The Two Princes of Calabar

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ATLANTIC ODYSSEY

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For Linda S. Ferguson

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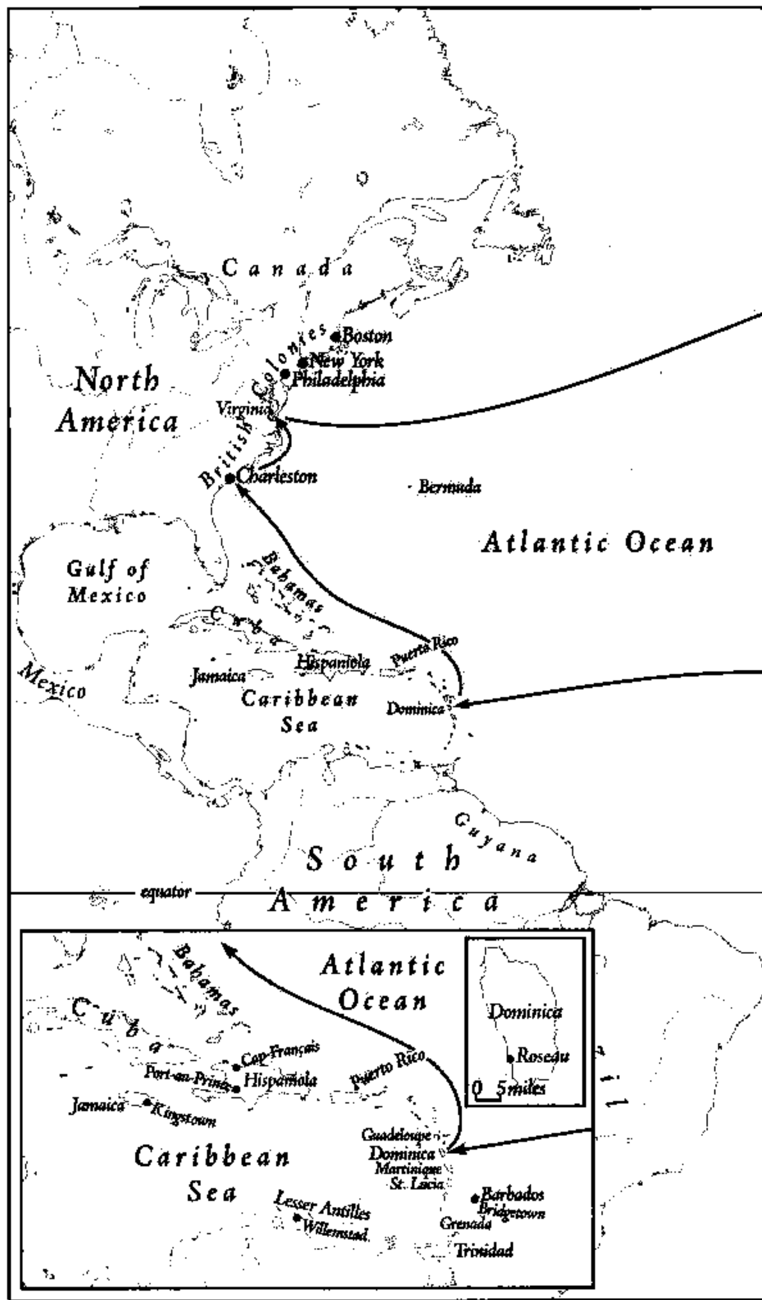
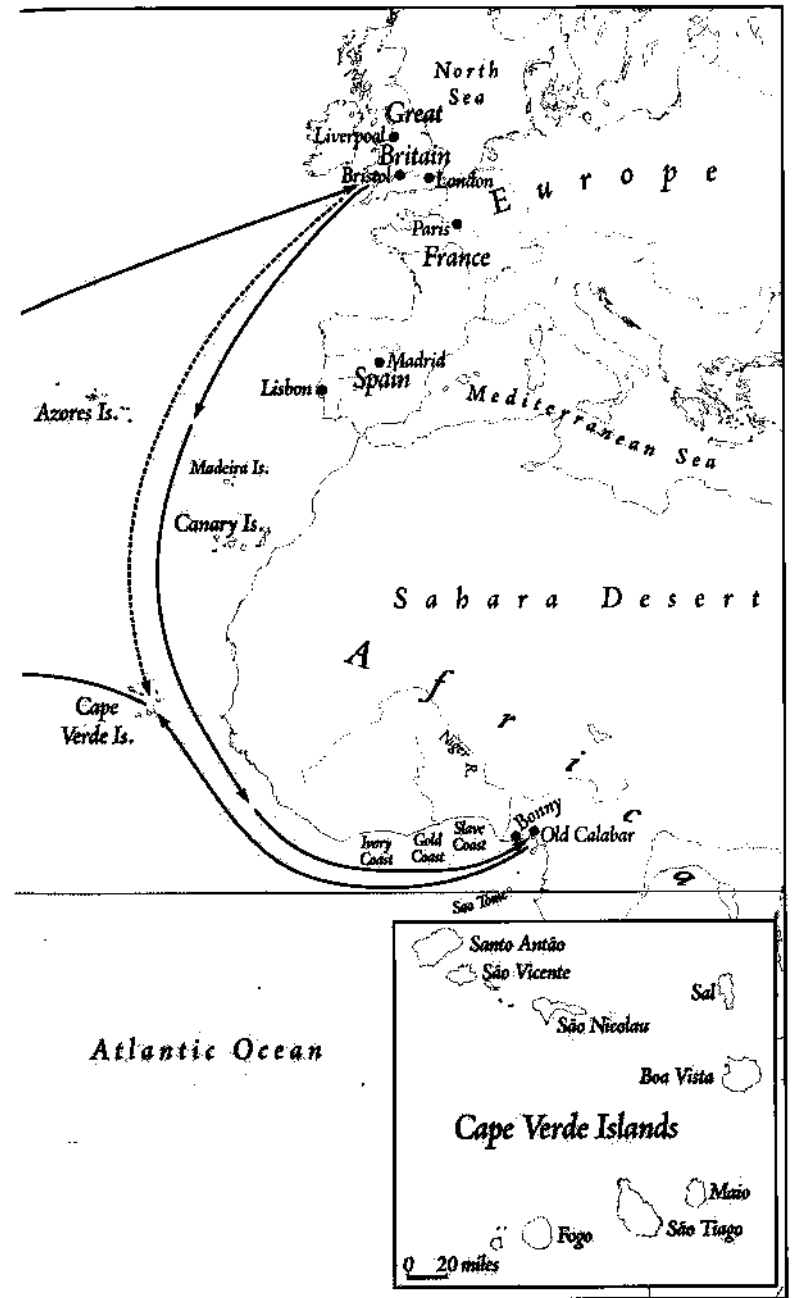
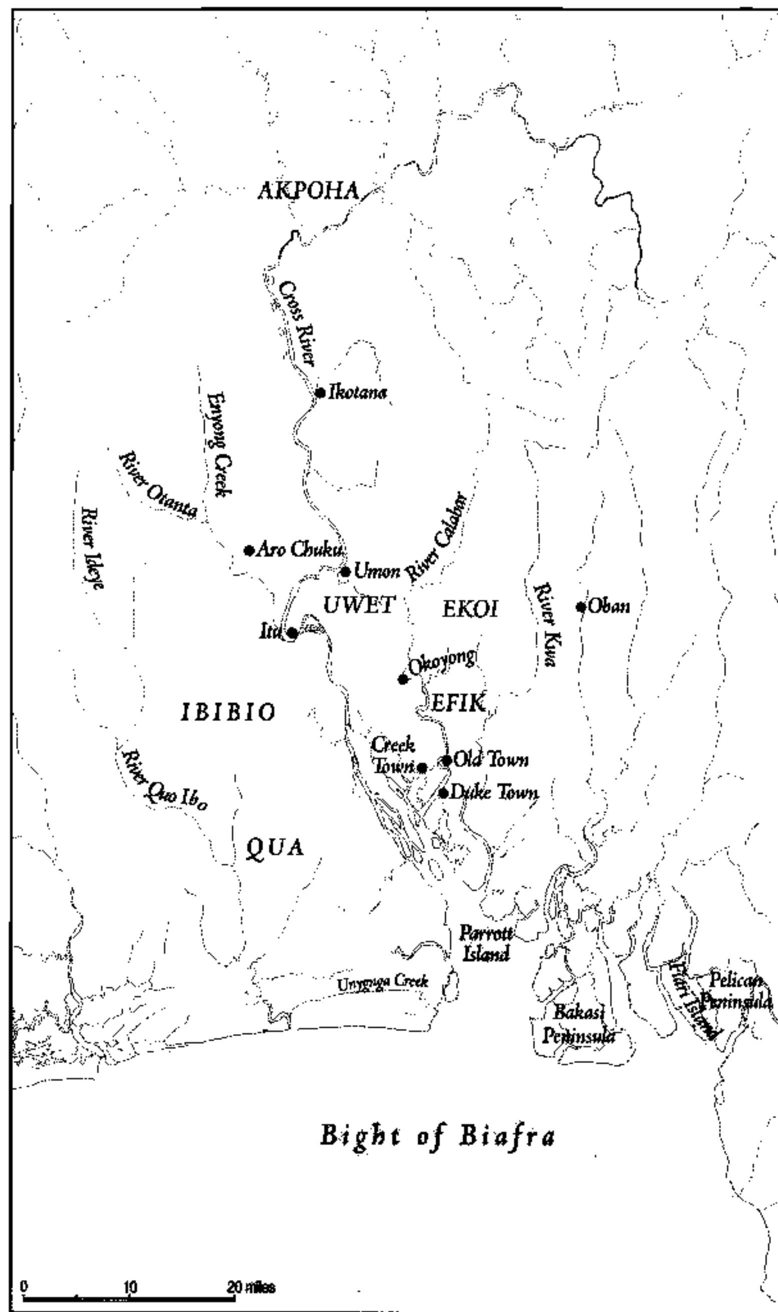




The Robin Johns' voyages around the Atlantic World



Old Calabar in the eighteenth century

Prologue

In 1767 Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, were captured during an ambush by English slavers in the African port of Old Calabar and sold into slavery in the Americas. The young men were members of the ruling family of Old Town, a major slave-trading town in Old Calabar. Grandy King George, the ruler of Old Town, was Little Ephraim's brother and Ancona's uncle. Those relationships led the English to refer to them as princes, though "prince" was not a title in use in their native land. Their remarkable odyssey took them from Africa, to the Caribbean, to Virginia, to England, and finally back to Africa. Their story, written in their own hand, survives as an early, and as yet virtually unknown, firsthand account of an Atlantic slave experience with important implications for the history of the slave trade, slaves' relentless quest for freedom, the early British antislavery movement, and the

role of enslaved Africans in the creation of the early modern Atlantic World.

Those of us engaged in historical research know well the joys of chance discoveries. This project began when I visited the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, where I was researching a topic in the history of early nineteenth-century American and British Methodism. The Rylands Library was built in honor of John Rylands, one of England's wealthiest cotton manufacturers and merchants, whose business was closely linked to plantation slavery. As I scanned the catalogue to the papers of Charles Wesley, the brother of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and one of the greatest Protestant hymnodists, I ran across descriptions of a series of letters written by former slaves to Charles. Intrigued by the brief references in the catalogue to the collection, I asked to see the letters. What I found were a series of letters written to Wesley by Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, natives of Old Calabar, a slave-trading depot on the West Coast of Africa, who were enslaved in the Americas before making their way to England. I found the letters so compelling that I began to find out as much as I could about the men and their story, a project that has led me to research in the histories of Africa, the slave trade, the Caribbean, and England.

With Columbus's voyage in 1492, the Atlantic Ocean was transformed from a barrier into a bridge, and com-

plex links began to emerge between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Much important work has been done on the emergence and growth of the Atlantic World in recent years, though the topic is usually taken up in broad studies that have addressed such topics as the exchange of plants, animals and diseases, the massive movement of people, the rise of new economic systems, the transfer of culture and institutions, and the development of empires.[1] But in this book I explore the impact of the rise of the Atlantic World on a particular place in time—eighteenth-century Old Calabar—through the lives of two men who were themselves products of that Atlantic World. Their identities were shaped by it and they moved through it—often touched by those large impersonal forces that have captured so much scholarly attention, and their story can provide a microhistory of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic World. The Robin Johns can best be understood as Atlantic creoles. My use of that term is borrowed from the historian Ira Berlin. In defining Atlantic creoles, Berlin is moving away from the definition of creoles as individuals of African or European origin born in the New World toward a definition that owes more to linguists and their understanding of creolized languages. In his definition, it is culture, not birth, that designates Atlantic creoles. As Berlin wrote:

> Along the periphery of the Atlantic—first in Africa, then in Europe, and finally in the Americas—

> African-American society was a product of the momentous meeting of Africans and Europeans and of their equally fateful encounter with the peoples of the Americas. Although the countenances of these new people of the Atlantic—Atlantic creoles—might bear the features of Africa, Europe, or the Americas in whole or in part, their beginnings, strictly speaking, were in none of those places. Instead, by their experiences and sometimes by their persons, they had become part of the three worlds that came together along the Atlantic littoral. Familiar with the commerce of the Atlantic, fluent in its new languages, and intimate with its trade and cultures, they were cosmopolitan in the fullest sense.[2]

The Robin Johns were such individuals, and their story will help bring the lives of Atlantic creoles into sharper focus.

The Atlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in human history. Over the course of the trade, approximately eleven million men, women, and children from a wide variety of African ethnic groups were captured, sold, and transported to the New World.[3] Despite the vast scope of the trade, firsthand accounts from the victims themselves are extremely rare. Largely illiterate (though not entirely, as the example of the Robin Johns illustrates), captives had few opportunities to write down

their stories, and few slave masters had any interest in their doing so. Typically they were enslaved in brutal and harsh conditions in the plantation societies of the New World, and so there was little chance that any records from the slaves themselves could survive. For decades, historians of the slave trade played the "numbers game," a long-running and often heated debate over the extent of the trade and the number people who fell victim to it. While there can be no question that the numbers are vital to a full understanding of the trade and of its terrible costs in human lives, that focus on the numbers often obscured the individual stories of those who experienced enslavement. The challenge is to translate those statistics into people. Indeed, most of those individuals are lost to history—it is now impossible to reconstruct the lives of eleven million individuals, though only that could fully reveal the scope of the trade's tragic impact. The sheer number of victims defies easy comprehension, and yet we know that great diversity of experience lies behind those numbers. The Robin Johns offer one opportunity to portray victims of the trade in greater detail and to restore the voices of two of the individuals who survived the Middle Passage, the journey from the west coast of Africa to the Americas. Their story is filled with surprises, and they cannot be considered typical of the men who were enslaved in Africa.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect to the Robin Johns' story for modern readers is that they were themselves

slave traders. The slave trade spread its tentacles throughout the Atlantic World, and it could not have been conducted so successfully without the complicity of men and institutions in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Robin Johns must be situated within the history of their home in Old Calabar, an important trade depot located in the Bight of Biafra, one of the most intensely trafficked slave-trading regions anywhere in Africa. This area rose to prominence in the trade only in the mid-eighteenth century as families like the Robin Johns created thriving commercial trading houses in Old Calabar built on the profits from the slave trade.

In 1767 several British Guineamen, as the slave ships were called, lay in the Calabar River, where they engaged in a lucrative trade with their African counterparts, members of an ethnic group known as the Efik. That trade was dominated by a relatively small number of English slave traders in Bristol and Liverpool and Efik slave traders in Old Calabar. Those English and African merchants formed long-term relationships, nurtured through education, social interactions, and fictive kinship ties, but those relationships could be brittle and could quickly be undermined by the violence that plagued the trade. By the mid-1700s a bitter trade rivalry existed between Old Town and New Town, the largest settlements in Old Calabar. The competition between Old Town and New Town flared in 1767 when the New Town traders persuaded British ship captains to join them in entrapping and murdering several hundred residents of Old

Town involved in the trade, a pivotal event in the history of Old Calabar. During the bloody battle, a British captain captured two members of the ruling family of Old Town, Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John.

The captain carried the men to the Caribbean island of Dominica, where they were sold to a French physician. After several months, a ship's captain offered to help the young men escape to freedom. Their activities hint at the complexity that surrounds the African slave trade. These men were creolized Africans from a coastal region where close and long-standing ties between British and African merchants had enabled them to learn English and other skills useful to the members of a prominent merchant family. Their example serves as an important reminder that not all native Africans sold as slaves in the Americas fit the stereotype of the "outlandish" African, who knew nothing about European languages or culture. The Robin Johns attempted to use their considerable language and interpersonal skills to negotiate their escape. They may well have assumed that bargains such as the one they struck with the ship captain could be relied upon, as they generally could on the coast of West Africa, where slavers depended heavily on the good will of the local African elites. Rather than returning them to Africa as agreed, however, the captain sold the Robin Johns to a merchant in Virginia. After five years in Virginia, the princes met two of their countrymen from Old Calabar who had sailed to Amer-

ica aboard a slave ship from Bristol. The men described the princes' plight to their captain, who convinced the princes that he would return them to Old Calabar if they ran away with him. The princes escaped and boarded his ship, but the captain took them to Bristol, where he attempted to sell them into slavery once again.

Desperate to escape, the young men wrote to Thomas Jones, a Bristol merchant and slave trader, who helped get them off the ship, but they had to remain in jail until they successfully appealed to William Murray, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who helped free them. Their case is a significant one in the history of the legality of slavery in Britain. Their case was the first dealing with slavery in Britain following the landmark *Somerset* case, in which Mansfield ruled in 1772 that James Somerset, once enslaved in Virginia, could not be forced to return to bondage in America because slavery was not supported by English law. The Africans asked for and received spiritual instruction and reading lessons from Charles Wesley. They were frequent visitors in the Wesley household and wrote affectionate letters to Wesley and his children. They came into frequent contact with Charles's brother, John, and they were converted to Methodism and baptized. After several months in England, the princes sailed for Old Calabar, but their ship was wrecked in a storm on a deserted island off the African coast. Rescued after sixteen days by a ship bound for Bristol, they were forced to return to England. After another stay of several months, they set out again and finally made their way back to their home in Old Calabar. Once back in Africa they remained in contact with English friends and invited the first Methodist missionaries to come to Africa. The evidence indicates that they also went back to their old business as slave traders, highlighting the complexities and moral ambiguities that surround the trade.

Their remarkable story, preserved in their own hand, offers a rare glimpse into the eighteenth-century slave trade from the perspective of the Africans themselves. Recently, scholars have called into question the authenticity of the best-known eighteenth-century slave narrative, that of Olaudah Equiano, particularly his claim to have been born in Africa, his description of his homeland, and his experience in the Middle Passage.[4] The Robin Johns' story can be verified in almost every detail, and it is vital to bring to light as many firsthand accounts of the slave trade as possible. As former slaves who returned to West Africa, their case opens a window onto the creolized trading communities along the coast and the regular movement of goods, people, and ideas around the Atlantic World. We are only beginning to appreciate the full importance of these Atlantic creoles and the communities they created for the explosion of commercial and cultural exchange that revolutionized African slave-trading regions and made them central players in the Atlantic community.

1

"A Very Bloody Transaction"

Old Calabar and the Massacre of 1767

Old Town bustled on a balmy June day as its dominant slave trader, Grandy King George, and his brothers, Amboe Robin John and Ephraim Robin Robin John, and his nephew Ancona Robin Robin John prepared to lead the grand delegation soon to visit the six English slave ships anchored in the Calabar River. Hundreds of enslaved canoe boys rushed to ready the vessels that would carry scores of notable traders and their retainers out to the tall ships. Clearly this occasion was to differ from the ceremonial visits that the individual traders from the major trading "houses" customarily paid the English captains of the slavers. A fleet of nine or ten great canoes, as long as eighty feet and carrying as many as 120 men, was the center of Old Town interest as they set off to party and parley. The most gaily decorated boat carried Grandy King George, who had to present himself in a fashion that justified the title he had recently taken for himself (he had formerly been known as Ephraim Robin John). His determination to equal the majesty of the English monarch included adopting many of the trappings of English culture; the king and his sons relieved themselves in English pewter piss pots, washed in large imported brass basins, and shaved with English razors they had imported through the English slave traders. Well aware of the king's fascination with European goods and of the ambition they betokened, English slavers had supplied him with a fine "Lucking glass six foot long and six foot wide" in "a strong woden freme" that allowed the very tall and quite stout king of Old Town to admire himself from all angles. Similar mirrors reflected his sons when they too dressed as "gentlemen" in clothes whose cut, color, and style they had specified meticulously when they ordered them from England.[1]

Grandy King George presented an imposing figure as he boarded the royal canoe—dressed in a multicolored robe reaching to his knees, a red coat trimmed in gold lace, a silk sash thrown round his shoulders, a gold-headed cane in one hand, a gold-trimmed cocked hat under his arm, and a fine ceremonial sword at his side—and then made his way to the bow, where he took his place under a grand umbrella. Brightly colored ensigns fluttered in the wind, one emblazoned with his own name written in English in large letters (for the traders were

literate in English).[2] Behind him a small house stood in the center of the canoe, brightly painted yellow and red, and atop the roof were two men loudly beating drums. In the bow a small cannon pointed forward, and in front of it stood a man who shook a large bundle of reeds to symbolically ward off obstacles and dangers. On each side of the canoe sat fifteen canoe boys with paddles, and between them, lined up down the center of the vessel, stood an imposing row of attendants. On most voyages these men would have been armed with cutlasses and guns, but John Ashley Hall, an English sailor on slave ships at Old Calabar in this period, reported that "when they [the Efik traders] came on board, in the common course of trade and visits, they had very few muskets in their canoes, and they are never suffered to bring their arms into the ships."[3] As the royal canoe pulled into the river it was followed by eight or nine others, all of them ornamented in the same style, though perhaps not on quite so grand a scale, occupied by the king's sons and by the "lesser gentry" of Old Town, meaning all the town's principal slave traders. Altogether, about four hundred men sailed toward the English vessels lying peacefully in the river about three miles distant from Old Town.

The purpose of this impressive visit was an invitation from the captains of the English ships to mediate a dispute then raging between the traders at Old Town and those from its commercial rival, New Town, also known as Duke Town. European ships paid "comey" or

"coomey," essentially a custom's duty based on the ship's tonnage, to the king of the town with which they planned to trade, hence the rivalry between Old Town and Duke Town for the primary location on the river.

Old Town had been established probably in the mid to late seventeenth century by the ancestors of Grandy King George on a high hill overlooking a ten-mile stretch of the Calabar River, an advantageous position to capitalize on the arrival of European slave traders in Old Calabar. That trade grew from a trickle in the seventeenth century to a veritable flood in the eighteenth, when Old Calabar became one of the principal slave-exporting regions in West Africa, an expansion that made Old Town one of the most important slave suppliers in the Bight of Biafra, greatly enriched the Robin Johns, and raised the envy of other traders in Old Calabar equally eager to share the spoils. Sometime between the late seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth, one of those families, the Dukes, originally from Creek Town, established a new trading center farther down the Calabar River at Atakpa (also known as New Town and later as Duke Town), and a long and bitter struggle ensued between Old Town and New Town for preeminence in the slave trade. The stakes were extremely high for both parties, and by 1767 matters had come to a head. The rivalry had become so intense that each side was preventing the other from sending slave-raiding expeditions up the Calabar River to purchase or capture the hundreds of

men, women, and children needed to satisfy the demands of the European captains. In addition, the captains themselves had sometimes been caught between the warring factions.[4]

When the exasperated captains offered to mediate between the rulers of Old Town and New Town, Grandy King George accepted their offer to come on board the English ships for a night of festivities, then to meet on board the rulers of New Town on the following day. The king may have been a bit flattered that it was he and his entourage who had been invited as overnight guests to enjoy the hospitality that the captains offered visiting dignitaries while the New Town men would not arrive until the next day. But Grandy King George was eager to settle a dispute that impoverished both towns, and as a sign of his magnanimity and sincerity he presented one of his favorite women to Duke Ephraim, the ruler of New Town, as a wife.[5]

Duke Ephraim, Grandy King George's chief rival, was also busy making preparations for the important event to take place on the following day, but rather than decking himself and his canoes out in ceremonial splendor, he prepared for battle. Duke Ephraim was finally ready to destroy his Old Town rivals, and with the help of the English captains, he prepared a trap for the Old Town delegation. Ever since his ancestors had founded New Town generations earlier, their aim had been to supplant

Old Town and take control of the vital and profitable slave trade. Until now, however, none of his predecessors had been able to defeat the wealthy and powerful Robin Johns. Duke Ephraim had worked diligently to build alliances that would enable him to crush his opponents with remarkable speed. New Town was settled as an offshoot of an older town called Creek Town, and the rulers of New Town had maintained alliances at Creek Town whose rulers also bristled at the wealth and power of Old Town. Creek Town had long been in decline, but its fortunes revived under the leadership of Eyo Nsa (called Eyo Honesty I or Willy Honesty by the Europeans because of his honorable dealings in trade), one of the most famous and successful of the Old Calabar traders. Unlike his contemporaries in the slave trade, he was not of noble birth, and may even have been born a slave, but through marriage, hard work, intelligence, courage, and ruthlessness, he rose to the chief position in Creek Town. Eyo Honesty was as eager as Duke Ephraim to destroy the preeminence of Old Town, and the two entered into an alliance against the Robin Johns. A successful warrior, Eyo Nsa was celebrated for his bravery and feared for his cruelty. The historian David Northrup aptly describes traders like Eyo Nsa and Duke Ephraim as "men of tremendous imagination, energy, and determination who succeeded where lesser men would have failed." Although we will probably never know who laid the clever plans that defeated the Robin Johns, the

scheme certainly looks like Eyo Nsa's handiwork. On the fatal morning, Eyo Nsa and Duke Ephraim readied their war canoes and hid them behind a heavily wooded turn in the river, eagerly awaiting a signal from the English ships to launch their ambush.[6]

Why should English captains intervene in Old Calabar's internal affairs? As relations between Old Town and New Town deteriorated, the English traders suffered the consequences. The English captains could either have their ships lie at anchor for months on end, with supplies running lower and lower, tempers rising higher and higher, while the traders at Old Town and New Town quarreled among themselves, or they could look for ways to force the rival traders to resume commerce. The growing rivalry between the towns threatened the peaceful conduct of trade and brought into prominence the ambiguities embedded in a commercial system based on trust and personal relationships, somewhat brittle relations that could be used both to build confidence and to deceive.

Captain James Berry of Liverpool, who had made many trading voyages to Old Calabar, expressed his outrage at the harsh treatment he received from the Robin Johns at Old Town in 1763. After anchoring his ship in the river off Old Town, he "according to custom went ashore to shake the Kings and the rest of the getlemen Hands." The Robin Johns refused to meet his terms, so

Berry forced them to trade by simply waiting on his ship for fifteen days until he wore them down to his price. But the Old Town traders were far from happy with the transaction, and Ephraim Robin John refused to give Berry his son for a pledge, as was customary. A few days later, "that rouge Ephm. [Ephraim] Robin John Joined by Rn [Robin] John Tom Robin, Captn. John Ambo and the Rest of that Town" sent out a fleet of ten war canoes to capture Berry, whom they held hostage for twenty-nine days. He reported that in order to gain his release, Grandy King George "obliged me to pay him and the Rest of the Schoundrells just what he pleas'd[;] the amount of his imposition is 4251 Copper [copper bars were the currency in Old Calabar. By contrast, Berry had paid only 1,000 coppers to the other traders for comey]." Along with the coppers, the king also took "one of my great guns . . . three of my musquetts two Blunderbusses 2 pistols [and] 2 cutlasses," arms that the king may have planned to use against his New Town rivals. To add insult to injury, the king even forced Berry "to give severall Books and one [account book] to clear him of all palaver with me." Once freed, Berry sailed downriver to trade with the Dukes at New Town, who, he reported, "I believe did me justice in every thing." Outraged by "the vilanious [*sic*] intentions of the Old Town Scoundrells," he vowed that he "never will forgive the injury Ephm and the rest of them did me till I have satisfaction."[7]

In 1764 Captain James Briggs had a violent confrontation with the Robin Johns. Though the details of their dispute do not survive, no doubt it was similar to that between the Robin Johns and Captain Berry. As the supplies of slaves dwindled and as the rivals at Old Town and New Town tried to prevent each other from acquiring and selling slaves, the English captains tried every means to force them to trade. One tactic was called rowing guard. English captains put boats into the river to stop Efik canoes. They captured the traders, and then held them hostage until they agreed to sell slaves at a reasonable price. They could also cut the Efik off from their supply of slaves by barring their passage upriver. Briggs had his chief mate lying in wait to ambush Orrock Robin John as he came down a creek in a canoe. The English sailors chased Orrock, who jumped ashore and made for the bush. When the Englishmen tried to follow, he leveled his musket and shot the first mate through the head.[8] Clearly the traders at Old Town had violated every rule that governed the trade, and their actions soon lost them the trust that was essential to maintaining successful relations.

In 1767 another English merchant at Old Calabar wrote, "There are now seven large vessels in the river, each of which expects to purchase 500 slaves, and I imagine there was seldom ever known a greater scarcity of slaves than at present." The reason for that scarcity was the ongoing struggle between Old Town and New

Town, which had grown so serious that "for a considerable time no canoe could leave their towns to go up the river for Slaves." The captain reported that "the natives are at variance with each other, and, in my opinion, it will never be ended before the destruction of all the people at Old Town, who have taken the lives of many a fine fellow . . . I now flatter myself, I shall be an assistant in revenging the just cause of every poor Englishman that have innocently suffered by them." Thanks to the reports of captains like Berry and the others, word of the arrogance and duplicity of the Old Town traders spread quickly among the small circle of slave traders in Liverpool and Bristol.[9]

In June 1767 seven English vessels lay in the river at Old Calabar: the *Indian Queen*, John Lewis, captain; the *Duke of York*, James Bivins, captain; the *Nancy*, James Maxwell, captain; the *Concord*, William Bishop, captain—all of Bristol—the *Hector*, John Washington, captain; the *Edgar*, Ambrose Lace, captain—both of Liverpool—and the *Canterbury* of London, Nonus Parke, captain. All of these captains were seasoned veterans of the trade to Old Calabar, and were well aware of the festering dispute between Old Town and New Town. European traders usually ignored internal disputes among the traders at Old Calabar, but given the disastrous impact of the dispute on the supply of slaves, combined with the actions of the Old Town traders, the captains clearly favored the traders at New Town. Whether the English

captains, Eyo Nsa, or Duke Ephraim actually devised the plot to destroy the Robin Johns is unclear, but they all found themselves with that goal in mind.[10]

Without the connivance of the English captains, the plot could not have succeeded. Most of the captains agreed that it was time to punish the Robin Johns for their effrontery and reopen the trade. Captains Bivins, Lace, Lewis, Maxwell, and Parke addressed several letters to the Robin Johns and the Old Town men inviting them to meet the traders from New Town aboard their ships, where the captains would serve as mediators to settle the dispute. The captains gave the Robin Johns assurances that they would be protected on their ships, probably the only conceivable place in Old Calabar where such assurances could have been given and the only neutral ground where each side could feel secure. Further, since the Efik were not permitted to carry arms on board the English ships and had few weapons in their canoes, if attacked, the Old Town men would be "incapable of resisting."[11]

After spending a pleasant night on board the English ships, no doubt fed well and plied with drink in keeping with the usual tenor of such visits, the men from Old Town awoke early to begin preparations for their important meeting. Grandy King George, his son Otto Ephraim, his younger brothers, Amboe and Little Ephraim Robin John, and his nephew Ancona Robin Robin John spent the night on board the *Indian Queen*. On the following

morning, Captain Lewis asked Amboe, Little Ephraim, and Ancona to deliver a letter to Captain Lace. Meanwhile, the canoes were busy carrying men to the other ships. From the *Edgar*, Amboe, Little Ephraim, and Ancona took letters to Captains Maxwell, Parke, and Bivins. When the Robin Johns boarded the *Duke of York*, Bivins, apparently acting on a signal from Lace, ordered armed men to trap the brothers in the cabin while other men opened fire on the canoes alongside the ship. The Robin Johns were relaxing in the cabin when Captain Bivins and his first mate came in with pistols drawn. Amboe rushed the men and knocked them both to the floor, but more crewmen quickly followed, well armed with cutlasses. Ancona later recalled that the sailors "were Cutting him on ye head and he cryed out, O Capt. Bevan, what fashion is this, for white men to kill black men fo [for]?"[12] Little Ephraim and Ancona tried to make their escape through the cabin window, but sailors knocked them down and locked them in irons.

Meanwhile Captain Lewis ordered his chief mate, William Floyd, to watch for a jack to fly from the mizzenmast of the *Hector*, the signal for the attack on the Old Town delegation to begin. As Floyd watched for the signal, he was surprised to hear small arms fire coming from the *Duke of York*. As Floyd looked on, he saw sailors firing into a canoe alongside the ship; it quickly filled with water as the men on board tried to swim to safety. Once the *Duke of York* initiated the attack, three of the

other English ships opened fire (the *Hector* and the *Concord* did not; their captains apparently refused to join the ambush) while the war canoes from New Town and Creek Town emerged from their concealed positions and joined in the massacre. The English captains ordered their men into small boats, where they joined in the slaughter of the Old Town men swimming in the river. The river literally ran red with blood.[13]

The captives were transported to the English ships as the massacre came to its bloody conclusion. Eyo Nsa and a group of men from New Town pulled their war canoe up alongside the *Duke of York*. Bivins consulted with Captain Parke and ordered his first mate, Mr. Green, to deliver Amboe to the people of New Town. Green refused, but Eyo Nsa said, "By god, captain Parke, if you give me that man to cutty head, I'll give you the best man in my canoe . . . and you shall be slaved the first ship." That promise was enough for Bivins, who ignored Amboe's desperate pleas and ordered the transfer once Eyo Nsa handed over a man from his canoe. Amboe begged for a drink of water, but even that was denied him as he was lowered into the canoe. Eyo Nsa grabbed him by his hair, held him over the gunwale of the boat, and beheaded him with one blow as Little Ephraim and Ancona looked on in horror. Eyo Nsa waved the bloody head in the air as shouts of victory rose from the New Town and Creek Town canoes. Eyo Nsa wanted Captain Bivins to turn over Little Ephraim and Ancona as well,

but Bivins kept them on board his ship, promising to turn them over once his ship was slaved as agreed.[14]

Grandy King George, on board the *Edgar*, barely escaped with his life. Captain Lace recalled that he and the king were about to have breakfast at eight o'clock that morning. Lace was pouring a cup of coffee when he heard firing. Lace reported that the frightened king jumped overboard while ordering his son and nephew to stay behind. But one English sailor told a different story. When crewmen on the *Edgar* attempted to capture Grandy King George, he fought bravely and killed two of his English attackers. He jumped overboard and climbed into a little canoe known as a one-man canoe, and paddled desperately toward the shore. One of the English ships fired a six-pounder at the canoe, and one well-aimed shot struck the small craft and shattered it to pieces. The king survived, however, and managed to swim to shore. Despite eleven wounds from musket shot, he escaped to Old Town, with his enemies at his heels. A surgeon from one of the English ships that had not joined in the attack treated the king and helped save his life.[15]

Fortunately for Little Ephraim and Ancona, Captain Bivins was not a man of his word. Even after his ship was slaved, he refused to deliver his two captives and instead sailed away with them. The two princes of Old Calabar joined other survivors of the massacre and slaves supplied by New Town in the stinking holds be-

low the decks of the *Duke of York,* en route to the Caribbean with its valuable cargo. Their capture provoked a flurry of desperate letters from their family in Old Town to English slave traders. Orrock Robin John wrote to Thomas Jones, one of the veterans of the trade with long-standing connections in Old Town, asking for the return of "Lettle Ephraim & Ancone." He also assured Jones that his family was eager to reenter the slave trade and that they held no grudges toward the captains who had participated in the massacre, and pleaded with Jones to boycott New Town. Grandy King George himself wrote Jones at about the same time, also asking for the return of his relatives and for a resumption of the trade. Lace took the king's son, Otto Ephraim, back to England with him. Lace later wrote, "I brought young Epm. home, and had him at School near two years, then sent him out, he cost me above sixty pounds and when his Fathers gone I hope the son will be a good man."[16] While Otto Ephraim was safe in England, the whereabouts of Little Ephraim and Ancona was unknown in Old Calabar. Despite their relatives' desperate pleas, it would be many years before anyone in Old Calabar had news of their fate.

The Massacre of 1767 completely altered the politics of Old Calabar. Some four hundred men from Old Town were slaughtered, a loss that devastated Grandy King George's trading house and left his world in shambles. On a personal level, the king had lost his brothers,

Amboe and Little Ephraim, his son Otto Ephraim, and his nephew Ancona. Despite the fact that Grandy King George survived, his crushing defeat and the deaths of so many of the gentlemen traders and valuable canoe boys led to the virtual collapse of Old Town. When Captain George Colley of the *Latham* visited Old Calabar on a slave-trading expedition in 1768, he reported that "our purchase here [Old Town] at present is very small, owing to a hot and troublesome war among the natives." Problems with English merchants continued as well. In 1773 the *Integrity* of Liverpool (Richard Jackson, captain) and the *Maria* of Bristol (George Bishop, captain) arrived at Old Town to trade. After a dispute over the comey payments, Jackson fired on Old Town for twenty-four hours until the king's bribes stopped the assault. Jackson warned the king that if he "went on bord of Bishop I shuld be stopped by him and my hed cut of and sent to the Duke at Nuetown." In addition, the king charged that Jackson had sailed away with his pawns after he had taken on his full cargo of slaves, a loss that included four of the king's sons. Captain Jackson, well aware of the king's weakened position and the rivalry with New Town, could manipulate the king in ways unthinkable before the massacre. In 1773, the king pleaded with Captain Lace to "send good ship and make me grandy again for war take two much copr [copper] from me."[17] Despite Grandy King George's attempts to rebuild his house, Old Town never recovered from the

massacre and fell further and further behind its New Town rival.

This is the version of events that best fits the evidence. But in 1790 the British House of Commons conducted hearings on the African slave trade and investigated the events that took place in the Calabar River in 1767, and in those hearings testimony from one English slaver gave a different version of events. The committee called Ambrose Lace, captain of the *Edgar* of Liverpool during the massacre, and one of the most important slave traders in Liverpool. By 1790 he had spent about forty years in the trade, first as a crewman, then as a captain, and finally as the owner of slave ships. As a captain, he transported over 2,700 Africans to the slave colonies in the Americas. During those voyages over 450 captives died, and were unceremoniously tossed overboard to be eaten by the sharks that trailed the vessels of death. As an owner, he invested in the transport of over 15,400 men, women, and children, of whom only about 12,600 arrived in the New World. When he entered the business in the 1740s, it was an accepted area of commerce with few opponents, but Lace lived to see a dramatic shift in public opinion about the trade, symbolized by the parliamentary hearing of 1790, which was a direct outgrowth of public petitions against slave trading. The historian David Brion Davis referred to this change as a "remarkable shift in moral consciousness," characterized by the

growing belief that the slave trade and New World slavery "symbolized all the forces that threatened the true destiny of man."[18] No doubt Lace pondered the changed climate as he recalled the events of 1767. He made his way through the bustling streets of London to the House of Parliament, where he answered the summons of the Select Committee. The hardened old captain took his seat as questioning began:

Was you ever employed in the African Trade?
Yes.
Was you at Old Calabar in the year 1767, as captain of any, and of what ship?
I was there as captain in the ship Edgar.
What number of ships were then lying at Calabar?
Nine.
Were they all ships concerned in the African Trade?
Every one.
Do you remember, that in order to make an end of a dispute which had for some time subsisted between the inhabitants of the Old and New Town, any agreement was made for both parties to meet on shipboard?
Yes.
Can you describe the nature of that dispute?
There had been for many years a dispute between the people of Old Town and New Town.
State the nature and circumstances of that dispute.

When I first went there in 1748, there were no inhabitants in the place called Old Town, they all lived at the place called New Town; some time after disputes arose between a party who now call themselves Old Town people, and those who are now called New Town people.

When the parties were invited to meet on ship-board, was that invitation made with an insidious view, to get them within the power of the English, to make Slaves of them?

No.

Did any of the parties meet on board in consequence of such agreement; and what passed on that occasion?

The principal people from Old Town came on board my ship, where the duke (the principal man of Old Town) was to have met them; they came on board about half past seven in the morning; at about eight I was going to breakfast with a person who called himself king of Old Town; there were four of the king's large canoes alongside of my ship, where the other canoes were I cannot tell: I was just pouring out some coffee, when I heard a firing. I went upon deck along with the king, and my people told me my gunner was killed; immediately the king was for going overboard; I then told him to stay where he was; he told me he would not, he would go in his canoe, which he did; the firing, by what I can recollect, might be for ten or fifteen minutes, but I cannot be certain as to the exact time. The canoes . . . most of them then got astern of my ship within about 300 or 400

yards; I had not time to make observations of the two parties, I wanted to defend myself after I was fired into; I was no further molested, the canoes were all gone.

At the time the firing commenced, were any of your guns loaded, or were any of the small arms in the possession of your crew?

The small arms are always loaden, but they were locked up, and the chest was broke open.

Was the key of the chest afterwards found, and where?

In the gunner's pocket.

Did you or your people take any share in the affray that then happened?

No more than any gentleman in this room.

Were any guns fired from your ship, great or small, upon that occasion?

No; not so much as a pistol.

Were any guns fired from any other ships upon that occasion?

Not to my knowledge.

Did the king kill any man on board your ship?

No.

Was the king on board any other ship during the battle?

Not to my knowledge; if he was, it must have been before he came on board my ship.

Were there any Slaves actually made on that occasion?

Not to my knowledge.

At what time, and how long after, did you get the complement of Slaves for your ship?

I went there in the beginning of July, I cannot exactly state when this happened, and sailed the first week of December; I was there within a few days of five months, over or under.

Did the English enter into this business with any fraudulent or improper view?

Not that I ever heard of.

Did the English, as you know or believe, reap any benefit whatever from this transaction?

No; it was against the trade.

Previous to this transaction, had there been any consultation amongst the English captains, relative to the difference between the Old and New Towns, or relative to any other matter connected with this transaction?

If there was, it was before I came into the river, and unknown to me.[19]

Was Captain Lace telling the truth? Were he and the other English captains innocent in the Massacre of 1767? There is little evidence to support his version of events. Lace showed a very poor understanding of the history of Old Calabar (suggesting that Old Town came into existence *after* New Town, for instance), and appeared to have no real knowledge of the dispute between Old Town and New Town. A letter he wrote to Thomas Jones in 1773 revealed a very different understanding of

Old Calabar. He carefully recited the genealogy of the Robin John family and reported that "as to Grandy Epm. [Grandy King George or Duke Ephraim] you know very well [he] has been Guilty of many bad Act[i]ons, no man can say anything in his favor, a History of his life would exceed any of our Pirates, the whole sett at Old Town you know as well as me." Lace took one of Grandy King George's sons back to England with him after the massacre, sent him to school, and returned him to Old Calabar almost two years later.[20] It is inconceivable that Lace's memory could have been as faulty as it appeared in his testimony.

It comes as no surprise that Lace did his best to defend his actions and those of the other English captains. The Massacre of 1767 was the most egregious case of English slavers' use of violence to interfere in the internal politics of Old Calabar. They did so, of course, with the expectation that their activities would never come to light. Their actions clearly violated the Acts of Parliament for Regulating the Slave Trade, which stipulated that "no commander or master of any ship trading to Africa shall by fraud, force or violence or by any indirect practice whatsoever take on board or carry away from the coast of Africa any negro or native of the said country or commit or suffer to be committed any violence to the natives to the prejudice of the said trade." And now Lace found himself, and the entire trade, on trial in the court of public opinion. He must have cursed his luck

that the episode had ever come to light and that it continued to be a subject of investigation nearly twenty years later.[21]

Grandy King George humiliated, defeated; Amboe Robin John, dead; Little Ephraim Robin Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, princes of Old Town and slavers themselves, now enslaved. Four hundred of the gentry and canoe boys of Old Town massacred or enslaved. Duke Ephraim and Eyo Nsa triumphant. The English captains, their slave ships now loaded and the troublesome Robin Johns of Old Town brought low, sail away with their ships loaded with slaves and fully satisfied with the outcome of events. It certainly was, as one of the English captains described it in the language of commerce, "a very bloody transaction."[22]

These are the chief protagonists of the Massacre of 1767, but if we are to fully understand how this event came to pass, why the traders of Old Calabar willingly slaughtered one another, and why English ship captains actively plotted an attack against men they routinely referred to as friends and gentlemen, we must delve into the history of Old Calabar. And if we are to fully grasp the long-range implications of the massacre, we must carry the story forward, especially the story of Little Ephraim and Ancona, whose capture and enslavement sent them on a remarkable journey around the Atlantic World.

2

"Nothing But Sivellety and Fare Trade"

Old Calabar and the Impact of the Slave Trade on an African Society

In 1773 Grandy King George urged English slave traders to come to Old Calabar with promises of "Nothing but Sivellety [Civility] and fare [fair] trade."[1] That the king was able to write to English merchants in English, and that his promise of favorable trade was couched in the language of civility prevalent in the eighteenth century, says a great deal about the evolution of the slave trade in this distinctive region. Several characteristics of Old Calabar's history and development paved the way for it to become a major slave-trading society. The Efik, a branch of the Ibibio-speaking people, were traders with well-developed long-distance networks stretching