

The Strange Story of David Margate

by John Campbell, minister of High Cross URC, Tottenham, London

David Margate was an African who attended the Countess of Huntingdon's Theological College in Trefeca in Wales in the 1770s. In 1775 he sailed, as a missionary, to Georgia, one of His Majesty's colonies in North America (soon to declare independence). He was possibly the only black missionary from the UK to go to the Southern Colonies in North America in the 18th Century. He went to work with Revd William Pierce, who was in charge of Bethesda Orphanage, outside Savannah, Georgia – an orphanage founded by George Whitfield, the famous preacher and evangelist, who had left it in his will to the Countess of Huntingdon - including the slaves who worked at the orphanage and who were considered to be part of the property, each listed with a price. (I have seen the will, which is now in Westminster College, Cambridge.)

Apparently, when David arrived in America he did not observe the usual niceties expected of Christian missionaries working in the slaveholding colonies. He made absolutely no effort to keep the white slaveholders sweet. He stood up and strongly denounced slavery as an institution and he did so whilst preaching to black congregations (most of whom must have been enslaved). He saw himself as called to be a new Moses, sent by God to lead his enslaved people out of their bondage into freedom and he spoke so strongly on the issue that many white plantation and slave owners feared he was about to plan and lead a slave rebellion.

The slave owners were aghast. Soon, and very soon, they were plotting David's lynching and hanging. William Pierce, his white colleague (who, judging by his reports to the Countess of Huntingdon, was clearly driven to distraction by Margate's whole approach and attitude, and his inability to live and work respectfully within the slaveholders' written and unwritten rules) stepped in and hastily arranged to smuggle David out of his clear and present danger on a ship bound straight back to the UK. Margate's mission to slaveholding America lasted less than seven months. This amazing story of an unbowed black African preacher unleashed in 18th Century Georgia has been reconstructed almost entirely from the papers of the Countess of Huntingdon which are held in Westminster College, the United Reformed Church's college in Cambridge, UK. I suppose David Margate was more of a prophet (a brief fiery Amos) than a pastor; more of a Vashti than an Esther - but, hey, we need fiery prophets as well as gracious pastors. And surely the memory of a passionate, free black preacher openly denouncing slavery as a mighty sin that was against the will of God must have been a deeply empowering idea treasured and recounted by many black slaves, even if this fiery black Moses had to flee the land before he'd persuaded all those Southern Pharaohs to let his people go. Respect, David, Respect.