

HILL, Elias (1819-28 Mar. 1872), minister, school-teacher, Union League organizer, and Liberian emigrant, was born into slavery near Yorkville (later York), South Carolina, probably the son of a light-skinned house slave named Dorcas Hill and a man brought as a slave from Africa to South Carolina. At the age of seven, Hill contracted a crippling disease that he called "rheumatism," but that was probably polio. His owner's five-year-old son, Daniel Harvey Hill (the man who would later famously lose a copy of Robert E. Lee's battle plans while serving as a Confederate general at Antietam), seems to have come down with a mild case of the same disease at almost the same time. But Hill got the worst of it. He was never again able to walk. His legs shrunk to the diameter of an average man's wrist. His arms were like those of a small child. His fingers were so contracted that he could barely hold a pen. Hill's severe disabilities made him of little use as a slave. Around 1840 his father (who had bought his own freedom for \$150) purchased the freedom of Hill and his mother, Dorcas, from the white Hill family.

Little is known of Hill's life before 1860, when he was listed on the census as a "deformed" freeman in a household with his mother, who was then working as a free domestic servant. After the Civil War, Hill became a leader in each of the three great fields of postwar black activism: religion, education, and politics. He had preached as a Baptist minister since at least 1861, traveling to congregations across the Piedmont with the assistance of several young nephews. Beginning with the end of the war, he taught school in a one-room schoolhouse near Yorkville. And by 1870 Hill was working as a community organizer for York County Union League chapter. In each of these areas, Hill became known for his unusually powerful voice. It carried long distances, and observers called it "clear and sonorous," a "voice of unusual power and sweetness" (Witt, 113).

Hill's voice also helped draw the attention of the local Ku Klux Klan. The York County Klan was among the most violent in the South. In 1870 and 1871 its leader, Rufus Bratton (who served as a model for Thomas Dixon's white supremacist novel, *The Clansman*), organized a campaign of violent and deadly attacks on upcountry blacks and Republicans. Early in the morning of 6 May 1871 Bratton's Klan arrived at Hill's door. Other black men were sleeping in the woods to avoid the Klan, but Hill's disability made that impossible. The Klansmen pulled Hill out of his home and beat him, attacking him with a horsewhip and demanding that he renounce his affiliations with the Union League and the Republican Party. Thanks to men like Hill and to the efforts of the federal government, however, the Klan seemed to be in retreat by the summer and fall of 1871. In July, while still recovering from his wounds, Hill testified at a congressional hearing on the Klan, describing its campaign and naming its attackers. That fall, President Ulysses S. Grant suspended the writ of habeas corpus across the South Carolina upcountry and sent in federal troops to restore order. Grant's attorney general, Amos Ackerman, initiated a battery of arrests and prosecutions of Klansmen under new civil rights legislation enacted pursuant to Reconstruction amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Hundreds of Klansmen were indicted by the federal authorities, and dozens were convicted. Facing what seemed like almost certain convictions, Bratton and many of his fellow Klansmen fled to Canada.

Yet in the very same months, Hill chose to leave the country, too. Beginning in April 1871 he had been corresponding with the American Colonization Society, a white Christian organization that had promoted and sometimes financed the emigration of American blacks to Liberia since its founding in 1816. It no longer seemed possible, Hill wrote to the Colonization Society, “for our people to live in this country peaceably” (Witt, 130). In Liberia, by contrast, the Colonization Society seemed to promise an independent constitutional republic (founded in 1847 by former African Americans, some of whom were former slaves) as well as twenty-five acres of land and six months of supplies to each emigrant. In November 1871 Hill and almost 200 of his fellow York County freed people departed by railroad for Virginia and from Virginia by ship to Monrovia on the Liberian coast. From there, Hill and most of the emigrants moved up the St. Paul’s River to the fledgling town of Arthington, where they began to build a school and a church.

Hill’s emigration began with great hope but ended in tragedy. When Hill and his fellow emigrants arrived in Liberia in December 1871, they found a republic in crisis. A violent coup in October (and the subsequent assassination of the deposed president) touched off a period of political turmoil in Liberia that lasted into the twenty-first century. Social and economic conditions were far worse than the Colonization Society had led Hill and his fellow South Carolinians to believe. Already in chronically poor health, Hill fell ill with malaria in January 1872 and died two months later. By May, one-third of the emigrant group had died of malaria and similar ailments. By November 1872 some of the York County emigrants began to trickle back into South Carolina. Among those from Hill’s company who stayed in Liberia, however, a still stranger fate awaited. In the 1870s and the 1880s American Liberians were turning to a new cash crop: coffee. Two of Hill’s nephews, in particular, successfully recreated many of the conditions of their native South Carolina, replete with plantation-style homes and forced labor agriculture, this time from the local indigenous people of the West African coast.

Further reading

Elias Hill’s extensive correspondence with the American Colonization Society is available in the Library of Congress’s microfilm edition of the Records of the American Colonization Society, published in 1971.

Witt, John Fabian. “Elias Hill’s Exodus,” in *Patriots and Cosmopolitans: Hidden Histories of American Law* (2007)

JOHN FABIAN WITT

Source: *African American National Biography*. Eds. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008