever happened, that sensible men Could be so blinded as to trust Such a Man as Kock with the care of an enterprise of so much importance . . . I am at a loss to know the extravagance and waste of Money–the Self-important and Consequential little Scoundrel was guilty of is astonishing. . . .'[31] It served the New York company right to lose many thousands of dollars; it served Kock right to be hounded off the island. But where was justice for the colonists?

While anticipating that within a month or two a transport would soon be sent for them, Donnohue put in place what reforms he could. Colonists would be better fed, the hospital and general sanitation improved and church services regularized. As he took hold as colony superintendant, he developed a new and optimistic sense that a successful *American* colonial establishment on Ile-a-Vache might, under liberal and enlightened management such as his, become a reality after all. He noted to Usher that the remaining colonists were now 'free and have enough to eat' and he hoped that the U. S. government would pay them the back wages on which the New Yorkers had defaulted.

[31] Donnohue to Usher, 4 Jan. 1864.

More personally, from having been weak and feverish upon his arrival in Haiti, once on the island and in charge Donnohue found that '[m]y own health was never better than at present this is a healthy place.' Moreover, Ferret Bay has proved 'a fine little harbor,' maybe the best in the West Indies, and would make a perfect coal station for the U. S. Navy: 'I Could establish one here in the best harbor in the world for about the expense of bringing a man of war down here,' which would have the collateral benefit of impressing Haiti with a show of power.[32] How far, one might think, and how quickly has special agent Donnohue strayed from his brief to report objectively the condition of the colony and colonists! 'I live within twenty feet of the sea, in rather grand style,' he complacently told Usher. 'My house is new and well furnished. . . and being the only white man on the Island except an old doctor & a boatman. . . I am absolute Monarch.'[33] Thus did D. C. Donnohue, after less than a month on Ile-a-Vache, slip into tropical dreaming, as had his foil Kock. Donnohue may here have been letting his fancy drift out over the Ferret Bay of an evening-this letter to Usher was friendly, not official-but both 'rulers' of Ile-a-Vache dreamed of absolute command over all they surveyed on this tropical island: Kock's that of a sybaritic kingdom run on the southern plantation model;

[32] Donnohue to Usher, 3 Jan. 1864.
[33] Donnohue to Usher, 4 Jan. 1864.

Donnohue's, of an outpost of American military empire. Ultimately, neither was to be realized on Ile-a-Vache, and neither had the ultimate welfare of the colonists in mind.

§

Sunday before last ex Governor Bernard Kock paid a visit [to the colony]

I could not and did not treat him well He however started out among

his people as he in his hypocrisy chose to term the poor negroes who had

confided their destinies to him, he had not proceeded more than a

hundred & fifty yards from my house before his people began to exhibit

Signs of hostility; and if ever you Seen a little devil run and Squall

equal to Kock, you have Seen what I never seen before. He was a little

the worst demoralized individual that I ever Saw, and as he came

through a gate near me he Squalled out, 'They are after Me' I assured him

they only desired to embrace him 'no no the poor Cuss shrieked out

'they want to kill me' we arranged the terms of Surrender, which was

Kock was to leave Hayti to which he readily assented. went over to

Aux Cayes and left on the first Steamer.

[--Ile-a-Vache sees the last of its King]

§

On February 29, 1864, the U. S. naval transport *Marcia C. Day* steamed into Ferret Bay and anchored. It was the relief ship Donnohue had anxiously awaited. The following day the now ex-colonists embarked, all of the remaining members of the group being 'in good health except Cripples eighteen in number.' [34] After an uneventful homeward voyage, the *Marcia C. Day* bypassed Fortress Monroe and made her way up the Potomac to anchor within view of the White House.[35] It was March 20, 1864. That day was also a Sunday, and President Abraham Lincoln was lounging in his study, talking with one of his secretaries, William O. Stoddard, about his latest commander, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. All his previous generals, Lincoln mused, had tried to put the responsibility for failure on him rather than bear it themselves. Grant didn't do that. 'He hasn't told me what his plans are,' Lincoln said to Stoddard. 'I don't know, and I don't want to

[34] Donnohue to Usher, 1 Mar. 1863.
[35] Nicolay and Hay, 2: 447; Lockett, 441.

know. I'm glad to find a man who can go ahead without me.'[36] To be relieved at last of some of his burden of responsibility: this was a tired president's hope for whatever remained of the Civil War. At this point, we are free to imagine Lincoln unfolding himself from the couch and walking to a window and looking out. As the surviving ex-slaves left the *Marcia C. Day* (no more than 365 of the original complement: and not a single record is known that tells who of the emigrating group had died over the past eleven months, or what became of the returnees thereafter), had any one of them been able to borrow the ship's telescope he or she might have caught a glimpse of 'massa Lincoln' after all. But, from the other end of the world, could he see them?

§

To the visitor who comes to the northwest end of Ile-a-Vache today, the terrain looks much as it must have to the 1863-64 emigrants. A narrow beach curves gracefully around Ferret Bay, the narrow eye of which looks northwestward toward the Haitian mainland. Trees and thick brush begin only twenty or thirty feet from the water and follow the gentle rise of the land to the south; on and over a low ridge lay cultivated fields of corn and bananas (for the place is now inhabited by Haitians). The small-holding

[36] William O. Stoddard, *Inside the White House in War Times*, Michael Burlingame, ed. (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 126.

farmers and their families live in a village of maybe 200 people known as Ka Coq, situated partly there on the beach and partly up a bit to the southwest. Some of the families have generators for electricity, all of them have charcoal for cooking. Ka Coq boasts a tiny library, a Methodist chapel, a school. While the people have no folk memory of the old colony, they do nod in recognition when the place name Ferret Bay is mentioned. It would take a team of archaeologists to find any physical traces of the 'grand pavillion' or where the many dead were buried. Still, without such evidence, the villagers seem know someone has been there before them. 'Ka' can be the same as 'Kay' in Haitian Creole; and 'Ka(y) means 'house.' 'Coq' means. . . ? Yes, that. And just to the east less than a mile, across a second bay, is the only other named village on Ile-a-Vache. It is called Madame Bernard.



Ile-a-Vache: fishermen, Ka Coq