Captain Canot; or, Twenty years of an African Slaver, in addition to providing valuable data for Liberia's early commercial history, is also an important source in the reconstruction of the history of the Rio Pongo. From 1800 to 1865, the Rio Pongo was a major center of slave trading activity on the coast of the present Republic of Guinea. Theodore Canot lived in the Rio Pongo from 1831 to 1833. This published record of his commercial successes, acquaintances met, and intrigues with the local traders is the most complete picture of commerce available to historians working with the period. In recent years, however, Captain Canot has come under fire, with due justification, as a record of dubious validity. The purpose of this paper is to look closely at the periods during which and about which Canot writes for the purpose of testing the work and to suggest questions which may be asked of Captain Canot for the purpose of retrieving those bits of data which have validity.

Since its publication in 1854, Captain Canot has enjoyed unusual success for a book on African
commerce. And the public was not alone in lauding Canot's account of trade along the West African coast. John R. Spears, 1907 author of *The American Slave-Trade*, characterized Captain Canot as "practically an autobiography" and quoted at length from the book.¹ Malcolm Cowley was perhaps the first to recognize that restrictions should be placed on Canot's account, and in 1928 he published a new edition of the manuscript, having removed those sections and passages which he believed represented the biases and prejudices of Brantz Mayer with whom Canot collaborated to produce the original manuscript.² Since 1928, some authors have accepted Cowley's corrections as valid and have cited the cleansed version as a legitimate account. The latest among this group is James Pope-Hennessy who, in his 1967 *Sins of the Fathers*, cites not only Canot but also Richard Drake, *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler*, the latter long recognized by historians as a purely fabricated record of trade in West Africa.³

Against those who accept Canot as a valid account is Warren S. Howard who in his *American Slavers and the Federal Law* describes Captain Canot as "supposed memoirs . . . of dubious validity."⁴ While recognizing that Cowley and Pope-Hennessy may have too willingly accepted Captain Canot on one extreme, Howard's overly cautious assessment has gone too far
on the other. No serious researcher in African history can help but be struck by the number of events or trading practices described in Captain Canot which can be verified or further clarified in British or American documents. The best example of source-concurrence for Canot's years in the Rio Pongo is a visit by Lieutenant Findlay of HMS Favorite to Canot's factory at Gambia during December 1831. According to Canot, Lieutenant Findlay appeared in the upper river in search of a slave trader named Edward Joseph who operated a slave trading factory a few miles upstream from Bangalan town and with whom Canot had cooperated in provisioning slavers in the past. Joseph entered the river's commerce from Sierra Leone where he had successively served as Governor Turner's groom, harbor master, and coastal trader. He abandoned Freetown after unwisely advancing credit to traders along the coast, subsequently losing the entire cargo, and took a position as clerk at John Ormond's factory in the Rio Pongo to escape his creditors. By 1831 Joseph had left Ormond's service, operating his own factory at Gambia. Canot reports that Joseph's "malicious Sierra Leone creditors" informed Governor Findlay of Sierra Leone of Joseph's
slaving activity and solicited the aid of Lieutenant Findlay of HMS Favorite to settle an old debt. Warned of the impending visit of the man-of-war by a "friendly Isrealite" at Freetown, Joseph fled the river, taking with him sixty slaves. Meanwhile Canot forged a new set of books which proved that Joseph's property and factory belonged to Canot and settled down to await Findlay's arrival. Outmaneuvered by Canot's brilliant move, Findlay recognized the failure of his own mission and graciously accepted Canot's invitation to dinner. 7

Lieutenant Findlay's report to the governor of Sierra Leone and other letters appended to the governor's dispatch to the Colonial Office substantiate Canot's account in some cases but not in others. Michael Proctor, a Freetown merchant with commercial interests in the Iles de Los, the Rio Nunez and the Rio Pongo, informed Governor Findlay on November 24, 1831, that Joseph was then in the Rio Pongo collecting slaves for shipment to the New World. 8 Lieutenant Findlay of the Favorite entered the river on December 7 only to discover that Joseph had left the previous night aboard the Portuguese schooner Speculation for Cuba. Findlay then proceeded to Gambia factory, inspected Canot's books and, reporting that he was there from 1 to 9 P.M., certainly stayed for dinner. 9
Similarities aside, the accounts contain important differences which not only correct a problem of chronology in the Canot manuscript but suggest considerations which the historian must keep in mind when evaluating the manuscript in its entirety. Canot asserts that Findlay visited the river in June of 1828 while Findlay's report dates the episode a full three and one half years later. Assuming both descriptions to be of the same event and the Findlay account to be the more reliable reference, a basic flaw in the Canot manuscript becomes evident. According to Cowley's prefatory remarks to the 1928 edition and the title itself of the 1854 edition, Canot had kept journals while in Africa, and the published manuscript flowed from a combination of material from these journals, from memoranda supposedly written by Canot, and from conversations between Mayer and Canot. If in fact Canot did keep a journal of his activity in the Rio Pongo, he was severely lax in recording work-a-day events on the coast. Indeed, for a slaver to have kept a written record of transactions would have been altogether unwise because, had records fallen into wrong hands, they would have served as evidence for a charge of piracy at Freetown. Instead the three and one half year discrepancy in the record perhaps more properly lay with Canot's
imperfect memory and Mayer's attempt to tie the raw manuscript into some chronological order. Where Canot claims to have entered the river's commerce early in 1827, the more reasonable date is 1831. The latter is suggested in a letter to Governor Findlay dated April 27, 1833, which states that Canot had been in the river only two years.10

A second and perhaps more serious discrepancy in the accounts surrounds the reason for Findlay's visit and the status of Joseph in the river's commerce. Findlay claimed that Joseph, in 1831, no longer operated a factory in the Rio Pongo although he kept goods at Canot's factory at Gambia. Instead, Joseph had returned to the Pongo from Mantanzas in Cuba to collect debts from Pongo-based traders and to purchase a few slaves. Against the sixty slaves mentioned by Canot, Findlay reported a figure of 250, including four recaptives and a Nova Scotian settler from Freetown. More revealing still is Findlay's allegation and John Ormond's testimony suggesting that Canot and Joseph were in partnership, Canot collecting the slaves in the Pongo and Joseph marketing them in Cuba.11

In reviewing the accounts of this single episode and other sources which describe trade in the Rio Pongo for the period of Canot's residency in the area, one can also not help but be struck by Canot's failure
to mention his commercial opponents in the river's commerce. Canot mentions only Edward Joseph and John Ormond by name. From 1830 to 1835, however, the Rio Pongo served as the base for more than a dozen principal slave traders on the Windward Coast. Thomas and George Curtis, Mr. Sterne, William Skelton, Jr. and William Lawrence all operated major factories on the lower right bank of the river within the territorial jurisdiction of Yati Yende Kati whom most recognized as the King of the Rio Pongo. In the Bangalan Basin where Canot's factory was located were Paul and Mary Faber, W. C. Wilson, Styles and Mary Lightburn, John Emerson, Benjamin Campbell, and William Ormond, all of whom were more important to the river's commerce than were either Theodore Canot or Edward Joseph. 12

Perhaps Canot and Brantz Mayer, in 1853-54, found themselves confronted by a mass of information and a necessity to do some pruning. A more reasonable explanation for significant omissions in the manuscript, however, is Mayer's overt attempt to transform Canot into a hero-villain capable of reformation. 13 Rather than diminish Canot's role in the river's commerce which full disclosure of the river's commercial community would bring, Mayer chose to concentrate attention upon John Ormond of Bangalang town, his
commercial success, his debaucherous life style, and upon Canot's four month term as clerk in Ormond's service. In this manner, Mayer guaranteed for Canot a proper apprenticeship which placed him in line to challenge Ormond's dominance of the river's trade and to assume control after Ormond's death in 1833. Two additional characters became necessary to complete the scenario and to assure Canot's rise to power. One is Edward Joseph who was formerly a clerk at Ormond's factory and was the person with whom Canot cooperated in provisioning slavers for the middle passage. Rather than the important figure which Mayer describes, other sources hardly mention Joseph at all and then only as a shipper with connections in Cuba. The second figure is Ali Nympha, the landlord of the Fatala River, whom Mayer describes in lofty terms. Ali Nympha was "tired" of John Ormond's dominance. Through his intercession, Canot was able to challenge and eventually seize leadership in the river's commerce.14

Mayer used Canot not only as a hero for his story but also as a medium for propagandizing his own views about the Negroid race. In his dedicatory letter to Nat P. Willis, whom Cowley said "believed that the Abolitionists were insane and dangerous,"15 Mayer spoke of the "inmate or acquired inferiority
of the negro in its own land," and delivered the manuscript as a "true picture of aboriginal Africa,--unstirred by progress,--unmodified by reflected civilization,--full of the barbarism that blood and tradition have handed down from the beginning." Similar sentiments punctuate the manuscript. In a heated confrontation between Canot and Ormond's eldest wife, Mayer writes, "The wrath of the virago (amazon) was instantly kindled, while her horrid face gleamed with that devilish ferocity, which, in some degree is lost by Africans who dwell on our continent." Describing the arrival of a caravan from the interior, Mayer pens Canot to say that "had the troups been accompanied by a bevy of ourang-autangs, I confess I might, at times, have had difficulty in deciding the grade of animal life to which the object in front of me belonged."

Females became "sable bells" and "gladiators" while men were "gay Othellos," "sable lovers," or "stalwart savages."

Nor did Canot, as Mayer's instrument, limit himself to this topic alone. England was a country "fashionably addicted to philanthropy," and Sierra Leone, a cage for the British lion which growled periodically and bestirred itself to punish its cubs scattered in the local rivers. And only a few Englishmen in Her Majesty's service were gentlemen. Mayer's description of polygamous practices in the
Pongo area provided the occasion to turn his pen against Mormonism which, he warned his American readers, "is grafting a 'celestial wifery' upon the civilization of the nineteenth century." Jews were rich, "trusty," and willing collaborators in slave trading personal as long as no risks were involved and profits were high.

Mayer, however, reserved his greatest venom for those Caucasians who took African wives. The reader is constantly reminded that John Ormond was a mulatto and while quadroons, according to Mayer, exhibited more civilized traits, both Caucasians and Africans dispised those who were of mixed descent. When Edward Joseph decided to take an African wife, Mayer used the occasion to emphasize his own disdain. Again Canot became his spokesman.

Perhaps he Joseph was a man of more liberal philosophy and wider views of human brotherhood; at any rate, his residence in Africa gave him a taste not only for its people, habits, and superstitions, but he upheld practical amalgamation with more fervor and honesty than a regular abolitionist. Joseph was possessed by Afroco-mania.

How, then, does one retrieve those parts of the manuscript that have value? One must first accept a three and one half year discrepancy in the account and recognize Mayer's use of Canot to propagandize his own anti-Black, anti-Semitic, anti-amalgamist, and anti-British biases. Mayer becomes the key to the
dilemma. Cowley recognized this fact and courageously attempted in 1928 to remove him from text. He succeeded, however, only to the extent that the reader was led to believe that the record had miraculously become Canot's account. For that reason the researcher should consult only the 1854 edition. Above all, one must accept that Mayer was an honest man, a man with opinions perhaps not unusual to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1854.

Secondly, Mayer himself gives a clue in his letter of dedication to Willis concerning those parts of the narrative in which the reader will find the greatest reliability. "I am of opinion that there is an ethnographic value in the account of his visit to the Mandingoes and Fullahs." Research reveals that indeed this is the area in which Captain Canot makes its greatest contribution to scholarship. When compared to the reports of James Watt, Adam Afzelius, Brian O'Beirne, or Cooper Thomson who traveled in Fula country, little more can be appended to Canot's account. His description of the Susu and Baga peoples and his use of Baga and Susu terminology is of high caliber. Canot's record of the mechanics of trade, whether referring to caravan trade or to factoryship, is the most detailed description available to the historian.
That Canot operated a factory in the river is beyond dispute. But one can wonder what Canot thought when he read Mayer's final draft.
FOOTNOTES

1John R. Spears, The American Slave-Trade (New York, 1907), 85.


5Brantz Mayer, Captain Canot, or, Twenty Years of an African Slaver (New York, 1854), 118.

6Ibid., 98

7Ibid., 118-19.

8Proctor to Findlay, November 24, 1831, enclosed in Findlay to Hay, December 16, 1831, C0267/110, PRO.

9Findlay and Campbell to Findlay, December 16, 1831, enclosed in Findlay to Hay, December 16, 1831, C0267/110, PRO.

10George Nichol to Findlay, April 27, 1833, enclosed in Findlay to Hay, May 9, 1833, C0267/119, PRO.

11Findlay and Campbell to Findlay, December 16, 1831, enclosed in Findlay to Hay, December 16, 1831, C0267/110, PRO.


13Mayer, Captain Canot, iii, uses the term "hero."

14Ibid., 109.

15Canot, Adventures, xvii.

16Mayer, Captain Canot, vi. Italics in the original text.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 79.
19 Ibid., 85.
20 Ibid., 83.
21 Ibid., 77.
22 Ibid., 118.
23 Ibid., 119.
24 Ibid., 81.
25 Ibid., 98, 100.
26 Ibid., 111.
27 Ibid., v.
28 James Watt, "Journal of Mr. James Watt, in his expedition to and from Tembo in the Year 1794" (Rhodes House Library, Oxford, MSS Africa S.22; Adam Afzelius, Sierra Leone Journal, ed. by Alexander P. Kup (Uppsala, 1967); Brian O'Beirne, "Journal of Assistant Staff Surgeon O'Beirne," enclosed in Grant to Bathurst, September 24, 1821, CO267/53/14, PRO; Letters of Cooper Thomson, CAI/0214/17-30, CMS.