

An Account of the Life of Mr. David George

A Modern-English Edition

An Account of the Life of Mr DAVID GEORGE, from Sierra Leone in Africa; given by himself in a Conversation with Brother Rippon of London, and Brother Pearce of Birmingham.

*Originally published in John Rippon, The Baptist Annual Register
(1793)*

Editorial approach

This lightly edited text modernises spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, and obsolete constructions while preserving the style of George's first-person account. The accompanying testimonials and editorial notes are also retained.

David George's Account

I was born in Essex county, Virginia, about fifty or sixty miles from Williamsburg, on Nottoway river, to parents who were brought from Africa but did not fear God. My first work was fetching water and carding cotton; afterwards I was sent into the field to work the corn and tobacco till I was about nineteen years old. My father's name was John, and my mother's Judith.

I had four brothers, and four sisters, who, with myself, were all born in slavery: our master's name was Chapel—a very bad man to the Negroes. My oldest sister was called Patty; I have seen her so whipped several times that her back has been all corruption, as though it would rot.

My brother Dick ran away, but they caught him, and brought him home; and as they were going to tie him up, he broke away again, and they hunted him with horses and dogs, till they took him; then they hung him up to a cherry-tree in the yard, by his two hands, quite naked, except his breeches, with his feet about half a yard from the ground.

They tied his legs close together, and put a pole between them, at one end of which one of the owner's sons sat, to keep him down, and another son at the other. After he had received 500 lashes, or more, they washed his back with salt water, and whipped it in, as well as rubbed it in with a rag; and then directly sent him to work in pulling off the suckers of tobacco.

I also have been whipped many a time on my naked skin, and sometimes till the blood has run down over my waistband; but the greatest grief I then had was to see them whip my mother, and to hear her, on her knees, begging for mercy. She was master's cook, and if they only thought she could have done anything better,

instead of speaking to her as to a servant, they would strip her directly, and begin whipping her.

I believe she was on her death-bed when I got away, but I have never heard since. Master's rough and cruel treatment was the reason for my running away. Before this time I used to drink, but not steal; did not fear hell, was without knowledge; though I went sometimes to Nottoway, the English church, about eight or nine miles away.

I left the plantation about midnight, walked all night, got into Brunswick County, then over Roanoke River, and soon met with some White travelling people, who helped me on to Poke River. When I had been at work there two or three weeks, a search party discovered me, and the master said to me, there are thirty guineas offered for you, but I will have no hand in it: I would advise you to make your way towards Savannah River. I took his advice, but it took several weeks to get there. I worked there, I suppose, as long as two years, with John Green, a white man, before they came after me again.

Then I ran away up among the Creek Indians. As I travelled from Savannah River, I came to Ocmulgee River, near which the Indians observed my track. They can tell the Black people's track from their own, because they are hollow in the middle of their feet, and the Black's feet are flatter than theirs. They followed my track down to the river, where I was making a long raft to cross over with. One of these Indians was a king, called Blue Salt; he could talk a little broken English. He took and carried me away about seventeen or eighteen miles into the woods to his camp, where they had bear meat, deer meat, turkeys, and wild potatoes.

I was his prize, and lived with him from the Christmas month till April, when he went into his town Augusta, in the Creek nation. I

made fences, dug the ground, planted corn, and worked hard; but the people were kind to me. S.C., my master's son, came there for me, from Virginia, I suppose 800 miles, and paid King Blue Salt for me in rum, linen, and a gun; but before he could take me out of the Creek nation, I escaped and went to the Nauchee Indians, and got to live with their king, Jack, who employed me a few weeks. S. C. was waiting this while in hopes to have me.

Mr Galphin, who lived on the Savannah River, at Silver Bluff, and who was afterwards my master, traded in these parts among the Indians in deer skins. He had a manager here named John Miller. Mr Miller knew King Jack and agreed with him and S. C. as to the price Mr Galphin was to pay for me. So I came away from King Jack, who gave me into the hands of John Miller.

Now I mended deer skins, and kept their horses together, that they might not wander too far and be lost. I used also once a year to go down with the horses, carrying deer skins, to Mr. Galphin's, at Silver Bluff. The distance, I think, was 400 miles, over five or six rivers, which we crossed in leather boats.

After three years, when I came down, I told Mr Galphin that I wished to live with him at Silver Bluff. He told me I should; so he took me to wait upon him and was very kind to me. I was with him about four years, I think, before I was married.

Here I lived a bad life and had no serious thoughts about my soul; but after my wife was delivered of our first child, a man of my own people, named Cyrus, who came from Charleston, South Carolina, to Silver Bluff, told me one day in the woods that if I lived so, I should never see the face of God in glory (Whether he himself was a converted man or not, I do not know). This was the first thing that disturbed me and gave me much concern.

I thought then that I must be saved by prayer. I used to say the Lord's prayer, that it might make me better, but I feared that I grew worse; and I continued worse and worse, as long as I thought I would do something to make me better; till at last it seemed as if there was no possibility of relief, and that I must go to hell. I saw myself a mass of sin. I could not read, and had no Scriptures. I did not think of Adam and Eve's sin, but *I* was sin. I felt *my own* plague; and I was so overcome that I could not wait upon my master. I told him I was ill. I felt myself at the disposal of Sovereign mercy. At last in prayer to God I began to think that he would deliver me, but I did not know how.

Soon after I saw that I could not be saved by any of my own deeds, but that it must be by God's mercy—that my sins had crucified Christ; and now the Lord took away my distress. I was sure that the Lord took it away, because I had such pleasure and joy in my soul, that no man could give me.

Soon after I heard brother George Liele preach, who, as you both know, is at Kingston in Jamaica. I have known him ever since he was a boy. I am older than he; I am about fifty. His sermon was very suitable, on *Come unto me all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

When it was ended, I went to him and told him I was so: That I was weary and heavy laden, and that the grace of God had given me rest. Indeed his whole sermon seemed meant for me.

Afterwards Brother Palmer, who was pastor at some distance from Silver Bluff, came and preached to a large congregation at a mill of Mr Galphin's; he was a very powerful preacher; and as he was returning home Lord's Day evening, I went with him two or three miles, and told him how it was with me. About this time more of my fellow-people began to seek the Lord.

Afterwards Brother Palmer came again and wished us to ask Master to let him preach to us, and he had leave, and came frequently. There were eight of us now who had experienced the Lord's great blessing and mercy, and my wife was one of them, and brother Jesse Galphin, whom you mention in the history of us poor slaves, was another. Brother Palmer appointed a Saturday evening to hear what the Lord had done for us, and the next day he baptised us in the Mill-stream.

Some time afterwards, when Brother George Liele came again, and preached in a corn field, I had a great desire to pray with the people myself, but I was ashamed, and went to a swamp and poured out my heart before the Lord. I then came back to Brother George Liele, and told him my case.

He said, "In the intervals of service you should engage in prayer with the friends." At another time, when he was preaching, I felt the same desire, and after he had done, I began in prayer—it gave me great relief, and I went home with a desire for nothing else but to talk to the brothers and sisters about the Lord.

Brother Palmer formed us into a church, and gave us the Lord's Supper at Silver Bluff. Then I began to exhort in the church, and learned to sing hymns. The first I learned from a book was a hymn by that great man, Watts, which begins with *"Thus says the wisdom of the Lord."* Afterwards the church advised me, with Brother Palmer, to speak to them and keep them together; I refused and felt I was unfit for all that, but Brother Palmer said to me, "Take care that you don't offend the Lord." Then I thought that he knew best, and I agreed that I would do as well as I could.

So I was appointed to the office of an elder, and the ministers were not allowed to come among us lest they should furnish us with too much knowledge. The Black people all around attended with

us, and as Brother Palmer must not come, I had the whole management, and used to preach among them myself. Then I got a spelling book and began to read. As Master was a great man, he kept a White schoolmaster to teach the White children to read. I used to go to the little children to teach me a, b, c. They would give me a lesson, which I tried to learn, and then I would go to them again and ask them if I was right.

The reading so ran in my mind, that I think I learned in my sleep as really as when I was awake; and I can now read the Bible, so that what I have in my heart, I can see again in the Scriptures. I continued preaching at Silver Bluff, till the church, constituted with eight, increased to thirty or more, and till the British came to the city Savannah and took it.

My Master was an anti-Loyalist; and being afraid, he now retired from home and left the enslaved people behind. My wife and I, and the two children we then had, and fifty or more of my Master's people, went to Ebenezer, about twenty miles from Savannah, where the King's forces were. The General sent us over the big Ogeechee River to Savages' Plantation, where the White people, who were Loyalists, reported that I was planning to carry the Black people back again to their slavery; and I was thrown into prison, and remained there about a month, when Colonel Brown, belonging to the British, took me out.

I stayed some time in Savannah, and at Yamacraw a little distance from it, preaching with brother George Liele. He and I worked together also a month or two: he used to plough, and I to weed corn. My family and I went into Savannah at the beginning of the siege. A ball came through the roof of the stable where we lived, and shattered it, which made us remove to Yamacraw, where we sheltered ourselves under the floor of a house on the ground.

Not long after the siege was raised, I caught the smallpox in the fall of the year, and thought I should have died, nor could I do any more than just walk in the spring. My wife used to wash for General Clinton, and out of the little she got supported us. I was then about a mile from Savannah, when the Americans were coming towards it a second time. I wished my wife to escape, and to take care of herself and of the children, and let me die there.

She went: I had about two quarts of corn, which I boiled; I ate a little, and a dog came in and devoured the rest; but it pleased God some people who came along the road gave me a little rice: I grew better, and as the troops did not come so near as was expected, I went into Savannah, where I met my family, and stayed there about two years, in a hut belonging to Lawyer Gibbons, where I kept a butcher's stall.

My wife had a brother, who was half an Indian by his mother's side, and half a Negro. He sent us a steer, which I sold, and I had now thirteen dollars, and about three guineas besides, with which I intended to pay our passage and set out for Charlestown; but the British light horse came in and took it all away. However, as it was a good time for the sale of meat, I borrowed money from some of the Black people to buy hogs, and soon repaid them, and agreed for a passage to Charlestown, where Major P., the British commander, was very kind to me.

When the English were going to evacuate Charlestown, they advised me to go to Halifax, in Nova Scotia, and gave the few Black people, and it may be as many as 500 White people, their passage for nothing. We were twenty-two days on the passage and used very ill on board.

When we came off Halifax, I got leave to go ashore. When I showed my papers to General Patterson, he sent orders, by a

sergeant, for my wife and children to follow me. This was before Christmas, and we stayed there till June; but as no way was open for me to preach to my own people, I got leave to go to Shelburne (150 miles or more, I suppose, by sea), in the suite of General Patterson, leaving my wife and children for a while behind.

Numbers of my own people were here, but I found the White people were against me. I began to sing the first night, in the woods, at a camp, for there were no houses then built; they were just clearing and preparing to erect a town. The Black people came far and near; it was so new to them! I kept on so every night in the week, and appointed a meeting for the first Lord's Day, in a valley between two hills, close by the river; and a great number of White and Black people came, and I was so overjoyed with having an opportunity once more of preaching the Word of God, that after I had given out the hymn, I could not speak for tears.

In the afternoon we met again, in the same place, and I felt great freedom from the Lord. We had a meeting now every evening, and those poor people who had never heard the gospel before listened to me very attentively; but the White people, the justices, and all were in an uproar, and said that I might go out into the woods, for I should not stay there.

I ought to except one White man, who knew me at Savannah, and who said I should have his lot to live upon as long as I would, and build a house if I pleased. I then cut down poles, stripped bark, and made a simple hut, and the people came flocking to the preaching every evening for a month, as though they had come for their supply.

Then Governor Parr came from Halifax, brought my wife and children, gave me six months' provisions for my family, and a quarter of an acre of land to cultivate for our subsistence. It was a

spot with plenty of water, which I had previously secretly wished for, as I knew it would be convenient for baptising at any time.

The weather being severe, and the ground covered with snow, we raised a platform of poles for the congregation to stand upon, but there was nothing over their heads. Continuing to attend, they wanted a Meeting house built. We had then a day of hearing what the Lord had done, and I and my wife heard their experiences, and I received four of my own people: brother Sampson, brother John, sister Orpah, and sister Dinah; these all are doing well, at Sierra Leone, except brother Sampson, an excellent man, who died on his voyage to that place.

The first time I baptised here was a little before Christmas, in the creek which ran through my lot. I preached to a great number of people on the occasion, who behaved very well. I now formed the church with the six of us and administered the Lord's Supper in the meeting house before it was finished. They continued with the building, and we set a time every other week to hear conversion experiences. A few months later, I baptised nine more, and the congregation increased greatly. The unconverted Black people, as well as the members of the church, helped cut timber in the woods and get shingles; and we used to give a few coppers to buy nails.

We were increasing all the winter, and baptised almost every month, and administered the Lord's Supper first of all once in two months; but the frame of the Meeting was not all up, nor had we covered it with shingles till about the middle of the summer, and then it had no pulpit, seats, nor flooring.

About this time, Mr William Taylor and his wife, two Baptists, who came from London to Shelburne, heard of me. She came to my house when I was so poor that I had no money to buy any potatoes for seed and was so good as to give my children somewhat, and

me money enough to buy a bushel of potatoes; which one produced thirty-five bushels.

The church was now grown to about fifty members. At this time a White person, William Holmes, who, with Deborah his wife, had been converted by reading the Scriptures, and lived at Jones's Harbour, about twenty miles down the river, came up for me, and would have me go with him in his schooner to his house. I went with him, first to his own house, and then to a town they called Liverpool, inhabited by White people.

Many had been baptised there by Mr Chippenham, of Annapolis, in Nova Scotia. Mr Jesse Dexter preached to them but was not their pastor. It is a mixed communion church. I preached there; the Christians were all alive, and we had a little heaven together.

We then returned to Brother Holmes's, and he and his wife came up with me to Shelburne, and told the church how God had converted them to the church on Thursday, and were baptised on the Lord's Day. Their relations who lived in the town were very angry; raised a mob, and endeavoured to hinder their being baptised. Mrs Holmes's sister especially laid hold of her hair to keep her from going down into the water; but the justices commanded peace, and said that she should be baptised, as she herself desired it. Then they were all quiet.

Soon after this the persecution increased, and became so great, that it did not seem possible to preach, and I thought I must leave Shelburne. Several of the Black people had houses upon my lot; but forty or fifty disbanded soldiers were employed, who came with the tackle of ships, and turned my dwelling house, and every one of their houses, quite over; and the Meeting house they would have

burned down, had not the ringleader of the mob himself prevented it.

But I continued preaching in it till they came one night, and stood before the pulpit, and swore how they would treat me if I preached again. But I stayed and preached, and the next day they came and beat me with sticks and drove me into a swamp. I returned in the evening, and took my wife and children over the river to Birchtown, where some Black people were settled, and there seemed a greater prospect of doing good than at Shelburne,

I preached at Birchtown from the fall till about the middle of December, and was frequently hearing accounts of conversion, and baptised about twenty there. Those who desired to hear the Word of God invited me from house to house, and so I preached.

A little before Christmas, as my own people persecuted me there, I set out with my family to return to Shelburne; and coming down the river, the boat was frozen, but we took whip-saws and began whipping the ice till we came to Shelburne.

In my absence, the Meeting House was occupied by a sort of tavern keeper, who said, "The old Negro wanted to make this place a heaven, but I'll make it a hell." Then I preached in it as before, and as my house was pulled down, I lived in it also. The people began to attend again, and in the summer there was a considerable revival of religion.

Now I went down about twenty miles to a place called Ragged Island, among some White people, who desired to hear the Word. One White sister was converted there while I was preaching concerning the disciples, who left all and followed Christ. She came up afterwards, told the church how God had converted her to our church, and was baptised, and two Black sisters with her. Then her

other sister told the church how God had converted her; and joined us without baptism, to which she would have submitted, had not her family cruelly hindered her; but she was the only one in our society who was not baptised.

By this time the Christians at St. John's, about 200 miles from Shelburne, over the bay of Fundy, in New Brunswick, had heard of me, and wished me to visit them. Part of the first Saturday I was there was spent in hearing the experiences of the Black people; four were approved, some of whom had been converted in Virginia: a fortnight after I baptised them in the river, on the Lord's Day. Numerous spectators, White and Black, were present, who behaved very well.

But on Monday many of the inhabitants made a disturbance, declaring that nobody should preach there again without a license from the Governor. He lived at Fredericton, about one hundred miles from thence up St. John's River. I went off in the packet to him. Colonel Allen, who knew me in Charlestown, lived but a few miles from the Governor and introduced me to him; his secretary then gave me a license.¹

I returned then to St. John's, and preached again, and left brother Peter Richards to exhort among them. He afterwards died on the passage, just going into Sierra Leone, and we buried him there.

When I got back to Shelburne, I sent brother Sampson Colbert, one of my elders, to St. John's, to stay there. He was a dear brother,

¹ License issued at Fredericton, 17 July 1792: "I certify that David George, a free Black man, has permission from the lieutenant governor to instruct Black people in the knowledge and practice of the Christian religion" –Jonathan Odell, Secretary.

and the Lord had gifted him with great gifts. When the experiences of nine or ten had been related there, they sent for me to come and baptise them. I went by water to Halifax, and walked from thence to Houghton about eighty miles from Annapolis, and not far from New Brunswick.

There is a large church at Houghton, I think the largest in Nova Scotia. They are all Baptists; Mr Scott is their minister. We spent one Sabbath together, and the whole day was one to remember. When I was landing at St. John's, some of the people who intended to be baptised were so full of joy that they ran out from waiting at the table on their masters, with the knives and forks in their hands, to meet me at the water side.

This second time I was at St. John's, I stayed, preaching about a fortnight, and baptised ten people. Our going down into the water seemed to be a pleasing sight to the whole town, White people and Black. I had now to go to Fredericton again, from whence I obtained the license before; for one of our brethren had been there, and heard the experiences of three of the people, and they sent to me, asking that I would not return until I had been and baptised them. Two brethren took me to Fredericton in a boat. I baptised on the Lord's Day, about twelve o'clock: a great number of people attended.

The Governor said he was sorry that he could not come down to see it; but he had a great deal of company that day, which also hindered one of his servants from being baptised. I came back to St. John's, and home to Shelburne.

Then I was sent for to Preston, about four miles from Halifax, on the other side of the river. Five converted people who lived there desired to be baptised and join the church. I baptised them, and

administered the Lord's Supper to them at Preston, and left brother Hector Peters, one of my elders, with them.

Returning to Shelburne with about thirty passengers, we were blown off into the sea and lost our course. I had no blanket to cover me and got frostbitten in both my legs up to my knees, and was so ill when I came towards land, that I could not walk. The church met me at the riverside and carried me home. Afterwards, when I could walk a little, I wanted to speak of the Lord's goodness, and the brethren made a wooden sledge, and drew me to Meeting. In the spring of the year, I could walk again but have never been strong since.

The next fall, Agent (afterwards Governor) Clarkson came to Halifax to settle the new colony at Sierra Leone. The White people in Nova Scotia were very unwilling that we should go, though they had been very cruel to us, and treated many of us as bad as though we had been slaves.² They attempted to persuade us that if we went away, we should be made slaves again.

The brethren and sisters all round at St. John's, Halifax, and other places, Mr Wesley's people and all, consulted what was best to do, and sent in their names to me, to give to Mr Clarkson, and I was to tell him that they were willing to go. I carried him their names, and he appointed to meet us at Birchtown the next day. We gathered together there, in the meeting house of brother Moses, a blind man, one of Mr Wesley's preachers. Then the Governor read the proclamation, which contained what was offered, in case we were willing to go, and most of us were pleased and agreed to go.

² This Governor Clarkson also has confirmed to the Editor.

We appointed a day over at Shelburne, when the names were to be given to the Governor. Almost all the Baptists went, except a few of the sisters whose husbands were inclined to go back to New York; and sister Lizzie, a Quebec Indian, and brother Lewis, her husband, who was half Indian, both of whom were converted under my ministry, and had been baptised by me.

There are a few scattered Baptists yet at Shelburne, St. John's, Jones's Harbour, and Ragged Island, beside the congregations at the other places I mentioned before. The Meeting House lot, and all our land at Shelburne, it may be half an acre, was sold to merchant Black for about £7.

We departed and called at Liverpool, a place I mentioned before. I preached a farewell sermon there; I longed to do it. Before I left the town, Major Collins, who with his wife used to hear me there, was very kind to me and gave me some salted herrings, which were very acceptable all the way to Sierra Leone. We sailed from Liverpool to Halifax, where we stayed three or four weeks, and I preached from house to house, and my farewell sermon in Mr Marchington's Methodist Meeting-house. There is also a Mr William Black, at Halifax, a capable preacher, one of Mr Wesley's, who baptises those Christians who desire it by immersion.³

Our passage from Halifax to Sierra Leone was seven weeks, in which we had very stormy weather. Several people died on the voyage of a contagious fever, among whom were three of my elders, Sampson Colwell, a dear man, Peter Richards, and John Williams.

³ Baptism by immersion was occasionally practised in Mr Wesley's connexion, in some West Indian islands, in Kentucky, and elsewhere in North America, reportedly even with Dr. Coke's permission.

There was great joy to see the land. The high mountain, at some distance from Freetown, where we now live, appeared like a cloud to us. I preached the first Lord's Day; it was a blessed time, under a sail, and so I did for several weeks after. We then erected a hovel for a Meeting-house, made of posts set in the ground and poles over our heads, covered with grass.

While I was preaching under the sails, sisters Patty Webb and Lucy Lawrence were converted, and they, with old sister Peggy, brother Bill Taylor, and brother Sampson Haywood, three who were awakened before they came this voyage, have since been baptised in the river.

On the voyage from Halifax to Sierra Leone, I asked the Governor if I might not hereafter go to England? And some time after we arrived there, I told him I wished to see the Baptist brethren who live in his country. He was a very kind man to me and to everybody; he is very free and good-natured, and used to come to hear me preach, and would sometimes sit down at our private meetings; and he liked that I should call my last child by his name.

And I sent to Mr Henry Thornton, Oh, what a blessed man he is! he is brother, father, everything. He ordered me five guineas, and I had leave to come over. When I came away from Sierra Leone, I preached a farewell sermon to the church, and encouraged them to look to the Lord, and submit to one another, and regard what is said to them by my three elders, brethren Hector Peters, and John Colbert, who are two exhorters, and brother John Ramsey.

A Few Testimonials to the Character of Mr David George.

Shelburne, Nova Scotia, Oct. 22, 1790.

I have known the bearer, Mr David George, above five years in this settlement, and know that he has conducted himself like a good Christian; and he is a very industrious, good citizen.

Geo. White, Justice of the Peace.

These are to certify that David George, a Baptist preacher, is an inhabitant of the town of Shelburne, and province of Nova Scotia; that he bears a good character, is charitable, sober, honest, and industrious, and is entitled to the attention of all well-disposed people. Witness my hand this second day of December 1791.

Stephen Skinner, Agent for the District of Shelburne. Ship York

Sierra Leone, 10th Dec. 1792.

My dear friends,

I beg leave to recommend to your brotherly love and Christian kindness, the bearer of this letter, Mr David George, as a sincere Christian, and an humble, diligent, and faithful minister of the Word of God, which has ever been blessed from his lips, as it has always

been exemplified in his conduct. He is connected with Christians of the Baptist profession, but his heart embraces, with ingenuous love, all who love God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.

His intention, in visiting England, is to see and converse with Christians of all denominations, and particularly to acquaint himself with the Baptist ministers; hoping by these means to increase in Christian knowledge, and to be still better qualified for administering the Word of God.

I earnestly ask you, for Christ's sake, to shew him all kind acts, particularly to introduce him to the most humble, devout, experienced Christians of your acquaintance; not much among those who move in the circle of fashionable Christianity. I remain, your affectionate Friend and servant,

Melvill Horne.⁴

To Rev. John Newton,
Rev. Rich. Cecil,
Rev. Henry Foster,
Rev. Mr Scott.

Governor Clarkson, in the most unreserved manner, assured me that he esteemed David George as his brother, and that he believes him to be the best man, without exception, in the colony at Sierra Leone.

⁴ Rev. Mr Melvill Horne was curate to Mr Fletcher of Medley and is now the much-loved officiating clergyman at Sierra Leone.