

Handout 1 - FLYING AFRICAN TESTIMONIALS

“I heard about the flying man up in Arkansas, Jonesboro...he just spread his arms and sailed right on off. And they never did catch him. They told all about him all through the South, in Alabama, Mississippi...”

Accounts of Flying Africans are widespread across the Americas in locations including multiple states in the U.S., the Caribbean islands of Jamaica, Barbados and Cuba, and the South American nation of Suriname. Continue reading to learn how eyewitness and people who heard second hand reports of Flying Africans described this phenomenon. We have divided the accounts into two threads, Stories of Return and Stories of Rising Above.

Stories of Return

In some stories newly arrived Africans take one look at the conditions facing them in the New World and turn their back on slavery. Dismayed and revolted, they take wing and fly back across the ocean.

“I have heard of those people. My mother used to tell me about them when we sat in the city market selling vegetables and fruit. She said that there was a man and his wife and they got fooled into boarding a slave ship. First thing they know they were sold to a planter on St. Helena. So one day when all the slaves were together, this man and his wife said ‘We are going back home, goodie bye, goodie bye,’ and just like a bird they flew out of sight.”

-Carrie Hamilton, Georgia

“Those folks could fly too. They tell me there are lots of them that were brought here and they weren’t much use. The master was getting ready to tie them up and to whip them. They said, ‘Massa, you ain’t gonna beat me’ and with that they run down to the river. The overseer he sure thought he’d catch them when they got to the river, but before he could to them, they rose up in the air and flew away. They fly right back to Africa. I think that happened on Butler Island.”

-Shad Hall, Sapelo Island, Georgia

Stories of Rising Above

In these accounts, often set in the fields, someone chants or sings particular words then takes flight. Sometimes the chant or song gives the gift of flight to others nearby and language becomes a tool of collective liberation.

“And the reason they say they flew away...they couldn’t stand the work when the taskmaster flogged them and they get up and they just sang in their language, and they clapped their hands, like this, and they just stretched out, and they were gone right back. And they never returned to this place.”

-Ishmael Webster
Waterworks, Westmoreland, Jamaica

“My mother used to tell me about slaves that came from Africa that have the supreme magic power. There was a magic password that they passed down. If they believed in this magic, they could escape and fly back to Africa. I have an uncle that could work this magic. He could disappear like the wind, just walk off the plantation and stay away for weeks at a time. One time he got cornered by the patrolman and he just walked up to a tree and said, “I think I will go into this tree.” Then he disappeared right into the tree.”

-Jack Wilson, Old Fort, Georgia



“Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines” - Faith Ringgold