

WILLIAM "HURRICANE" GILBERT AND THE WILDER SHORES OF FREEMASONRY:
REVOLUTIONARY WINDS FROM ANTIGUA, AMERICA, ENGLAND, AND NOVA SCOTIA TO AFRICA

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Marsha Keith Schuchard, Ph.D.
Independent Scholar, Atlanta, Georgia

<keithschuchard@gmail.com>

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A strange poem written by an Astrologer here, who *was* a man of fine Genius, which, at intervals, he still discovers.—But, ah me! Madness smote with her hand, and stamped with her feet and swore that he should be her’s--& her’s he is!—He is a man of fluent Eloquence & general knowledge, gentle in his manners, warm in his affections; but unfortunately he has received a few rays of supernatural Light thro’ a crack in his upper story.

---Robert Southey to John Thelwall (17 December 1796).¹

Low indeed, is that state, where few see Visions, few dream Dreams, few interpret them,...for such is the preponderance against DEITY IN ENGLAND—Hear O Earth!

---William Gilbert, *The Hurricane: A Theosophical Eclogue* (1796).²

In 1796, while living in Bristol and friendly with the Romantic poets Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, the Antiguan-born astrologer William Gilbert published his always eccentric and sometimes eloquent poem, *The Hurricane: A Theosophical and Western Eclogue*. In the extensive notes, Gilbert revealed his self-identification as an African and his longing to travel to Abyssinia to join his supposed kinsmen, the tribe of Gibberti (in the province of modern Djibouti). This odd self-fashioning from white to black was rooted in his childhood and young adulthood on his family’s sugar plantation in Antigua, where over three hundred slaves labored under the relatively benevolent tutelage of his ardently Methodist father, Nathaniel Gilbert, Sr., speaker of the Assembly. As William recalled, he had “strong symptoms of a neighbourhood to ABBYSINIA”:

I have such a strong predilection for Africa, as, when a youth, to have wished, in crossing the Atlantic without a Mediterranean Pass, to be taken by a Corsair and carried in; and while in the latitudes, I looked out impatiently for every sail, in hopes of finding an African Cruizer. There is certainly a Nation of Gibberti, who inhabit East and South of Abyssinia... I can infallibly prove my Relation from Spirit, because in Spirit, although naturally, it may be thought improbable.³

¹ Quoted in Paul Cheshire, *William Gilbert and Esoteric Romanticism: A Contextual Study and Annotated Edition of “The Hurricane”* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2018).² This is the most complete study of Gilbert’s life and writings.

² William Gilbert, *The Hurricane: A Theosophical Eclogue. To which is subjoined a Solitary Effusion in a Summer’s Evening* (Bristol, London, and Bath, 1796), 80. My citations are to this first edition.

³ *Ibid.*, 77.

As we shall see, his yearning to reach the interior of Africa, and his capacity to contact the spirit world, were shared by contemporary African-American and Swedenborgian Freemasons, in a complex “Hermetic geography” that stretched from Antigua, America, England, and Nova Scotia to Africa.⁴

After serving with the British navy at the siege of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1780, the seventeen year-old William left the service and moved to England, where there was an extended family of Gilberts. In 1783 he returned to Antigua, where he was appointed clerk to the Assembly and then practiced as a Counsellor at Law. Travelling to England in summer 1787, he appealed an Antiguan court martial case and won an important victory for his client, Major John Browne. However he subsequently lost “a naval cause tried at Portsmouth,” which caused such a shock to his intellect that it wrecked “a once splendid genius.”⁵ His friends found him a place in Richard Henderson’s mental asylum on the outskirts of Bristol. There he became friendly with Richard’s son, John, and gained access to John’s esoteric expertise and fine library of rare occultist volumes, which led to his lifelong preoccupation with astrology and the occult sciences.

While in Bristol, Gilbert probably met Ebenezer Sibly, a fellow astrologer and friend of John Henderson, and the two later moved in the same Swedenborgian-Masonic circles in London.⁶ Gilbert may have become a Freemason earlier in Antigua, where his cousin and companion John Gilbert joined a lodge in 1787. Despite the intense Methodism of his family, the teenaged John had gone through a skeptical period in which he became a deist and then an atheist. After his initiation at age twenty, he became “enthusiastically fond” of Freemasonry: “The symbolical representation of the principal doctrines of religion which Masonry exhibits, reconciled me to some degree to the Scriptures.”⁷

Bristol was a major port for slave-traders, which strengthened William’s growing abolitionist sentiments, and in February 1790 he contributed an anti-slavery letter to the *Bristol Mercury*, in which he castigated the slave traders as “Epicures in Assassination and Oppression,” while affirming the “Bond of Union” between the West Indian islands and Africa.⁸ It was a bond that would intensify within Gilbert over the next years, after he moved to London in spring 1790, though nothing is known about his activities until August 1791, when he began contributing articles to *The Conjuror’s Magazine* (until July 1793). According to a Victorian kinsman, “his insanity took a political line, and, the first rage of the French Revolution being rampant at the time, he went to France to ally himself with Robespierre and the rest, but took fright, I fancy, when he got nearer and returned.”⁹ From William’s continuing praise of the French revolutionaries in the magazine, his alleged visit to France seems more plausible than his

⁴ Cheshire, *William Gilbert*, 163-83, on “Hermetic Geography.”

⁵ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections: Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Longman and Hamilton, 1837), I, 62, 66

⁶ Cheshire, *William Gilbert*, 24, 26.

⁷ John Gilbert, *Memoir of John Gilbert, Esq., late Naval Storekeeper at Antigua* (Liverpool: D. Marples, 1835), 9-11.

⁸ Letter reprinted at <http://williamgilbert.com/africanslave trade.html>. The William Gilbert website, run by Paul Cheshire, is a valuable reference work.

⁹ Sir George Gilbert Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections*, ed. Gavin Stamp (1879; Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 37-38. Scott’s source was William’s sister Elizabeth, who was “a great correspondent” with William, but her extensive correspondence, including that with John Wesley, was destroyed at her death in 1832.

conservative kinsman's "I fancy." Moreover, he later believed that the French shared his desire to reach Abyssinia.¹⁰

In his articles in *The Conjuror's Magazine*, William gave hints about his associates and interests in London, where he was in contact with his older brother, the Anglican-Methodist minister Nathaniel Gilbert, Jr., and various Swedenborgian Masons, who were familiar with the "Abyssinian" or Ethiopian Masonic mysticism maintained by the freed African-American slaves who joined the new British colony of Sierra Leone.¹¹ Through this complex Methodist-Masonic international network, William developed a theosophy that strikingly paralleled that of Prince Hall and John Marrant, major figures in the development of African-American Freemasonry.

In early 1792, Nathaniel Gilbert began his service as chaplain to the Sierra Leone colony, where he became the friend and supporter of the free blacks from Nova Scotia, who had gained their liberty by fighting with British forces during the American Revolution. According to current Sierra Leone Freemasons, "The first African American settlers (more commonly known as the Nova Scotians) established the first Masonic lodge in Sierra Leone. The Nova Scotians were the highest class of blacks in Sierra Leone and were very inclusive."¹² Historical reinforcement for this claim was provided by Dr. Thomas Winterbottom, close friend of Gilbert and physician to the colony in 1792-96, who recorded his observations during that four-year period. He wrote that the local tribesmen recognized the similarity between Freemasonry and the "Semo," their traditional secret society: "the natives who speak English call it African masonry."¹³ They evidently learned about "masonry" from the Nova Scotian settlers, with whom they intermingled. Winterbottom also described the initiation rites of the "Burra" society, which "resembles free-masonry in excluding females, and in obliging every member by a solemn oath...not to divulge the sacred mysteries." The descendants of the Nova Scotians later became known as the Krios (Creoles), and "traditionally, the Masonic lodges have been a bastion of Krio Identity."¹⁴

The African Americans' pre-emigration background is important, for they had probably been initiated in Nova Scotia before sailing for Sierra Leone. Nine years earlier, when peace was achieved in 1783, the British government sent three thousand loyalist blacks to Nova Scotia, where they were promised certificates of freedom and plots of land. In England, the Countess of Huntingdon and her church of separatist Methodists supported the project and in August 1785 sent the African-American minister John Marrant to serve the Nova Scotians. Born free in New York, Marrant was apprenticed to a

¹⁰ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 75.

¹¹ Nathaniel Gilbert, Jr., was ordained in the Anglican church, but he was described by contemporaries as sympathetic and tending to Methodism.

¹² "Masonic Lodges of Sierra Leone," <<http://enacademic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/8269023>>. I have so far been unable to locate a detailed, documented history (which is a scholarly desideratum).

¹³ Thomas Masterson Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* (London: Hatchard, 1803), 135-37.

¹⁴ According to Christopher Fyfe, in Murray Last and Paul Richard, eds., *Sierra Leone, 1787-1987: Two Centuries of Intellectual Life* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987), 418. John Saillant informs me that the historical meaning and accuracy of the term "Krio" is currently the subject of academic debate.

carpenter in Charleston, South Carolina, and also became a popular musician with local whites.¹⁵ He was impressed onto a British man-of-war and served in a number of battles until the end of the American Revolution. He had become famous through the publication earlier in 1785 of his autobiography, which included an account of his adventures among the Native Americans and his spectacular conversion to Methodism by George Whitefield, who was visiting Charleston. The book became a best seller and was reprinted many times in America and England.¹⁶ The Gilbert family, who had introduced Methodism to the slaves in Antigua, was almost certainly aware of Marrant's work. When the government failed to fulfill its promises to the loyalist blacks, Marrant supported the emerging plan for them to emigrate to Sierra Leone to establish the "Province of Freedom."¹⁷

In January 1788, disappointed at the insufficient support from the Huntingtonians, Marrant travelled to Boston, where he was welcomed by the black Grand Master, Prince Hall, who named him chaplain of the African Lodge.¹⁸ It is unclear whether Marrant was already a Mason when Hall invited him to join his lodge. White Freemasonry was already well established in Nova Scotia when Marrant served there, and there were frequent public processions of Masons in their regalia. Governor John Parr, the Irish-born Grand Master, treated the free blacks relatively well, and he would later cooperate with John Clarkson in organizing the exodus to Nova Scotia.¹⁹ Marrant attracted a large following in Birchtown, where the many African-American carpenters and stonemasons had built houses and constructed an independent community.

In 1784, when John Wesley visited Birchtown, he commented: "The little town they have built is, I suppose, the only town of negroes which has been built in America—nay, perhaps in any part of the world, except only in Africa."²⁰ Under a mulatto military officer, the "Black Pioneers" also built barracks, storehouses, and wharves for the imperial army. Marrant, known in Charleston as the "free Carpenter," supported the construction projects, and he funded and oversaw the building of a chapel in Birchtown.²¹ In 1786 the black craftsmen asked him to carry their petition for "tools, spades, pickaxes, hammers, saws and files" to the provincial governor in Halifax, and his successful plea meant that the supplies were sent.²² In August 1788 Marrant returned briefly to Nova Scotia to marry, and he may have

¹⁵ John Saillant, "'Wipe away All Tears from Their Eyes': John Marrant's Theology in the Black Atlantic, 1785-1808," *Journal of Millennial Studies*, 1 (1999), 1. <www.mille.org/journal.html>; Peter B. Hinks, "John Marrant and the Meaning of Early Black Freemasonry," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 64 (2007), 108.

¹⁶ John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia)* (Boston and London, 1785). It was reprinted in fifteen editions during his lifetime.

¹⁷ Saillant, "Wipe away All Tears," 7-10.

¹⁸ Joanna Brooks, "Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy," *African-American Review*, 34 (2000), 197-216.

¹⁹ On white Nova Scotian Freemasonry, see Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2007), 167-68, 178. On Parr's initial reluctance but eventual cooperation with Clarkson, see John Clarkson, *Clarkson's Mission to America, 1791-1792*, ed. Charles Fergusson (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1999), 86-87.

²⁰ Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War of Independence* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012), 210.

²¹ Saillant, "Wipe away All Tears," 3.

²² Joanna Brooks, "John Marrant's *Journal*: Providence and Prophecy in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History*, 3 (1999), 9. He subsequently learned that a rival Wesleyan preacher stole the supplies and sold them.

informed his followers about his experiences with black Freemasons in Boston.²³ Given the Birchtowners' high reputation for expertise in construction, it would not be surprising if they formed a craftsman's lodge, unaffiliated with white Masonry.²⁴ There was a precedent for a self-created black lodge in the 1730s in New York, where it was reported that some Negroes "had the Impudence to assume the Stile and Title of FREE MASONS, in Imitation of a Society here, which...was very ill ACCEPTED."²⁵

Marrant's sermon to the Prince Hall lodge on 24 June 1789 "evinces how far he had advanced in his knowledge of Freemasonry."²⁶ He revealed a theme of the Ethiopian origins of Masonry that would be elaborated by Hall and his followers. Arguing that Paradise bordered upon Egypt, "which is the principal part of the African Ethiopia.," Marrant asked how can the slave owners despise and tyrannize over the lives and liberties of the Africans.²⁷ Their envy and pride make them call us Africans the sons of Cain, who murdered his brother, but we do not mind, because "it was from him and his sons Masonry began," after the fall of Adam: "Bad as Cain was, yet God took not from him his faculty of studying architecture, arts, and sciences, and his sons met together to receive instruction in the Masonic arts." He assured the brothers,

If you study the holy book of God, you will find there that you stand on the level...with the greatest Kings on the earth, as Men and as Masons, and these truly great men are not ashamed of the meanest of their brethren. Ancient history will produce some of the Africans who were truly good, wise, and learned men, and as eloquent as any other nation whatever, though at present many of them in slavery, which is not a just cause of our being despised.²⁸

Prince Hall knew that in 1775, the year of his initiation, the first black loyalist troop was named the "Ethiopia Corps," and they were given shirts emblazoned "Liberty to Slaves."²⁹ He was thus thrilled with Marrant's sermon, which he had printed and distributed to lodges in America and England.³⁰ It seems certain that the abolitionist Methodists and Masons, as well as their African brothers, in Antiqua learned about his message. He sent a copy to Lady Huntingdon, noting that "We, the members of the

²³ In June 1789 Hall wrote that Marrant had been received into the lodge "since August" 1788; see William H. Upton, "Prince Hall's Letter Book," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 13 (1900), 60.

²⁴ Bonnie Huskins, "'Ancient' Tensions and Local Circumstances: Loyalist Freemasons in Shelburne, Nova Scotia," *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*, 5 (2015), 59 n.35, found no archival evidence that blacks set up lodges in the town of Shelbourne, but she did not deal with the independent community of Birchtown. For the Nova Scotians' building skills in Sierra Leone, see Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), 52, 78.

²⁵ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 2nd. ed. (1969; Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP), 130.

²⁶ Hinks, "Marrant," 110.

²⁷ John Marrant, *A Sermon Preached on the 24th of June 1789, Being the Festival of St. John the Baptist, at the Request of the Right Worshipful the Grand Master Prince Hall, and the Rest of the Brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston* (Boston: Bible and Heart, 1789), 8-10-21.

²⁸ Marrant, *Sermon*, 20-21.

²⁹ Mary Louise Clifford, *From Slavery to Freetown: Black Loyalists after the American Revolution* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 1999), 11.

³⁰ Upton, "Prince Hall's Letter Book," 60.

African Lodge, have made him a member of our honourable society, and chaplain of the same, which will be a great help in his travels." He added that Marrant is "about to return to you." Hall knew that Marrant intended to raise funds in England for the Nova Scotians to emigrate to Sierra Leone.³¹ The two must also have viewed Freemasonry as a vehicle for recruiting and training the Nova Scotians. Marrant chose as his successors in Birchtown two artisans from Charleston, Cato Perkins (a carpenter) and William Ash (a stonemason), for whom the African Masonic themes would certainly appeal. Joanna Brooks observes that "Masonic history specified that the building trade and its attendant wisdoms originated in North Africa."³²

Hall approved of the Nova Scotian-Sierra Leone project, for in 1787 he and twelve black Masons had presented a petition to the Massachusetts state legislature seeking support for their move to Africa, "our native country, which warm climate is more natural and agreeable to us; and where we shall live among our equals, and be more comfortable and happy than we can be in our present situation."³³ Over the next years, Hall built on Marrant's themes and made the "Ethiopianist tradition" central to his system of Masonry. In his *Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge on the 25th June 1792*, he affirmed that Marrant's sermon "provided the groundwork."³⁴ Looking forward to "millennial revelation," he declared, "Hear what the great Architect of the universal world saith: *Aethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto me.*" He drew upon the Ethiopianist vision of Psalms 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." Sylvia Frey argues that Hall "domesticated" the Sierra Leone (Freetown) ideal and infused it into his Ethiopian Masonic teachings and fraternal networking.³⁵

But Ethiopia was far away from the west coast of Sierra Leone, so how did the Masons link them up in what became William Gilbert's "Hermetic Geography"? As we shall see, Sierra Leone was envisioned as the port of entry to the rivers and trails that would take the "illuminated" seekers into the original paradise in Africa's interior. For the esotericist William Gilbert, whose admired older brother was working in Sierra Leone in 1792-93, the Africanized Masonry of Marrant and Hall would have an additional appeal. Joanna Brooks notes that "Prince Hall's initiation into Freemasonry in 1775 admitted him to a parallel universe where Hermeticism, Egyptophilia, and Kabbalism flourished alongside, if not intertwined with, Enlightenment rationalism"—a universe shared by Gilbert.³⁶ Hall and fourteen free blacks were initiated in Boston into an Irish military lodge by Sergeant John Blatt, whose regiment had been stationed at Antigua and Nova Scotia and included West Indian blacks.³⁷

³¹ Hinks, "John Marrant," 115.

³² Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 126.

³³ Brooks, "Prince Hall," 199.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 207, 209..

³⁵ Frey's comment in Michael West, William Martin, Fanon Wilkins, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International Since the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2009), 54.

³⁶ Brooks, "Prince Hall," 198.

³⁷ Charles H. Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: United Supreme Council, 1977), 34-35. After this paper had gone to press, Oscar Alleyne informed me that John L. Hairston, in *Landmarks of Our Fathers: A*

The lodge worked under the Grand Lodge of Ireland and was affiliated with the “Antients” system, in which lower class artisans and craftsmen received special praise from the Grand Secretary, the Irish painter Laurence Dermott. He enumerated the great men of history who “were not only poor Men, but many of them of very mean extraction.” Jesus himself was a carpenter, and “the wise philosopher Socrates was the son of a poor stone-carver.”³⁸ He compared his unpretentious Antient brothers to those upper-class Modern Masons, who were “preferr’d to Places or Offices of great Trust, and dignified with Titles of Honour, without having the least claim to Courage, Wit, or Honesty.” Though Modern lodges in England had become increasingly “speculative” and divorced from the operative craft, Antient lodges in Ireland and Scotland maintained their traditional inclusion of actual carpenters and stonemasons in their meetings.

Drawing on the Antients’ praise of lower-class craftsmen, Hall envisioned Freemasonry as the means of transforming each black initiate into “the heroic artisan.”³⁹ His system stressed the importance of the craftsman more than the architect.⁴⁰ The African-American Masons also gained access to Irish Masonry’s acceptance of the higher degrees of the Royal Arch and Knights Templar.⁴¹ Hall initially thought of seeking a charter from French Freemasonry, but in 1784 decided to appeal to the English Grand Lodge, which after three years’ delay granted him one in 1787. Despite his success in being recognized as a “regular,” Modern Grand Lodge Freemason, critics and opponents would accuse Hall and his brethren of receiving clandestine and invalid initiations by the “irregular,” Antient Irish Masons.

After Marrant returned to England in 1790, he and Hall apparently maintained their communication, and members of Hall’s system wrote to their Grand Master from London. It seems certain that Marrant encouraged his followers in Nova Scotia to become Freemasons. In his autobiographical *Journal of the Rev. John Marrant*, published in London in 1790, he included his Masonic sermon for, as Peter Hinks observes, he believed that “Freemasonry would be the nexus of the regeneration of free black men in the Atlantic world as they emerged from the degradation of slavery.”⁴² After Marrant’s untimely death in London in April 1791, his whole congregation in Nova Scotia determined to make it to Sierra Leone, where they would attempt to implement his African-American Masonic beliefs over the next decades.

In October 1791, when John Clarkson visited Marrant’s congregation in Birchtown to recruit free blacks to Sierra Leone, he collaborated with Governor Parr, the white Grand Master, and he attended the funeral for Parr, who died on 25 November 1791, when “the several Lodges of Freemasons in their

Critical Analysis of the Start and Origin of African Lodge, No. 1 (2017), questions the long-accepted story of the foundation of Prince Hall Freemasonry.

³⁸ Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon* (London, 1764), xxix-xxx.

³⁹ Shirley Green, “Freeborn Men of Color: The Franck Brothers in Revolutionary North America, 1755-1820” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Bowling Green State University, 2011), 94.

⁴⁰ Maurice Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002) 68.

⁴¹ Upton, “Prince Hall’s Letter Book,” 54, 61-62

⁴² Hinks, “Marrant,” 115. Alphonso Saville argues that Marrant’s religious beliefs drew upon African and Native American traditions, which he infused into his sermons and Masonic teachings (in “The Gospel According to John Marrant: Religious Consciousness in the Black Atlantic, 1755-1791,” Ph.D. Dissertation: Emory University, 2017).

badges” marched, “His Excellency being Grand Master of the Order.”⁴³ He recommended to the government that another Mason, Sir John Wentworth, who believed in the Sierra Leone project, be named successor to Parr. Clarkson may have participated in a Masonic festivity, for he recorded his attendance at the November “Feast of St. Andrew,” an annual celebration by the Scottish Masons in Nova Scotia.⁴⁴ Among the observers of the Masonic procession at Parr’s funeral were ninety African Americans, led by their Baptist preacher, who joined the emigration project. Many of the Baptists called themselves the “Free Ethiopians.” While cultivating white Masonic support, Clarkson worked with the African-American artisans, and he recorded his admiration for their expertise in stonecutting and carpentry and their innovative construction designs. As the black craftsmen planned their journey across the Atlantic to Africa, they apparently planned to implement Marrant’s Masonic agenda, for early black Freemasonry was rooted in “a diasporic communitarianism,” which was “inextricably interwoven with Atlantic itinerating.”⁴⁵

During Clarkson’s first days in Nova Scotia, he was surprised and amused when “some of the Swedenburg [sic] persuasion supposing me to be of the same view were waiting to congratulate me upon my arrival.”⁴⁶ The Swedenborgians had heard from their Society in London about their members’ involvement in the Sierra Leone project. While this trans-Atlantic linkage was being established, William Gilbert emerged from obscurity in London and joined the circle of esoteric Masons and radical New Jerusalemists, whose Swedish members were major proponents of the African project.⁴⁷ Led by the Masonic *Illuminés*, Charles Bernhard Wadstrom and Augustus Nordenskjold, who combined their mineralogical and alchemical interests with radical political notions, they dreamed of finding the “illuminated” Africans, whom Swedenborg claimed had direct contact with the spirit world and who lived in isolation in the interior of Africa.⁴⁸

Through William Gilbert’s readings in Swedenborg and contact with the society in London, he was definitely aware of the Swedish adepts’ yearning to penetrate to the mystical heart of Africa. Moreover, he probably learned more from his brother Nathaniel, who befriended Nordenskjold and believed he was a valuable asset to the colony. In early 1792, when the Nova Scotians first landed at Freetown, Reverend Gilbert preached a Masonically-relevant sermon, based on Psalm 127, verse 1: “Except the Lord build the house, the labour is but lost that build it.”⁴⁹ Nordenskjold would have appreciated Nathaniel’s scriptural support for his own Swedenborgian-Masonic agenda. However, by

⁴³ Clarkson, *Clarkson’s Mission*, 50, 53, 87, 95, 102.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁵ Peter Hinks and Stephen Kantrowitz, eds., *All Men Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of African American Freemasonry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013), 6.

⁴⁶ Clarkson, *Clarkson’s Mission*, 39.

⁴⁷ See the important chapter, “The ‘microscope of enthusiasm’: Swedenborgian ideas about Africa,” in Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 63-105.

⁴⁸ For the peculiar sexual theories advocated by Swedenborg and Nordenskjold, see my book, *Why Mrs. Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (London: Random House/Century, 2006), 187, 234-37, 257. In *Plan for a Free Community at Sierra Leone* (London: Egerton, 1792), 35, 51, Wadstrom reprinted Nordenskjold’s sexual theories of 1789, which made perpetually increasing “Virile Power” within the bounds of “conjugal love” the basis for the colony’s organization.

⁴⁹ Clarkson, *Clarkson’s Mission*, 171.

the summer, Gilbert and Governor Clarkson worried that the Swede's impetuous plan to set off in search of gold and the Swedenborgian "paradise" in the interior was doomed to failure. Clarkson wrote in August that "this worthy man, who had been strongly recommended by the Court of Sweden, is evidently hastening to his ruin and probably his death."⁵⁰ On 5 November, when a defeated and ill Nordenskjold returned to Freetown, he described the little he saw of the interior as a "paradise," but Clarkson recorded that he "looks more like a spectre than a man." After his death a few days later, the sympathetic governor recorded, "what a pity such a man should be lost from an imprudent zeal."

In the meantime, Marrant's artisan followers, who had carried their tools with them, went to work immediately to implement his vision of a holy community who would rebuild the Temple in Africa. On 28 March 1792, twelve days after they landed in the colony, "Perkins, Ash, and their followers established the first chapel of the Huntingtonian Connexion in Sierra Leone."⁵¹ However, they would be disappointed and disillusioned by the failure of the London-based directors of the Sierra Leone Company to deliver the promised plots of land. Clarkson and Nathaniel Gilbert, who sympathized with them and labored to overcome the company's negative policies, won the devotion of Cato Perkins and his congregation. Perkins and Gilbert regularly attended each other's religious services.

The Nova Scotians implemented Marrant's position of religious tolerance (In Birchtown he had declared that the town chapel "was built for the people at large, not more for one connection than another").⁵² Reinforced by Freemasonry's creed of non-sectarianism, the Nova Scotians' "lack of intolerance" amazed some Scottish Presbyterians, who observed the back and forth visitations between black Methodist and Baptist congregations. Perkins and his people strongly supported Clarkson's efforts to gain more local control in the colony, a goal shared by Gilbert. In the meantime, the African-American craftsmen began the construction projects that produced over the next six years nearly four hundred houses, "with architecture resembling that of the American South with three to four feet stone foundations with wooden superstructures."⁵³ In 1798 they would build a four-hundred seat church in Freetown.⁵⁴

In early April 1792, a frustrated Clarkson responded to the Nova Scotians' complaints, and he sent Gilbert to London to provide the directors with information about what Anna Maria Falconbridge called "our distracted, deplorable situation." She noted that Gilbert is "a man of mild, agreeable manners, truly religious, without the hypocritical shew of it; he is universally liked in the colony, and I'm sure his absence will be greatly regretted."⁵⁵ Arriving in May 1792, Nathaniel Gilbert spent nine months in London, where he unsuccessfully supported the arguments of Clarkson for less meddling by the London directors who were more interested in commercial profits than the freedom and land demanded by the African-Americans. During this period, Nathaniel was in contact with his brother

⁵⁰ J.L. Hart, "Diary of Lieutenant [John] Clarkson, R.N., *Sierra Leone Studies*, 8 (1927), 8, 25, 35, 39, 97-98.

⁵¹ Saillant, "Wipe away All Tears," 14, 17.

⁵² Brooks, "John Marrant's *Journal*, 9.

⁵³ <http://www.come2sierraleone.com/freetown-colony-1792-1800>.

⁵⁴ Saillant, "Wipe away All Tears, 22.

⁵⁵ Anna Maria Falconbridge, *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone during the Years 1791-1792-1793*, eds. Christopher Fyfe and A.M. Falconbridge (1794; Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000), 79

William, and his first-hand knowledge of the Nova Scotians and their mystical Ethiopian Masonry must have intrigued his younger brother, who had recently expressed his Masonic interests and revolutionary political agenda.

In William's contributions to *The Conjuror's Magazine*, he had made clear his sympathy for radical, esoteric Masonry, and in January 1792, he boldly praised Cagliostro, the controversial head of the Egyptian Rite, who was now suffering in an Inquisition prison in Rome:

The Free Masons are the only Corporation, whether under the name of a church, a nation or a society, who melted the *knowledge* of God the Creator possessed by the Antients into the same fire with the knowledge of a Redeemer given to the Christians. May they shine with invigorated glories! They shall! And shall give Rome the blow, it has always suspected and feared from their hands. As far as Cagliostro is a Free Mason, he shall revenge and triumph.⁵⁶

William thus seemed to echo the rationale of his cousin John Gilbert for becoming "enthusiastically fond" of Freemasonry.

In February 1792 William advertised his proposal for a Philosophical Society, "a Weekly Lecture or Conversationi for the occult sciences and true philosophy":

I would indeed establish two societies—one more open, with the other more consolidated: the last should be of renovated, purified, and invigorated Free masonry, from which I will not exclude women: the first for Noviciates. Perhaps there are few quite ripe for the last; but the first may, I conceive, be speedily established.... The subscription must be liberal, as the gradual providing of a library is desirable: but the scheme will gradually enlarge.⁵⁷

In April 1792, shortly before his brother's arrival, William contributed "The Augur" to the magazine, in which he expressed his support for the French revolution and his opposition to the counter-revolutionary measures now undertaken by the "gang of kings" in Sweden and the Empire. He linked them to the oppressors in the Sierra Leone Company, and in a strange astrological interpretation, he argued that.

All the vessels fitted out from England for beginning the settlement of Sierra Leone have met miscarriages of some kind or other. The Harpy...their principal ship, after being out nearly two months, or twice the time of the passage, had not got half way, being opposed by WESTERLY WINDS. Now I must speak a little seriously to the gentlemen concerned in that undertaking—Conciliate the genius of the *West!* If ye do not, ye shall all likewise perish! That my brother and my first cousin are your chaplains is not enough to seduce me to a softer position. In 1783, the year of the American peace, I paid my last visit to the West Indies... During the three years that I staid in the islands, there was a frequency of West winds before unknown.... I augur conclusively to myself, that the New Sun, which has arisen in the West...is mild, benignant, and peaceable, in

⁵⁶ *Conjuror's Magazine*, 6 (January 1792), 187.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 (February 1792), 220.

his supplantation of the old light...and that *all* violences proceed from the old, and finally *vanquished*, system.⁵⁸

The old vanquished system was slavery, which was banned in Sierra Leone but continued its cruel practice in Antigua, a situation that provoked William to express his outrage in the same issue of the magazine:

To such a pitch of depravity is the human mind reduced, by continual objects of cruelty being presented to the eye, that it is not unusual for the *Ladies* in the West-Indies to order the Hangman to give their female Slaves a *round dozen*, for their *amusement*. After this punishment is inflicted, the poor wretches are obliged to curtsy to the flagellator, and *kiss the scourge*, to shew that they have nothing *stubborn* in their dispositions.⁵⁹

Though no correspondence survives between Nathaniel and William, it is possible that the chaplain wrote him about the charge of “stubbornness” made by the Company to the independent-minded Nova Scotians. Deirdre Coleman observes that these were “a self-emancipated people,” a “self-styled nation of blacks searching for a different kind of new beginning, in repudiating their past slavery in America,” they were shaped by their country’s “own struggle for liberty and independence.”⁶⁰ Peter Hinks adds that the independent Masonry of Marrant and Hall “forged a ‘counterpublic’ space or niche where they could constitute the apparatus of self-government,” parallel to the American government from which they were largely excluded.⁶¹

If Nathaniel did keep him informed, this perhaps explains William’s attack on one of the Company’s Directors:

The Sierra Leone Company, I shall remark, have on their list of Directors a *very particular* root of bitterness—a man, who combines the augury drawn from my passage immediately with the Sierra Leone company, as he has prostitutedly opposed himself to the success of the pure object of my visit to England. But let him remember, that the three days Eastern gale cannot longer oppose the sweeping West.⁶²

This rather inchoate “augury” suggests that William was earlier involved in some way with the planning or discussions about the Sierra Leone colony, for his information about the weather difficulties faced by the ship named “The Harpy,” was accurate.⁶³ He may have heard from his brother that Cato Perkins and William Ash were praised by Clarkson for keeping order on the ship during the difficult passage. Even worse, he may have known that during Clarkson’s recruitment drive in Nova Scotia in June 1792, the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 (April 1792), 383. His first cousin was Melville Horne, an Antiguan-born Methodist minister and co-chaplain with Nathaniel Gilbert.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁶⁰ Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 108-09.

⁶¹ Hinks and Kantrowitz, *All Men*, 3.

⁶² Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 383.

⁶³ Fyfe, *History*, 35-36.

directors of the Company in London were secretly collaborating with the pro-slavery “African Association.”⁶⁴

The augury may also explain William’s odd claim to be a friend of Prince William Henry (later Duke of Clarence and William IV), a rebellious son of George III, who was initiated into Freemasonry in Plymouth, a few months before William brought news of the prince’s plan to visit Antigua in December 1786.⁶⁵ William Henry subsequently travelled back and forth between Antigua and Nova Scotia, during the period when Marrant was preaching in the latter territory and planning the exodus to Sierra Leone.⁶⁶ In both sites, he was feted by the local Masons, who probably included John Gilbert, the Naval Storekeeper. The hard-drinking prince also indulged in sexual relations with many women, black and white, and allegedly fathered quite a few children. In William Gilbert’s autobiographical entry in *The Conjuror’s Magazine* in July 1793, he claimed to have brought news to Antigua of the arrival of Prince William, who “has followed me everywhere—into the navy, to New York, on board the Warwick, to Antigua, the place of my birth, to England again, and now to friendship with France. Besides this, he was always a favourite with me.”⁶⁷ In 1793, the prince, now Duke of Clarence, publicly opposed the British war against France,⁶⁸ thus initially sharing Gilbert’s view, but the erratic duke subsequently changed his position, and he became a strong defender of the West Indian slave holders who, he claimed, treated the slaves humanely.⁶⁸ Ironically, one of the Nova Scotians’ ships to Sierra Leone had earlier been named the “Prince William Henry.”⁶⁹

With a final prediction that the French revolutionaries would eventually triumph, Gilbert sang his swan song in *The Conjuror’s Magazine* (July 1793), which was sold to a less “esoteric” editor and re-named *The Astrologer’s Magazine*. After six months in London, his brother Nathaniel had returned to Sierra Leone, where his arrival in January 1793 was created with jubilation by Cato Perkins and the Nova Scotians.⁷⁰ However, they were greatly disappointed by the Company’s firing of John Clarkson, and in mid-March they elected Perkins and Isaac Anderson, another carpenter from Charleston, as their representatives to deliver a petition of protest to the Company in London, where they stayed from June to November 1793. The Huntingtonians welcomed Perkins and “put him to college,” but the Company directors treated him and Anderson shabbily and rejected their petition for reform.

⁶⁴ Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 115-16.

⁶⁵ For the prince’s visits to Antigua, see Vere Langford Oliver, *The History of the Island of Antigua* (London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1896), I, cxxx-cxxxi, cxxxviii. For the royal sons’ interest in “irregular” Masonry and contacts with radical French Masons, see my article, “Blake’s *Tiriel* and the Regency Crisis: Lifting the Veil on a Royal Masonic Scandal,” in Jackie Di Salvo, G.A. Rosso, and Christopher Hobson, eds., *Blake, Politics, and History* (New York: Garland, 1998), 115-35. In my unpublished lecture, “Rediscovering William ‘Hurricane’ Gilbert: A Lost Voice of Revolution and Madness in the Worlds of Blake and the Romantics” (1999), I mistakenly identified Prince William Henry as William Henry, 1st Duke of Gloucester. In 2005 Paul Cheshire, unaware of my error, uploaded the original, unrevised draft to his William Gilbert Website.

⁶⁶ Beamish Murdoch, *A History of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, NS: James Barnes, 1867), III, 50,-55, 61.

⁶⁷ *Conjuror’s Magazine*, 24 (July 1793), 517.

⁶⁸ Philip Ziegler, *King William IV* (London: Collins, 1971), 54, 91-94; Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free the Empire’s Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 85-87.

⁶⁹ Clarkson, *Clarkson’s Mission*, 117.

⁷⁰ Falconbridge, *Narrative*, 107.

The firing of Clarkson had so depressed Nathaniel Gilbert that he left Sierra Leone and returned to Antigua in April 1793, where he spent much time with his cousin, the skeptical Freemason John Gilbert, and through long religious conversations, converted him to Christianity.⁷¹ John Gilbert then became an ardent abolitionist and in 1798 married Anne Hart, a free African, who joined him in Methodist educational work among the slaves.⁷² They were persecuted by hostile whites, with John especially denigrated for calling his black congregants his “brothers.”

During the months when Nathaniel Gilbert, Cato Perkins, and Isaac Anderson petitioned for a fulfillment of the promised land and political rights, the memory of John Marrant (the late Masonic hero of the Nova Scotians), was publicly revived by Prince Hall in his *Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge on the 25th of June 1792*. The work was published in Boston and disseminated to lodges in America and abroad, including to the Grand Lodge in London.⁷³ It seems certain that Marrant’s chosen successor, Cato Perkins, would learn about it. Hall reminded the African brothers of Marrant’s earlier sermon, and credited him with providing the foundation, upon which he as Grand Master would now “raise part of the superstructure” of Masonic fraternity, thus fulfilling his duty to “the great Architect of this visible world.”⁷⁴

Drawing on his familiarity with the higher chivalric and Templar degrees, Hall referred to the “Order of St. John,” which had built temples across northern Africa and then asked: “Whether at that day, when there was an African church, and perhaps the largest Christian church on earth, whether there was no African of that [Masonic] order; or whether, if they were all whites, they would refuse to accept them as their fellow Christians and brother masons.” He claimed that Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law, was an Ethiopian who instructed Moses “how to regulate his courts of justice.” He praised the compassion exhibited by Ebedmech, an Ethiopian eunuch, for Jeremiah, “a Prophet of the Lord.” When the Ethiopian heard that Jeremiah was cast into the dungeon, “he made intercession for him to the King and got liberty to take him out of the jaws of death.” Hall concluded, “And now, my African brethren, you see what a noble order you are members of.”

William Gilbert probably maintained his concern about the difficulties facing the settlers in Sierra Leone, for in August 1794 his brother Nathaniel returned from Antigua to Bristol, where Anna Maria Falconbridge gave a copy of her just-published *Narrative* to “that valuable and ever to be esteemed Divine Mr. GILBERT.”⁷⁵ In it she recounted in detail the mistreatment of the Nova Scotians and especially of Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson by the directors in London. Taking his copy with him to London, Nathaniel continued to collaborate with John Clarkson in their private, long-distance support of

⁷¹ J. Gilbert, *Memoir*, 13-16.

⁷² Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1993), 5-14. After his conversion and second marriage, John criticized the white Antiguan Freemasons for their excessive drinking and bawdy singing during lodge meetings; J. Gilbert, *Memoir*, 9-11.

⁷³ Upton, “Prince Hall’s Letters,” 61.

⁷⁴ Prince Hall, *A Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge on the 25th of June, 1792, at the Hall of Brother William Smith, in Charlestown [Massachusetts], by the Right Worshipful Master Prince Hall* (Boston: Bible and Heart, 1792), 4, 6, 12-13.

⁷⁵ Falconbridge, *Narrative*, Appendix.

Perkins and the Nova Scotians.⁷⁶ He was aware that the white construction supervisor Isaac Dubois, Anna Maria's new husband, sent to Clarkson his detailed Nova Scotian journal, in which he described the harsh and deceptive treatment of the Nova Scotian masons and carpenters by the new officials.⁷⁷

Though William Gilbert welcomed his brother, nothing is known about his own activities from August 1793 until his reappearance in Bristol in May 1795. During that gap, he evidently worked on *The Hurricane*, which reflected many of Nathaniel's concerns, but from a more radical and eccentric perspective. Returning to Bristol, where Anna Maria and Dubois were now living, William brought with him his draft of *The Hurricane*, which earned the qualified admiration of his new literary friends, Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. In his extensive notes, Gilbert argued that the winds of revolution had turned from America to England and France:

While the inhabitants of AMERICA were subdued, the Europeans were gradually tincturing themselves with the feelings, manners and habits, of that new Quarter of the Globe. In other words, while AMERICAN *bodies* were destroyed by European bodies, AMERICAN SPIRITS were subduing the Europeans.⁷⁸

Gilbert identified Antigua and the West Indies as America, and he proclaimed, "I AM AN AMERICAN, AND *Qui SENTI Ille EST*" (What a person feels is what that person is).⁷⁹ Chastising the sugar planters of the West Indies, he argued, "With every lump of Sugar, a certain portion of *Essence* of AMERICA and of AFRICA is swallowed; and if refined with blood of bulls, a proportion of England too."⁸⁰

Drawing on Swedenborg's writings about Africa, Gilbert declared that Africa "is poised on the Equator; and certainly is the fiery region of the world"; moreover, the African is "the most *internal* man in the world."⁸¹ In an argument similar to the African-American Freemasons, he considered Egypt to be part of Africa and thus laid "aside the vulgar presumption in favor of *Asia* for the *Spring* of human Being":

I have not a penumbra of hesitation in affirming it to be ABYSSINIA; nor do I doubt, that the first formation of Man into Societies and apparent order, was in EGYPT... every REVELATION OF SCIENCE OR INSTRUCTION TO MAN, pagan or evangelical, has been from EGYPT... Here was the original ORFICINA GENTIUM, or work-shop or factory of nations.⁸²

Proclaiming that "AFRICA may be EDEN, and the Garden Eastward, Abyssinia...equally poised on the Equator, and opening her Ports *first* to the narrow sea of Asia; and then to the broader Mediterranean,

⁷⁶ For the Nova Scotians' unhappy letters to Clarkson, see Christopher Fyfe, ed., *"Our Children Free and Happy": Letters from Black Settlers in Africa in the 1790s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 171, 187.

⁷⁸ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 59.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 63. The process of refining raw sugar in England consisted in boiling it in lime-water and bullock's blood; see Cheshire, *William Gilbert*, 137n.118.

⁸¹ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 67.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 74.

and lastly, to all the Ocean,” he revealed the sources of his interest in the Gibberti, for “such undeniably has been the road of Light through the World.”⁸³

Gilbert read about the Gibberti in Charles Jacques Poncet’s *A Voyage to Ethiopia Made in the Years 1698-1700* (London, 1709), which portrayed the handsome, intelligent black kings and the magnificent, humane emperor of Ethiopia with great admiration. The emperor calls himself Jesus, and his officers wear a head-band emblazoned with golden letters, “Jesus Emperor of Ethiopia, of the Tribe of Judah, who has always vanquish’d his Enemies.” It is likely that Poncet’s well-known descriptions were familiar to Prince Hall, John Marrant, and other Masonic devotees of “Ethiopianism.” Throughout *The Hurricane*, Gilbert made allusions to Masonic themes, and in Poncet he learned about an Ethiopian church that contained “three pyramidal and triangular Spires, all fill’d with Hieroglyphicks.”⁸⁴ The spires are as high as the obelisk before St. Peter’s at Rome, attesting to the skill of the stone carvers who made them. Among the hieroglyphics on each spire was the emblem of a Lock, “which is very singular because the Ethiopians have no locks.” With an oblique hint that there may be a lost key to the lock, Poncet noted, “Tis believ’d that this was the Country of the Queen of *Saba* [Sheba].” For Masonic readers, this would tie Ethiopian hieroglyphics to their storied Grand Master, King Solomon. Prince Hall claimed that the Queen of Sheba discussed “points of Masonry” with Solomon, who showed her “curious pieces of architecture in the temple.”⁸⁵ Like William Gilbert, Hall believed that females had a role in ancient Masonry, “for if ever there was a female mason in the world she [Queen of Sheba] was one.”

Though Poncet gave a negative portrayal of the Muslim “Gebertis,” who were the Christian emperor’s slaves, Gilbert read in a later work a more provocative account of what he believed was his ancestral tribe. In James Bruce’s *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (London, 1790), the Scottish explorer and Freemason revealed that the Gibberti had become the “the princes and merchants of this country,” and from the sea of Suez they “trade into the heart of Africa,” through all the mountains of Abyssinia to the Western sea.⁸⁶ Here was the key route that could link the mysterious Christian interior with the western coast at Sierra Leone—the route that the Swedenborgian Masons had sought but failed to find. Bruce wrote that the Gibberti were “tawny, and have long hair,” and they are “a nation rich and so powerful” that they have made themselves independent of their ancient masters the Abyssinians, whom they hold in contempt for having a different faith.⁸⁷ They are shrewd, intelligent, and “have appeared in Europe and [been] treated as Ambassadors.”

William knew that Swedenborg had portrayed Islam positively, and through his brother, he could have learned that Nordenskjold had planned to work with Muslim traders when he travelled from

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 95. In a footnote, Gilbert referred to “Poncet and Bruce.”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64, 82, 84, 92, 95; Charles Jacques Poncet, *A Voyage to Ethiopia Made in the Years 1699-1700* (London, 1709), 106-07.

⁸⁵ Prince Hall, *A Charge, delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, at Menotomy* (Boston, 1797), 10.

⁸⁶ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Dublin, 1790), II, 186-87.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, II 184-85

Sierra Leone into the “illuminated” interior.⁸⁸ Moreover, their Swedish colleague in Sierra Leone, the botanist Adam Afzelius, reported to the London Swedenborgians that his meeting with three Muslim members of the interior Fula tribe convinced him of the truth of Swedenborg’s African visions:

The countenances of these men were beautiful and comely (very different from the negroes on the coast), their voices were sweet and sonorous, their gestures and manners mild and engaging... they had frequent and open communication with the spiritual world and its inhabitants; even at the time Mr. A. was with them they declared they saw angelic spirits, which it seems was no uncommon case with these men.⁸⁹

Afzelius may have shared his Swedenborgian ideas with Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson, for he accompanied them on their voyage to London in 1793.⁹⁰

Such reports must have encouraged William Gilbert’s desire to join the Muslim Gibberti. In *The Hurricane*, he noted that “as the Abyssinians never leave their country,” the Gibberti “have been ever their Merchants and their Embassadors to Europe.”⁹¹ He then claimed that they are the ambassadors referred to in *Isaiah*, XVII, 1, 2:

1. Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia.
2. That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters, saying, Go ye swift messengers, to a nation scattered and peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden down, whose land the rivers have spoiled!

He added that “if the hard, rough, toiling *country* [written in Greek]...to which they are sent, be not *Europe*, what region is it?” Cheshire explains that Gilbert then validates “by name correspondence his spiritual intuition of being an emissary of this new divine influence.”⁹² Gilbert argued further that the rationalist Europeans cannot comprehend this spiritual illumination:

The inference designed may seem almost an infantine speculation to the European, who knows of no relations but what are guaranteed by a parson or clerk, and archived in a register, according to statute; and therefore I have published enough; but with the aid of two or three other Correspondences, I can infallibly prove my Relation from *Spirit*, because *in Spirit*, although *naturally*, it may be *thought*, improbable.⁹³

Like Marrant and the black Nova Scotian Masons, Gilbert believed that the Bible justified their belief that Egypt and Ethiopia were the original home of a more pure and uncorrupted African race, a race that invented Freemasonry, and Gilbert wanted to be their messenger. As a born-again Gibberti, he

⁸⁸ On Swedenborg’s admiration for Muslim beliefs, see my *Emanuel Swedenborg, Secret Agent on Earth and in Heaven: Jacobites, Jews, and Freemasons in Early Modern Sweden* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 291, 524, 527, 620, 733.

⁸⁹ Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 79.

⁹⁰ Falconbridge, *Narrative*, 190.

⁹¹ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 77.

⁹² Cheshire, *William Gilbert*, 145.

⁹³ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 77-78.

proclaimed that “nothing is done towards enlightening the World at large, till the ESOTERIC overwhelms the EXOTERIC.”⁹⁴ He had probably heard from his brother that Zachary Macaulay, the new governor of the Sierra Leone colony, was horrified by the passionate spirituality of the Nova Scotians. James Walker notes that they believed that their “inspiration came directly from God to the preacher and his congregation through visions, dreams, and the physiological experiences of the prayer meeting.”⁹⁵ They had carried on the practices of John Marrant’s congregations, in which there were groans and sighing, weeping and crying out, faintings and near-death experiences, trances and visions, when worshippers were struck down or elevated by the spirit.⁹⁶ Similar reports came from the African-American Methodist congregations in Antigua and Nova Scotia.

In 1792, while Nathaniel Gilbert was in London, supporting the cause of Cato Perkins (one of the most passionate and exuberant preachers), Gilbert’s cousin and co-chaplain, the Antigua-born Melville Horne, determined to suppress the Nova Scotians’ religious “enthusiasm.” He preached to Perkins’s congregation that their “dreams, visions, and the most ridiculous bodily sensations” were *not* “incontestable proofs of their acceptance with God or of their being filled with the Holy Ghost.”⁹⁷ They must test such experiences against Scripture. His sermon infuriated the Nova Scotians, leading their captain Henry Beverhout to publicly criticize Horne and work to “restore to dreams and visions their ascendancy over the word of God.” He went further to compare the new governor, William Dawes, to Pharaoh, and the Company to the oppressors of Israel. Nathaniel Gilbert may have quietly disapproved of Horne’s action, for despite Beverhout’s “roaring style of oratory,” he considered the black preacher a friend and good citizen.⁹⁸ William Gilbert, like his contemporary William Blake and the African-American and Swedenborgian Masons, believed that “Low indeed is that state, where few see Visions, few dream Dreams, few interpret them.”⁹⁹

Though William still admired Swedenborg’s writings, he no longer respected the increasingly conservative Swedenborgians who now dominated the society in London. The split between the radical Masonic *Illuminés* and the government-supporting “fundamentalists” had been provoked by Nordenskjöld’s advocacy for Swedenborg’s theories of conjugal love, concubinage, and perpetual “virile potency.” Both he and Wadstrom had been kicked out of the society in 1789.¹⁰⁰ In *The Hurricane*, William mocked those rationalistic Europeans who can only see the external in certain words of scripture: “Therefore I say to you all, whether College Petit-maitres, Priests, Moralists, Encyclopaedia Writers, Swedenborgians, or Philosophers” that “Christ wants no such help, no such defenders.”¹⁰¹ He

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁵ James Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London: Longman’s, 1976), 196.

⁹⁶ Brooks, *American Lazarus*, 111

⁹⁷ Susanne Schwarz, *Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone Colony, 1793-1794* (Leipzig: Leipzig UP, 2000), 61-62.

⁹⁸ Hart, “Diary of Lieutenant Clarkson, 29.

⁹⁹ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 75-77. For the background to the split between the radical and conservative Swedenborgian Masons, see my article, “The Secret Masonic History of Blake’s Swedenborg Society,” *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 26 (1992), 40-51.

¹⁰¹ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 54.

apparently now grouped the loyalist members of the Swedenborg Society with other “brawlers for Jesus.”¹⁰²

However, he still admired Wadstrom, who defended Anna Maria Falconbridge’s book against her hostile critics, noting that she courageously displayed “enlightened zeal in a great cause.”¹⁰³ Maintaining his belief in Swedenborg’s vision of Africa, “Citizen” Wadstrom was now working with French Masons to argue the abolitionist-colonial cause in France. In an article that Gilbert contributed to Coleridge’s journal, *The Watchman* (2 April 1796), he seemed to draw on Wadstrom’s earlier work, *Observations on the Slave Trade* (London, 1789). The Swede recommended the introduction of luxury, “the improvement of the conveniencies and comforts of life,” noting that “By *Luxury*, I understand, all enjoyments beyond the necessaries of mere animal life,” a word “now so generally abused.”¹⁰⁴ In a friendly challenge to Coleridge’s “Lecture on the Slave-Trade,” in which Coleridge blamed “*imaginary Wants*” for the vices of slavery and urged the use of only “necessaries,” Gilbert argued:

Commerce is always opened for the attainment of luxuries, not necessaries... Luxuries are *necessaries*. Luxuries I mean as a general term for every thing beyond the rudest food and cloathing; for all those wants which originate in the necessity of our intellectual though not of our animal nature. If we confine the wants of man to the wants of the mere animal, we unravel the web of society and brutalize our nature...¹⁰⁵

Rather than a credo of capitalism, Gilbert argued that balanced trade will contribute to social and political equality: “Equality is the only solid, lasting basis on which mankind as Individuals or as Nations can communicate.” In *The Hurricane*, published in late 1796, he determined “to clear EQUALITY from the obloquy of the English.”¹⁰⁶

Despite the support of his literary friends in Bristol, who tried to protect him from his reckless eccentricities, Gilbert still determined to travel to Africa, and he believed that the French—perhaps at Wadstrom’s prodding—shared his vision. He wrote that “the French are embarked [for Abyssinia] and are near landing on this spot of practical, sensual, or corporeal Good.”¹⁰⁷ In a politically risky passage, he praised Sennar, “on the *confines* of Abyssinia, for being “the only kingdom in the World, which allowed the king to be regularly tried and put to death.” He may have heard from his brother that in 1793 the desperate Nova Scotians reminded a hated Company official of “the melancholy fate of Louis XVI, and threatening something similar to him,” if he did not distribute the promised provisions.¹⁰⁸ When the frightened official capitulated, they promised “to wait peaceably till their Deputies,” Perkins and Anderson, “return from England.” Given the English government’s horror at the execution of Louis XVI,

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰³ Charles Bernhard Wadstrom, *An Essay of Colonization, Particularly Applied to the West Coast of Africa* (London: Dunton and Harvey, 1794-95), 782.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Bernhard Wadstrom, *Observations on the Slave Trade* (London: James Philips, 1789), 35.

¹⁰⁵ William Gilbert, “The Commercial Academic,” *The Watchman* (2 April 1796), 135-36. In *William Gilbert*, 61-63, Paul Cheshire interprets Gilbert’s article as a response to Coleridge’s lecture.

¹⁰⁶ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

¹⁰⁸ Falconbridge, *Narrative*, 127.

the Nova Scotians and William Gilbert were sailing close to the wind. But in *The Hurricane*, the poet fearlessly proclaimed, "I am the only Being in the World, who goes through every inch and every league of the French Revolution."

Nathaniel Gilbert probably informed his brother that the African-American Masons in Sierra Leone would share his radical sentiments, for they interpreted a French attack on Freetown in 1794 as a providential strike at their oppressors, the Company's directors and officials. Isaac Anderson and his supporters wrote to Clarkson that they believed that God saw the tyranny and injustice inflicted upon them and sent the French as a "Message of his Power to attack the Barbarous Task Masters in the Height of their Pomp and Oppression."¹⁰⁹ They thus stood by while the ransacking French sailors looted and burned the Company's buildings, leading one Swedenborgian resident (John Lowes) to compare the French ("a ragged, lawless set of rascals") to the "Sans Culottes."¹¹⁰ Anderson further informed Clarkson that after the attack, the French "Enemy" had pity on their case and bestowed some necessaries upon them.

An outraged Governor Macaulay reported that in Freetown, "a religious society is erected into some kind of Jacobin club for controlling government."¹¹¹ He complained that the government of the black Methodists "is a pure democracy, without subordination to anyone." The officials regretted "the undisciplined extravagances of some preachers, and their readiness to mix politics and religion in their emotional, even ecstatic, out pourings." For the black Nova Scotians, this merger of religion and politics, as advocated by Marrant and Hall, was their major defense against racist injustice. These reports from the former "Province of Freedom" and the intensifying repression of "irregular" Freemasonry and other "corresponding societies" in England must have reinforced William Gilbert's African ambitions.

When Coleridge left Bristol for Nether Stowey in late 1796, Southey replaced him as the promoter of Gilbert's work.¹¹² Southey later wrote that after the publication of *The Hurricane*, Gilbert placarded the walls in London "with the largest bills that had at that time been seen, announcing the 'Law of Fire.'" The two corresponded until July 1798, when Gilbert disappeared from Bristol. A worried Southey wrote William Roscoe, a wealthy abolitionist in Liverpool, that Gilbert was now in his city, "from whence he intends to work his passage to Africa":

He is a man of much information & much genius, but afflicted with that worst calamity, mental derangement; & should he leave England without money, & on the wild idea of being divinely called to Africa, the fatigues of such a voyage & the situation he would be in at its close would probably be fatal to him. What Sir I have taken the liberty to request of you is, that you would inform the captain of any African vessel about to sail that Mr Gilbert is deranged, that they might refuse to take him.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Fyfe, *Our Children*, 44.

¹¹⁰ Coleman, *Romantic Colonization*, 127. The burning of the colony's papers perhaps explains the lack of surviving documents on the first Masonic lodge.

¹¹¹ Fyfe, *History*, 56.

¹¹² Cheshire, *William Gilbert*, 74.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Roscoe could not find him, and it is unknown if he indeed tried to sail to Africa. He could have learned from his brother Nathaniel in 1796 that some of the Nova Scotians wrote to Clarkson that because of the continuing oppression, they would leave the colony just as the Israelites left Egypt.¹¹⁴ By 1800 their situation had so deteriorated that the remaining settlers met at Cato Perkins's chapel and formed a rival government. When Isaac Anderson, who had earlier accompanied Perkins to London, led an armed revolt against the Company, Perkins tried to mediate, but Anderson was subsequently executed. Nathaniel Gilbert and Clarkson continued to admire the Nova Scotians and sympathize with their cause, but more conservative abolitionists poured scorn upon them. William Wilberforce wrote that "They have made the worst possible subjects, as thorough Jacobins as if they had been trained and educated in Paris." Was it merely coincidental that "around 1800," the time of the Nova Scotians' rebellion, William Gilbert, after spending some time in Antigua with his Masonic cousin John, emigrated to Charleston, South Carolina? His sister Elizabeth reported that America "was the only country with the government of which, he could feel satisfied."¹¹⁵

According to the recently discovered obituary of Gilbert, published in Georgia in the *Augusta Chronicle* (3 July 1824), he was so "disgusted with the politics of the English Government," that "he determined to pass the rest of his days in America."¹¹⁶ One wonders if he initially chose Charleston because of the many African-American Freemasons from that cosmopolitan city, some of whom were known to his brother Nathaniel and probably to his cousin John. In 1782 loyalist blacks from Charleston, known as the "Ethiopian Dragoons," had been transported to Antigua to build fortifications for the British.¹¹⁷ Many of them stayed on as freed slaves in Antigua. As the Naval Storekeeper and a Freemason, John Gilbert would have been aware of the Charlestonian-Ethiopian craftsmen's expertise in carpentry and stonemasonry. During William's residence in Charleston from ca. 1800 to 1810, the city offered great employment opportunities for free black artisans, who performed "most of the mechanical arts," and were tolerated and even protected by local whites.¹¹⁸ Methodism attracted many blacks, who formed mutual assistance societies, often modelled on those of Antient Freemasonry. However, William virtually disappeared from the historical record until his move to Augusta, Georgia, in 1810.

In Augusta, where he lived for the next fourteen years, he entered a community where Freemasonry was long-established and influential, where Methodism struggled to gain a foothold, and where republican-revolutionary sentiments remained strong. Though the colony of Georgia had maintained its prohibitions against slavery until 1750, the British trustees changed the law, and Augusta became part of the southern slave economy. One wonders what Gilbert's attitude was to the attempted

¹¹⁴ Fyfe, *Our Children*, 52.

¹¹⁵ Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections*, 37.

¹¹⁶ Obituary discovered by Patricia Cline Cohen, UC-Santa Barbara, August 19, 2018. I am grateful to Paul Cheshire for sending a copy to me; it is now posted on his William Gilbert website.

¹¹⁷ Graham Russell Hodges, Susan Hawkes Cook, eds., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile After the American Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1996), xvi, xli n. 17.

¹¹⁸ Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (1997; University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 2000), 16-19, 23.

slave rebellions in Augusta in 1819 and in Charleston in 1822. According to his obituary, Gilbert was “esteemed for his urbanity, integrity and benevolence.” He was praised as the author of unpublished “dramatic pieces,” of “many essays moral and political,” and of “a poem called the Hurricane, which was about to be issued from the American press at the time of his death.” There was no mention of any mental derangement or “a crack in his upper story.”

In his conclusion to *The Hurricane*, Gilbert described his “lonesome pilgrimage through the world, which was unavoidable to one, who saw in a light different from ALL THE WORLD,” for “the zeal of the Temple had even eaten me up.”¹¹⁹ But, ever proudly optimistic, he proclaimed, I AM NOT UNDERSTOOD. `tis well. I UNDERSTAND MYSELF. It is better.” Like the pioneering “Nova Scotian” Freemasons in Sierra Leone, who shared his “zeal of the Temple,” William Gilbert’s history requires new, international investigation.

ADDENDUM: THE SEARCH GOES ON IN 2019.

After this paper had gone to press, the researchers Paul Cheshire, Patricia Cline, and Susan Thomas reported important new discoveries about William Gilbert. Newspaper articles of 1801 in Charleston, S.C., and 1824 in Augusta, Georgia, reveal his continuing radicalism and support of the American and French revolutions and, more importantly, his previously unknown Masonic writings. At present, these writings and his other political and literary productions have not been found, but we hope that curious Masons and other historians may join the search. Ric Berman raises the question of Gilbert’s possible influence on the foundation of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in Charleston in 1801. See the attached newspaper articles.

¹¹⁹ W. Gilbert, *Hurricane*, 103-04.

