

Rev. Lott Cary: The First African American missionary to Africa

Early Life and Conversion

Lott Cary (sometimes spelt Carey) was born in Charles City County, Virginia, in the newly formed United States of America, just four years after independence. His parents were enslaved by a Virginia farmer named William A. Christian.

Little is known of Cary's early life, and no record of his birth date was kept, but early biographers say it was "about 1780." He was his parents' only child. They were illiterate, and young Lott did not receive an education. His father, a godly man and a distinguished member of a local Baptist Church, and although his mother attended the church, she made no public profession of faith.

The influence of the home, the instruction from his illiterate parents, and the prayers of his father had no hold on Carey as a young man. What hope was there for a young slave boy, or any prospect of freedom? In the face of the evils of his circumstances, being owned and traded among the city's merchants, Cary rebelled against the gospel. He gave himself to alcohol, grew increasingly profane and violent, and became the chief troublemaker among his peers.

In 1804, owned by a Methodist minister, John Bowry, Cary was hired out on an annual contract as a common labourer to the Shockoe tobacco warehouse in the city of Richmond, about 30 miles northwest of his home. In Richmond, his rebellion found more outlet, and although he did attempt to reform his life, he found he could not.

The turning point came in 1807 at the First Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. At that time, there was no separate church for the slaves to attend. The galleries of the large meeting-house of the First Baptist Church, however, were reserved for the slaves connected with the church and congregation. The date of Cary's conversion is unknown, but it was in 1807. One particular

sermon is recorded either as the means by which the Lord brought the gospel to bear on Cary's soul, or as impressing on him the great desire to read.

The text was John three, the conversation between Nicodemus and the Lord Jesus. From that day, Cary wanted to read the Lord's interview with Nicodemus for himself, and he resolved to learn to read and write. He acquired a New Testament and, with help from a young man at the warehouse, learned the alphabet and, in a short time, was able to read the chapter and write.

Cary was baptised by Pastor John Courtney that same year and brought into fellowship at the First Baptist Church in Richmond. He was a changed man. Previously, he had been lazy, devoting his time to leisure and trouble. Now he was industrious and focused, spending his time reading. Observers noted that one of the books he read during his breaks at the warehouse was Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. First published in 1776 by the Scottish philosopher, it recorded the conditions and changes in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. It explained general economics, how national wealth was generated, and addressed issues of labour, productivity, and markets. His interest in economics was also evident in his ability to save money and be thrifty in his spending. He also became an expert in the warehouse's shipping department, and at the time it was said of him that no one was his equal in shipping goods so promptly and correctly.ⁱ

His diligence and ability in the warehouse earned the owners' respect and trust, and he was often given money as a reward and permission to sell small amounts of waste tobacco. Within a few years, Cary had saved quite a sum of money.

ⁱ Ralph Randolph Gurley, "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary," in *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia: With an Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary* (Washington: James C. Dunn, 1835), 148.