Chief Alfred Sam. Courtesy of Kwabena Owusu.
The Chief Sam Movement, A Century Later

public histories, private stories, and the African diaspora

Kendra Field and Ebony Coletu

One hundred years ago this summer, the SS Liberia set sail from Galveston Island, Texas, for the Gold Coast in West Africa. The boat transported a mere sixty passengers—most of them former slaves-turned-homesteaders from the new state of Oklahoma—but carried the dreams of thousands of African American exodusters. A few days earlier, hundreds paid admission to board the Liberia, to touch the brasses of the steamship “owned by Negros” at the height of Jim Crow. At the helm stood a complicated West African missionary and global entrepreneur named Chief Alfred Sam. Sam had first come to the United States as a merchant trading in timber, rubber, and cocoa, but soon found himself organizing African American farmers and landowners who hoped to emigrate from the U.S. and settle his homeplace in the Akyem region of the Gold Coast. Meanwhile, many denied the movement’s reality. W. E. B. Du Bois proclaimed in the February 1914 Crisis, “There is no steamship in New York building for the African trade and owned by Negros.”

The upcoming centennial of the 1914 Chief Sam Back-to-Africa Movement invites us to engage previously unexamined source material in Oklahoma and West Africa—especially the oral testimony and ephemera of descendants and witnesses in both places. In this essay, piecing together historic documents, testimony, and images from both sides of the Atlantic, together we point towards a more complex narrative of this little-known and less-understood emigration movement. Inspired by an uncanny revelation of our overlapping family histories, what follows is the story of our shared research endeavors and personal journeys to revitalize inquiry into this movement that in fact served as a model for what would soon become the largest black organization—Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association—in world history.

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The “African Pioneer” – Kendra Field

As a child, I often heard my grandmother say, “Grandpa went back to Africa with Garvey.” Decades later, when I learned that Garvey never stepped foot in Africa, I asked, “Then who did Grandpa go to Africa with?” I soon found Chief Sam—not in Harlem or Chicago, but in the former Creek Nation, the black and Indian borderlands of Oklahoma. Just as the Great Migration had largely displaced this quieter history of black rural emigration, so had Garveyism displaced memories of the Chief Sam movement—including my grandmother’s.

Two decades later, I came across the only book-length study of the movement. In their 1964 *The Longest Way Home*, authors William Bittle and Gilbert Geis argued that the Chief Sam Movement illustrated “the desperate hopes of an utterly desperate group of people . . . the final and extreme . . . rejection of an American residency.” Relying on U.S. sources and the memories of those “left behind” in an economically depressed and politically repressed Jim Crow Oklahoma, Bittle and Geis portrayed the movement largely as the product of a single charismatic charlatan and his nameless, faceless followers; this image reflected their sources and fit easily with twentieth-century American tropes of black victimhood and chicanery.

This image stood largely at odds, however, with the fragments of stories I had heard while excavating our family history. Notwithstanding their displacement of Sam with Garvey, my father’s mother and aunts had spoken with great pride about Coleman’s participation in the movement. When the ship steamed into the Gulf of Mexico, the fraction of the movement on board included my great-great-grandfather, Monroe Coleman, his wife, Ida, and two of their sons, Willie and Raymond. When I asked what happened next—why Coleman returned to the United States the year following, after successfully migrating to the continent—I was told the land was inhospitable, that life in the Gold Coast was not as they had expected.

Coleman’s seemingly rational explanation again stood at odds with the more dramatic stories of fraud and dispossession circulated among those “left behind.” I had examined hundreds of articles from black and white newspapers, from the *Boley Progress* to the *New York Times*, with headlines such as “Sam’s Bunch Starving! Appeal for Aid in America. Let them stand the pressure of their folly.” I felt the vigor and visceral certainty with which many of Coleman’s peers blamed the movement’s collapse on Sam’s fraudulence. I could not resolve this disjuncture for some
time. I considered the possibility that Coleman was part of the scheme; in a family history that intermingles stories of gambling and infidelity alongside schooling, worship, and uplift, this was hardly taboo. But upon closer inspection, Coleman had left several of his young children, and most of his extended family, in Galveston while he inspected their future home. From a written interview conducted in the 1980s, and numerous family stories I knew about my aunts and uncles left behind in Galveston, they were all anxiously awaiting the “next trip.”

Drawing on West African newspapers and recently excavated accounts of first-hand witnesses—commissioned in the 1970s by Garvey scholar Robert Hill and conducted by Ghanaian archaeologist James Anquandah—my co-author Ebony Coletu and I gradually began to piece together the more complicated, sobering details of how the movement ended on the eve of the First World War. Repeated interventions by the British government delayed the ship for months, exhausting the movement’s limited food supplies and funds. By the spring of 1915, famine and an outbreak of influenza resulted in the deaths of more than half of the migrants. The black press in Oklahoma reported based on letters received from migrants requesting support to return. While the majority of those who survived returned to the United States, recently recovered Ghanaian memories of first-hand witnesses of the movement (interviewed in the 1970s by Anquandah) suggest that some dispersed throughout the Gold Coast and Liberia, their existence and fate disappearing from most American records of the movement. These interviews indicate some engaged in the production of tobacco, gunpowder, gin, and cocoa. At least two brothers set up shop in Cape

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Coast, while another migrant ran a tobacco plantation close to Chief Sam’s family home; others were remembered for building a motorized boat and operating a ferry service along the coast; a young woman, who had married Chief Sam during the movement, later migrated to England; and several appear to have moved on to Liberia with Sam. Such alternate endings had not appeared in any detail in the fledgling literature, nor in the public history—urban and rural legends that had declared the movement an unmitigated failure.

Last summer, I shared these alternate endings and other evidence with a group of residents in Clearview, Oklahoma. Founded in 1903 along the tracks of the Fort Smith and Western Railroad, this was the first all-black town in Indian Territory, a bustling black metropolis of newly arrived southern migrants, on the eve of Oklahoma statehood. In the decade that followed, the political and economic repression that accompanied statehood urged many to look again beyond the U.S. By December of 1913, the all-black town of Clearview had emerged as the heart of the Chief Sam Movement. Today, Clearview’s population is about fifty-six, but along its historic main street, the
old boarded storefronts, remnants of Doc Alford’s pharmacy, and numerous churches still offer an evocative picture of this rich history.

The residents I met included men and women in their sixties and seventies. Many had heard of Chief Sam from their parents and grandparents—men and women who bought shares in the Akim Trading Company and waited in vain for the SS Liberia to return for them; in the story they knew, Sam was a fraud. Some had heard it directly from Doc Alford, who had tended to sick children in the camps of would-be migrants that emerged in the fall of 1913, and was still practicing in town decades later.

I knew this story well. My great-great-grandfather’s cousin, Elic Davis, had moved to this “tent city” in November of 1913. Born enslaved in Mississippi, Elic Davis had migrated to Oklahoma several years prior before joining hundreds in the movement. Together they “disposed of their property” and moved to the camps, preparing for this African exodus; they named their temporary camp South Gold Coast. Later, when I met with the daughter of J.P. Owens, whose parents were shareholders,
I learned that he recalled two adjoining camps: North and South Gold Coast Camps.

As winter neared, a local reporter wrote, “Some of the children have been horror stricken already,” and he believed “a great many will die of croup and other contagious diseases.” J.P. Owens, nine years old at the time of the movement, recalled a doctor traveling to the camps where he found “many children with no shoes and people in rags.” Amidst repeated postponements, food was becoming scarce and the migrants were ill-prepared for freezing temperatures. Still, the local paper reported, “There are hundreds who have not . . . languished in the hope of seeing the promised land.”

In the public history of the movement, the mournful recollection of children dying in the camps—and subsequent illness and death in West Africa—have formed the core of the fraudulence claim. The migrants living at South Gold Coast in the winter of 1913–1914—and those in Gold Coast the following year—would have resembled thousands of African Americans who escaped the American South and Southwest with dreams of an “African return,” some of whom were indeed taken by “swindling schemes,” stranded in rail cars, standing on docks, and huddled on the streets of New York City. Under the auspices of African emigration, for instance, a man calling himself “Doctor Edward W. Blyden,” the esteemed Pan-Africanist, collected a dollar from each
hopeful migrant he met in Arkansas during the summer of 1890, while the real Blyden was in Africa at the time. These moments testify to the symbolic power of black emigration during this “golden age” of black nationalism, as historians including Edwin Redkey, Nell Painter, Wilson Moses, Steven Hahn, and James Campbell have documented over the past four decades. The evidence suggests, however, that Sam was not one more swindler in this succession of emigration schemes. To be sure, Sam’s financial resources were outshined by his Pan-Africanist vision. The $100,000 Sam raised in Oklahoma (most in $25 shares) appears to have covered the ship and its repairs, and could not support the number of migrants that continued to flock to the movement. For all of Sam’s confidence, however, he frequently discouraged followers from selling their homes or rushing to the camps until a second Atlantic passage was secured. Their unwillingness to listen and determination to migrate against all odds (resulting in hundreds of black Oklahomans living in Galveston camps for a full year or longer, awaiting the “next” trip) highlights the gravity of black political and economic life in Jim Crow Oklahoma.

Indeed, there were thousands looking to escape the rising tide of racial violence in the newly segregated state of Oklahoma who refused
to wait. Two years prior, a mob of white Oklahomans had lynched a thirty-three year old woman, Laura Nelson, and her fourteen-year old son, L.D. Mother and son were hung together over a bridge, while dozens watched. Her “suckling babe” was left lying on the bridge, until a neighbor picked her up. Perhaps not surprisingly, this bridge was just a few miles from the land that would soon become known as South Gold Coast. The bridge stood over the North Canadian River, the same one that Sam proposed navigating southward towards the Gulf of Mexico.

Back in Clearview, as I spoke with the men and women whose parents and grandparents had been “left behind” by Sam, I began to understand how seamlessly the popular story of a charismatic charlatan had papered over the near-perfect storm of structural constraints the movement faced at every step. In addition to the material constraints of a grassroots movement of rural southerners—many of them former slaves—at the height of Jim Crow, the movement faced a series of governmental roadblocks extending from the Boley courthouse and the Oklahoma state house to the U.S. State Department and numerous British officials in London and the Gold Coast. But in spite of the steady stream of claims of Sam’s fraudulence from ministers, officials, and professionals of Boley (individuals who had a financial stake in his followers staying put), the U.S. and British governments found no fault in his handling of the movement. Mobilizing the longstanding “Liberia fever” that was endemic to the South and Southwest, Sam and his followers envisioned a practical future together; living in the camps and on the ship for more than a year, they weathered the attacks of the press, a harsh winter, and dwindling resources. West African newspapers like the African Mail and Gold Coast Leader noted the many “distinguished Afro-Americans” who supported the movement, naming graduates of Fisk, Tuskegee, and University of Chicago, citing several who had invested not twenty-five or fifty dollars, but one thousand. As the Okfuskee County attorney Tom Hazelwood wrote to Oklahoma’s Governor Cruce, “If this is a swindle, it is open and above board, and there is nothing secret about it.”

Following the movement’s dispersal in the Gold Coast, some “delegates” later blamed Sam for the government persecution, mounting debts, dwindling supplies, hunger, and illness they faced, but there is little evidence they felt themselves duped by the individual. Some who were forced by circumstance to return nevertheless continued to believe in the idea of the “African movement.” Alongside Sam, they had been “animated by a higher motive . . . to help to link Afro-Americans and West Africans . . .” The movement’s theologian, Orishatukeh Faduma, wrote in the African Mail in the winter of 1914–1915 that the
participants were “men and women who are not afraid to live and die for great ideas which they believe to be true . . . There is no fake or fraud in it. Being partially human, some mistakes will be found in it. The heart of the movement is right.”

When the ship failed to return to Galveston in 1915 for the supposed “next trip”—when those “left behind” returned to Oklahoma penniless, when their children soon faced the depths of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the near-disappearance of whole towns and livelihoods—the now-familiar narrative of abject failure and individualized fraud set in. To this day, descendants still living carry with them haunting memories of their parents’ lost fortunes and of what might have been. I began to see this narrative, like many, as a yearning attempt to

First Baptist South (formerly First Baptist Church), Weleetka, Oklahoma, August 2013. Site of October 1913 Back-to-Africa Meeting. Photo by Kendra Field.
explain not the movement itself, but the hard times that followed, to make peace with what happened next.

Before leaving Clearview, I witnessed two somewhat quiet reflections that did not quite fit the movement’s popular narrative in Oklahoma. The first came from a middle-aged man who helped tend to an African American gravesite in town, where many of the migrants had been buried. After showing me the headstones and sharing what he knew about the location of an unmarked “mass grave” behind these stones, he offered one opinion. He said that one thing that had never quite made sense to him was how Sam could have been a fraud when, in the end, he “bought that ship” and made the trip with the others. “If a 318 foot steamship, formerly the Curityba of the Munson Line, can be regarded as an earnest of Chief Sam’s intent to take American negroes to the gold coast of Africa, give them lots of land to farm and win huge profits for them by shipping their produce to the markets of the world,” a writer for the New York Sun heralded a century earlier, upon visiting the ship in February 1914, “it may be said that the project is well under way.” The second was a woman I met who had in her home an original stock certificate from Sam’s Akim Trading Company. At the time of the movement, her father, J.P. Owens, was nine years old. He had held onto his parents’ certificate ever since; before he passed, he recorded his memories of the movement, many of them fond.

Where Garvey had failed, Sam had succeeded, at least momentarily, in pulling off the African “return.” In hindsight, however, the displacement of Sam by Garvey in the scattered public history of this movement is hardly surprising. In 1913 and 1914, the Sam movement engaged several thousand African Americans in one corner of the American Southwest; five years later, Garvey mobilized millions across the United States and the western hemisphere. By 1926, ten years after the dissolution of the Chief Sam Movement, black Oklahomans had produced twenty-eight UNIA chapters—the eleventh-most of all states, according to historian Tony Martin. In the wake of Garvey and the UNIA, impressions of Sam grew hazy and sometimes disappeared. The historical erasure of the Chief Sam Movement, however, was not only a function of scale, but a failure of imagination.

In 1790, French colonist La Barre wrote to his wife from Saint-Domingue, “There is no movement among our Negroes. . . . They don’t even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible . . . Freedom for Negroes is a chimera.” Several
months later, the world’s “first successful slave revolt” began, creating an independent Haiti. In Silencing the Past, Michel-Rolph Trouillot used La Barre’s words on the eve of insurrection to illustrate that the Haitian Revolution was an event “unthinkable even as it happened.” Trouillot added that not even the “most radical writers of the Enlightenment” or “the extreme political left”—those presumably in favor of “freedom for Negroes”—had a “conceptual frame of reference” for the events that unfolded in Saint-Domingue at the turn of the nineteenth century.

A century later, the question of “freedom for Negroes” had been decidedly put to rest for the children of enslaved Americans living in the period Rayford Logan termed “the nadir” of African American experience in the United States. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the tragic consequences of the demise of Reconstruction, “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” Historians have located in the nadir a stark reminder of a racial order that outlived the institution of racial slavery and a sober caution against privileging the “event” of emancipation. Yet even at this low point, as African Americans proverbially “turned inward” in the Jim Crow South, another “unthinkable” movement was underfoot in the Atlantic world.

This was, after all, a group of ex-slaves who pooled nearly $100,000, purchased a German steamship, and journeyed to West Africa at the height of Jim Crow. Frequently narrated as yet another “failed African venture,” the denial and distortion of the Chief Sam Movement by contemporaries and historians reveals much about the “deeply held beliefs” that dominated American lives and history in the years not only before the civil rights movement, but before the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, the World Wars, and the Great Migration. One of the quieter legacies of the Jim Crow era has been the narrowing of historical imagination for what black lives and actions could and did look like.

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**Reconstructing a Family Tree in the Forest—Ebony E. A. Coletu**

I first encountered Chief Alfred Charles Sam seven years ago in a footnote, while leafing through a humanities journal at the University Bookstore in Legon, Ghana. My father’s surname is Sam, which is rare enough to presume a distant relation, yet I had never heard of a chief in our family. From what I could discern, we tended to err on the side of entrepreneurial charisma, rather than traditional lines of authority.
I followed the footnote to William Bittle and Gilbert Geis’s *The Longest Way Home*, and found the description of Sam uncanny. Here was a man who managed to bring a ship full of African Americans to the Gold Coast to resettle less than three miles away from where my father was raised, with character traits that we often claimed as our own: perseverance against odds, a knack for fundraising, and an imaginative approach to problem-solving, to name the best of them. However, by the end of *The Longest Way Home*, the qualities I generally admired corroded
into the profile of an African con man who promised more than he could deliver and made off with the money.

When I shared the story with people in Ghana, I punctuated the telling with my questions and doubts, hoping for leads and probing for what made Chief Sam significant for Ghanaians. They always listened with a mixture of awe and humor. Who was this audacious man who persuaded African Americans to come ashore a hundred years ago, to set up factories and businesses in the Birim Forest? Initial chuckles over the irony of an African leading a Back-to-Africa campaign quickly sobered with news of his pragmatic approach to Pan-Africanism. Echoing newspaper editorials a hundred years prior, the shift in tone from skepticism to admiration between early 1914 and 1915 reflected the difference between proposal and arrival. After months of mounting critique, the Gold Coast Nation, a Cape Coast weekly, heralded the movement’s achievement in May, 1915. “Mr. Sam’s scheme is no longer imaginary, it is neither a paper scheme nor a railway in sketch but a genuine reality to which we owe real appreciation and more than that, a tangible factor in the upward move of this country.” Organizing the purchase of a ship and land, registering a corporation, initiating a stock scheme and actually sailing for Saltpond with at least sixty out of thousands of committed African Americans took vision and persistence. Yet Sam’s importance in the history of Pan-Africanism is thinly documented relative to that effort. Though several recent studies have incorporated the Chief Sam Movement into historical accounts of African American migration, it has been twenty-seven years since any new evidence has emerged and fifty since Bittle and Geis released the only book-length study on the movement. I was encouraged with each telling to research the story on West African shores and share discoveries that might reframe recent debates about the role of Africans in African American repatriation to Ghana. Reopening the case would also help reverse the strenuous effort made by Marcus Garvey to suppress mention of the Chief Sam Movement as an influential model for the Universal Negro Improvement Association with its mission to repatriate the African diaspora through economic investment in a shipping line and stock scheme.

Last year, I dedicated two trips to researching Chief Sam’s origins and the migration route, and what I found suggests the movement was more fragmented and yet also more rooted than imagined, with several openings for further research. My family is far-flung and we have a horizontal sense of what ties us together, but a more limited depth of awareness about our genealogy, complicated by layers of migration. In the

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summer, I proposed to my siblings that we take a trip to retrace Chief Sam’s steps from his hometown to the coast and places in-between to learn more about his life and motivation, if possible. My sister Saiton traveled from Kenya, where she was born and raised, to meet me in Accra. We were introduced to each other late in life, around the time I learned of Chief Sam. Having linked the two discoveries, she was eager to pursue Chief Sam’s life journey as a way to personalize her introduction to the country through the lens of migration history. I flew in from Egypt, where I live, and my brother Gyepi offered research support daily from the United States, then later from South Africa, where he has since moved with his family. We were guided by a brief, densely packed article written by Robert Hill, curator of the Garvey Papers. Importantly, Hill based his 1987 article “Before Garvey” on research conducted by a noted Ghanaian archaeologist James Anquandah, who was a young faculty member then working on commission to collect oral histories from witnesses of the SS Liberia’s arrival. Anquandah pursued the oldest living members of Sam’s family and visited chiefs, recording their stories of the African American migration and Sam’s leadership. He created the only family tree for Alfred Charles Sam in existence, mapping his royal lineage, several wives, children, and stepchildren. On the eve of Saiton’s arrival, I paid a visit to Anquandah to ask if he might have notes from those interviews conducted thirty-five years earlier.

His office reflected four decades of work growing the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. He thought it was possible he still had the notes and showed me an envelope he recently found from 1978 containing trading beads from the seventeenth century. He had a hunch to dig inside a buried refuse bin and discovered the beads, recorded in his book Rediscovering Ghana’s Past (1982). The notes, the beads, and the yellowed tag labeling their origins were tucked in the back of a filing cabinet for decades in his office. Surrounded by the material evidence of discarded things rediscovered, I felt a surge of hope that this trip would also bring us that much closer to understanding Chief Sam’s life and the African Americans’ migration experience.

When Saiton arrived, we headed to Saltpond—or more precisely, Abandze Beach, the place positioned halfway between Saltpond town and Anomabo where the SS Liberia landed in 1915. With Fort
Amsterdam—an important administrative post for British colonial authority—perched above, I could already see how the story of a ship landing near a small, coastal town leaned too heavily on the imagined isolation of the migrants and villagers. During our visit to Saltpond town, where many of the migrants lodged during the first part of their journey, we found large storehouses for traders built in the late nineteenth century and what would have been a new building erected in the year the migrants arrived, sitting next to the Methodist Mission. The Methodist Church in Saltpond absorbed the members of the A.M.E. Zion Church and offered the pulpit to women preachers in the delegation. We suspected that a Methodist cemetery up the road buried those who fell ill and passed during those early months. Since there was no map of the cemetery available at the mission, we headed into the overgrown thicket surrounding the graves and hired some teenaged boys to cut through the bushes with machetes, trying to find a match from a list of migrants who died there. After hours of searching, we remained convinced this was the most likely burial site, but the vast maze of headstones and unkempt grounds meant we could have missed a special section of the cemetery allocated to foreigners, or more likely, a scattered mix of stubs without chiseled names among those more well-known Fanti families we discovered.

Similarly, we walked the streets of Saltpond, only learning later that we passed by Chief Sam’s house several times—or rather, its ruins, what
was left after a devastating storm collapsed the ceiling and walls. Contrary to the prevailing narrative of a penniless con man with no roots in the town, Chief Sam’s house in Saltpond—in which his mother had also lived—was a sprawling plot, with two stories and at least a dozen rooms, situated two doors down from the Chief of Saltpond’s house. Alfred Sam’s half-brother, Henry Essuman Sam, who was not listed on Anquandah’s family tree because he grew up in Saltpond with another mother, was a reminder of the frequent movement between the coastal town and the interior village of Apaaso. Like many who hailed from Akim Swedru and Apaaso (neighboring villages), Chief Sam spent several years of his education in Saltpond, also called Akyemfo—named after the place where Akyems lived along a Fanti-dominated coastline.

Chief Sam must have been inspired by the growth of the shipping industry during his childhood and the sudden fortunes of what Raymond Dummett calls “indigenous entrepreneurs,” whose burgeoning businesses peaked in the late nineteenth century. Emerging opportunities for trade in timber, rubber, cocoa, and palm oil encouraged small-scale traders to organize networks and manage larger businesses focused on collection, coastal delivery, and profit reinvestment to foster competition in transnational trade. Sam and his first wife, Mary Appiah, developed such a business and had multiple homes, one inland and at least two on the coast, including the house in Saltpond. In an interview with Mary Appiah, Anquandah notes that Sam left her to the

Saltpond Methodist Cemetery. Photo by Ebony Coletu.
local business in Apaaso while he set sail for America in 1909. Between 1909 and 1921, Sam logged at least ten trips as a merchant to London, Boston, and New York.

Saltpond was not the small, remote town imagined in the pages of *The Longest Way Home*, and Chief Sam was not an ambitious stowaway-hustler. He was a seasoned transnational merchant in a coastal port city, the largest in the Gold Coast up to the middle of the twentieth century, attracting migrants from other parts of West Africa (especially Liberia and Sierra Leone), Syria, and Europe. Demographically cosmopolitan, the town’s leaders were keen to welcome newcomers, though with an eye toward economic enhancement rather than dependency, an issue that arose quickly as the African American migrants found their initial resettlement plans delayed by paperwork and land disputes. The Chief of Saltpond, Nana Kurantsti III, interviewed by Anquandah years later, cited the challenges of food distribution, governmental taxes, and compensation for lodging as some of the reasons migrants dispersed to other cities along the coast, from Anomabo to Cape Coast, Accra and Sekondi, fracturing the movement.

Reconstructing Chief Sam’s biography in tandem with the African American migration inland, we traveled the route to Apaaso and stopped briefly at Chief Sam’s birthplace before arriving in Akim Swedru to visit the Paramount Chief of Akyem Bosome, Okotwasuo Kantamanto Owaorae Agyekum III. Picking names from Anquandah’s family tree, the chief produced photos, names and phone numbers of potential or proven relations, as well as a map of Apoli—where the African Americans attempted to purchase land, with Chief Sam as their agent. Though the new contacts were unable to meet before our departure and we could not arrange a ride into the forest to see Apoli, a critical link had been made with Sam’s living relatives and the location that motivated the journey from Oklahoma. The day of our departure, Professor Anquandah also called to say his wife found the original interview notes in a box buried deep within the garage. After scanning seventy-two pages, I knew another trip was needed. I prepared to go back several months later, now with knowledge of the exact location of Chief Sam’s house, additional notes on the family tree, prospective kin, a map of Apoli, and three potential repositories for records of the migration.

With all of these leads, I expected my second trip would yield many new documents to share with other researchers of twentieth century
Pan-Africanism and the Chief Sam Movement. But my expectations on the ground were quickly recalibrated. Civil servants at the National Archives in Accra went on strike the day I arrived, cutting off access with a red ribbon loosely tied around the front gate. Termites had eaten the Royal Archives in Oda for the years I was investigating. The son of Chief Sam’s stepson fell ill on the eve of our meeting and was unable to retrieve his original photos of Chief Sam from his deceased father’s files. Frankly disappointed with so many detours and dead ends, I took solace in going back to Apaaso to meet a distant relative of Chief Sam whom we had missed by a day, Mr. Boadi.

Apaaso has under two hundred residents. Intuitively, my sister and I had stopped directly in front of Mr. Boadi’s house on our previous trip without knowing it. He surprisingly bore a resemblance to my father, and his demeanor made him easy to imagine as an uncle. Yet as we tried to map out genealogical ties, I had to remind myself that I still had not pinpointed my relation to Chief Sam. It turned out, neither had Mr. Boadi. “I just always grew up hearing that I had a late relative who was influential in America. He bought a ship and settled with some of them around Aduasa. It was a source of pride. But I was so small, I never asked questions or paid attention to the details.” Now eighty-two, Mr. Boadi is a retired engineer.
whose youthful face and familiarity can only tempt advocates of DNA testing in the absence of genealogical documents. After our meeting, he directed me to the village of Apoli, where Chief Sam had signed the land deed, which was later challenged, on behalf of the African American migrants.

I arrived an hour after leaving Apaaso, but surely this trip would have taken several days to walk with a full caravan of people and goods in 1915. I stopped at the first building that commanded my attention, a black and hot pink Catholic church. A woman was sitting in front of it so I asked her for directions to the oldest cemetery in town. I wanted to find Mary Lucile Garrett’s father. She was Chief Sam’s second wife, whom he married in the United States when she was a young teenager and both her parents died soon after their arrival in the Gold Coast. Her father passed shortly after they reached Apoli. The woman in front of the church explained that the cemetery had been moved. “But have the bodies been moved?” I asked, already trying to imagine the practical labor of disinterment. She shook her head, then offered to get in the car and come with me. At this point, I learned that I was speaking to Nana Afua Kobi II, the Queen Mother of Apoli. Once she understood
what I was looking for, she moved quickly and seemed to know exactly the place I wanted to see. Pointing to a field of plantain trees, she explained that the land for the cemetery had been sold sometime ago and the new owners planted trees in the place where the bodies were buried. Immediately, I visualized the roots of plantain trees growing around the remains of the migrants.

As if on cue, my camera battery died after taking a picture. I stood there, still, wanting to tie a ribbon around a tree, or create some marker to set this place apart from the ordinary movements of farming life. The Queen Mother broke my silence by taking me to meet someone who spoke English. The man only spoke a little more English than the Queen Mother, but he had an uncle in the village who was over one hundred years old, and he took me to see him. Stephen Otopaa was four or five years old when the migrants arrived in Apoli, and though lying down when I arrived, he grew very animated when his nephew explained what I wanted to know. He spoke quickly but repeated one word so often I smiled in recognition: Obrunikrom. White man’s/foreigner’s town. Obruni is a word that has long rankled African Americans for falsely interpellating descendants of slaves in a racial schema forged by the slave trade and colonial conquest. Undifferentiated from whites, the word seems to misrecognize the suffering, history, and ruptured relatedness of many African American visitors. As a fair-skinned Ghanaian-American, I had grown used to hearing young children sing obruni rhyming songs around me when I visited my grandmother’s village, so I took a moment to clarify in this case that obruni did not refer to white people, but foreigners more generally.

Mr. Otopaa confirmed this, then picked up his cane and took me to the place in the village where the foreigners pitched tents and lived among them while mining for bauxite—the main source for aluminum—in the river. Since he was a child at the time, he had no memory of complicated paperwork and disputes undermining a land deal, but he did recall the encampment, their cooperation, his friendships with other children in the camp, and their relationship to the Birim River. A neighbor approached and confirmed that he had also heard that they were mining for bauxite. I asked how he knew the specificity of their work and he replied, “That is what they say.” Both men agreed that some of the migrants died in the village and were buried under the plantain trees when it was still a cemetery.

Four new assertions emerged in this moment to complicate the received history of Chief Sam and the African American migration to Apoli: First, the story of the migration was alive in this community, heard by more than one member. The boundaries of the tent city were even the subject of a loud dispute between a younger woman and Mr. Otopaa—who claimed elder status in the end. This confirms that there
are African stories to be told about an early twentieth century African American migration that have yet to be fully documented, particularly from living witnesses (there may be more than one). Second, this memory is spatially specific. Cohabitation with villagers developed in the form of an encampment with tents that were likely also used in the tent city constructed in Weleetka, Oklahoma, or South Gold Coast. The tents occupied a space next to the mud and wood houses in the oldest part of town and close to the river. Third, if the migrants did engage in mining as a backup plan—a way to generate income during the
period when the land was still in dispute—this is a new detail that has never been mentioned in other accounts. The Birim River has been a rich site for gold and diamond mining in Ghana, and the specificity of bauxite suggests they were given boundaries for what resources they could extract while living in Apoli. Finally, considering Stephen Otopaa was relaying memories from his earliest years, we can’t possibly glean the specific strategy for the migrants’ settlement and survival. But from his assessment of friendships during that period, at least some of the migrants lived in Apoli for nearly a year, leaving in early 1916.

After I returned to Egypt, the Queen Mother’s secretary contacted me. His name formed an unexpected homophone with my own: Abi Nii. He said he had found another witness who lived further upriver and possessed one of the original tents from the camp. He, too, was a childhood friend of the migrants’ children and received the tent as a parting gift. At 105, he still farmed and was full of talkative energy. If only I could wire money to pay for his transportation back to Apoli, and for a friend to accompany him to take pictures of the tent, he would conduct an interview using my questions. Though I followed through on this request, it turned out to be an elaborate extension of Mr. Otopaa’s story that was possibly fictionalized, since no photos materialized, nor did an adequate record of the interview. Perhaps on hearing my excitement over the novel details that Mr. Otopaa had contributed, Abi Nii saw an opportunity to trade on more details. Those fragments of stories, dormant and out of demand, surged to the foreground after my unexpected arrival. Inasmuch as the second story may have been invented for my benefit, we also can’t rule out the possibility that a second witness does live upriver and the details of documentation, the prospect of photos, and even travel to go see him were the money-saving fictions.

In addition to the awareness of stories—latent or active—about Chief Sam and the African American migration to Apoli, we have new questions to ask about the role of the river in sustaining the migrants’ livelihood far longer than we previously thought. If they did not leave with the majority of migrants in the summer of 1915, did they move with Chief Sam to Liberia or disperse to other villages? Despite the dominant narrative in American newspapers, which claimed they all returned to America several months after their arrival in the Gold Coast, these recent investigations tell a quite different story, about a fragmented group with different interests and survival strategies. Some blended into community life, whilst others moved on to points unknown. For those who died at the settlement site, perhaps they could not have imagined that a plantain tree and an unlikely witness would pay homage to their efforts a century later.