Salem and Liberia, Africa

In October 1836, twenty-three African Americans left Salem for Wilmington, where they boarded the ship Round-out and emigrated to Millsberg, Liberia, on the west coast of Africa. Below are the names of the men, women, and children who began their lives as slaves and were freed to pursue lives in Africa. Birth and death dates are given if known.

Dr. Friedrich Henry Schumann leased a 100-acre farm owned by Salem Congregation in 1815. The Schumann Plantation, as it came to be known, was located on the hills southeast of Salem. The August 30, 1814, minutes of Salem’s Aufseher Collegium state “Br. Schumann is not ill disposed...that he take the farm on the other side of the Wach [Salem Creek]. If he lives there he can serve the town...with his medical skill. He can also keep his Negro slaves there without objection.” This followed a June discussion in which objections to Schumann bringing Celia and her four children, all enslaved African Americans, into Salem were raised.

In 1820, the US Census recorded that Schumann’s labor force comprised four enslaved men between the ages of 14 and 26 working in agriculture, four enslaved girls under 14, and one enslaved woman between the ages of 14 and 26. By 1830, Schumann owned thirteen enslaved people. One free black man also lived on the plantation. The enslaved labor force at that time comprised three men and one woman aged 24 to 36, two girls and three boys under 10, and four teenage girls.

Near the expiration of his lease for the plantation, Schumann emancipated seventeen enslaved people and paid for their passage to Liberia, a strategy promoted by the American Colonization Society. Six other black men and women from Salem joined this group. On October 23, 1836, the Moravian African Church in Salem (later named St. Philips) held a Lovefeast to say goodbye. The ship departed on October 30, arriving in Millsberg on February 4, 1837. Tragically, five of the emigrants died from fever later that year. In March 1837, Schumann purchased a house in Salem, where he moved in 1838.
The Plantation after Schumann

The Schumann Plantation was surveyed in early December 1838, fulfilling the plans of the Aufseher Collegium, who in September had contemplated dividing it into smaller lots that could be rented to citizens of the Salem Congregation. On December 26, 1838, the Elders’ Conference minutes note, “The former plantation of Dr. Schumann has been surveyed and the citizens of the town can now apply for parts of it.”

Beginning in 1867, after Emancipation, the minutes from Salem record the requests of freedmen for lots in Salem on which to build houses. On December 17, 1867, “The question of selling town lots to freedmen … was discussed. Altho’ a considerable number of this class of people are now living in town in rented dwellings, and altho’ according to present laws of the country they are entitled to hold landed property, still Board felt reluctant…to entertain the idea of selling town lots to them, the chief reason being the decided unwillingness of a large majority of the citizens of the town to have them settled permanently among us… Board…resolved that for the present no town lots be sold to freedmen.”

By late August 1872, additional lots and a new street were laid out. The minutes also state, “For the sake of convenience it was proposed to call the little town now springing up at that place Liberia.” African-American and Moravian Benjamin Zevely purchased Lot 11, the plantation lot on which this historic marker now stands, from the Brethren in 1873. A year later, all of the lots had been sold, so plans were made to subdivide more land. In early January 1874, the Board faced the need to lay out additional lots for sale and to extend some streets, having received applications for land and lots from “Messrs. Best, Lash, Hairsten and others in Winston ….” The new streets in Liberia were named Beach and Willow. The former Plantation, once home to enslaved men, women, and children, had transformed into a community of African-American land owners called Liberia, meaning “free land”. The name Happy Hill came into use soon after.