

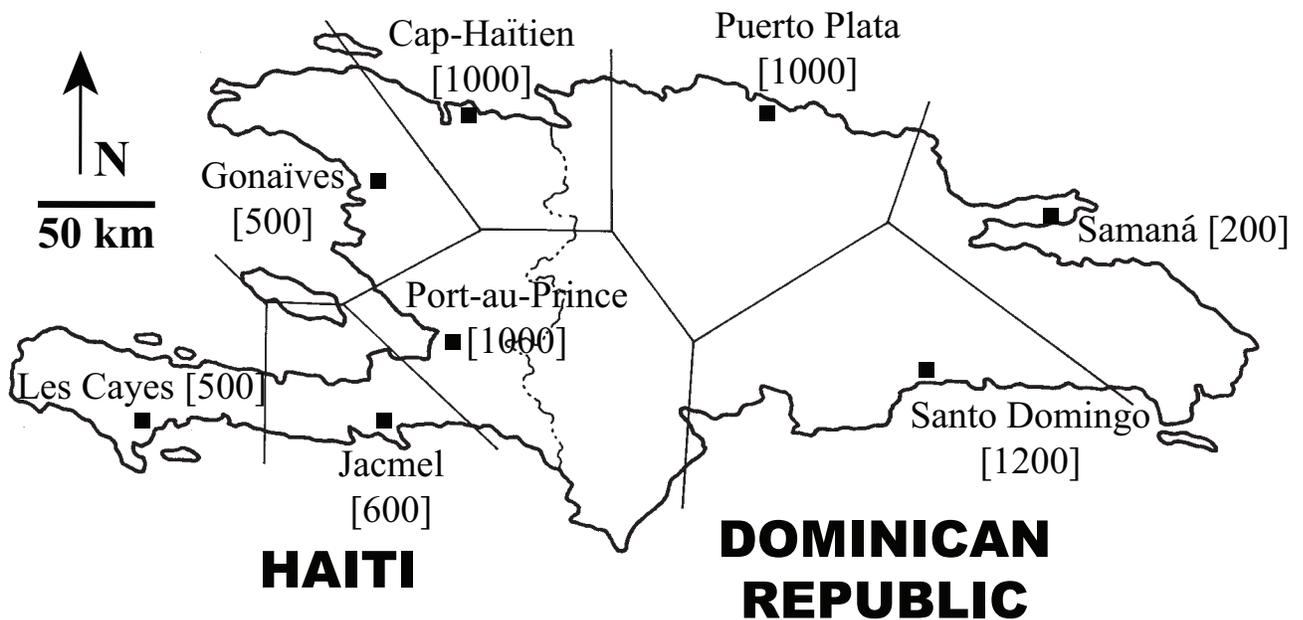
The Samaná Americans

Although we have been here so long, we have preserved our feelings as Americans. We try to keep our people together here as Americans.

—Rev. Jacob James, 1871

SOME
FORGOTTEN
PHILADELPHIANS
BY JOHN M. WEEKS
AND VIRGINIA
RAMÍREZ ZABALA

WITH THE END of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) the Haitian government made it known that it would welcome all people of African descent willing to come to their nation, which then occupied the entire Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Haiti viewed the United States as a potential pool of laborers to repopulate their country. Beginning in 1818, in Philadelphia, American abolitionists saw Haiti as a convenient depository for African-Americans. Hoping to create formal diplomatic relations with the United States, in April 1824, Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer agreed to pay passage for all immigrants. He also offered to support them for a four-month period after their arrival, to grant land at the rate of 36 acres for every 12 laborers, and to finance the trip of those who desired to return to the States.



The island of Hispaniola, showing ports of disembarkation with projected numbers of African-American settlers by region.



The Atlantic (north) coast of the Samaná peninsula.

In August 1824, African-Americans from Philadelphia and other U.S. coastal cities, filled with hope and encouragement, accepted the offer. Some saw Haiti as a new black homeland in the Americas, a place to construct new lives in a new nation. Most believed that Haiti was the solution to a lack of opportunities in an increasingly racist United States.

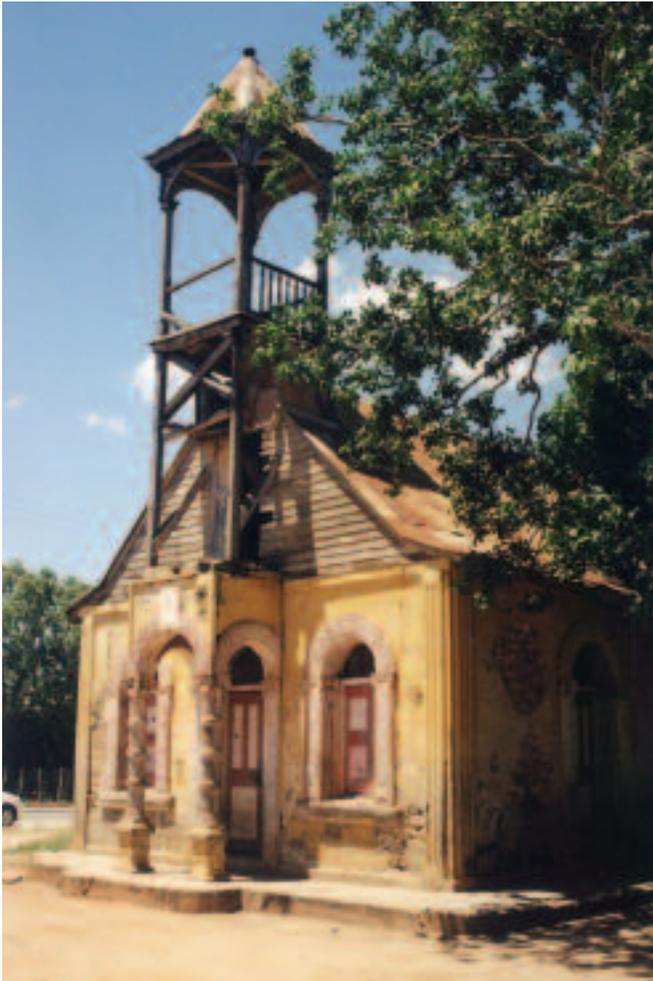
As many as 6,000 people made the trip, although fewer stayed permanently. The emigrants were situated in 10 regions across the island. Despite the seemingly honorable objectives, the scheme did not generate the expected results. Illegal transportation schemes by greedy sea captains, mismanagement of the relocation program by the Haitians, and a supercilious attitude from some Americans created many practical problems. Compounded by profound cultural, linguistic, and religious differences between the newcomers and the Haitians, both the Haitian politicians and the North American abolitionists became disillusioned rather quickly and the project ceased in June 1825. Similar problems would later emerge between African-Americans and indigenous Africans in the American Colonization Society's colony of Liberia between 1830 and 1839.

Only one of the American colonies in Haiti survived. For several years the authors have been working with this commu-

nity to investigate issues of ethnic continuity. On the Samaná peninsula, of what is now the northeastern Dominican Republic, live the descendants of African-Americans who migrated in 1825, originally assigned to cultivate fruits and vegetables, primarily coconuts. They initially settled along the south shore of the peninsula, beyond the sandy beaches, shaded by groves of coconut palms. In 1871 they numbered between 500 and 600 people. Their houses were simple, single- or double-room, thatched structures with wattle-and-daub walls. Small agricultural plots were located near homesteads, and their diet consisted of plantains, sweet potatoes, yams, maize, rice, peas, beans, cassava, pork, beef, poultry, cane, cacao, and coffee. Tropical produce was abundant, and surpluses were sold in the Turks and Caicos Islands and elsewhere in the western Caribbean.

The Samaná American community has been a relatively closed group, isolated from the rest of the country by a nonexistent road system and accessible only by boat, held together culturally by religious beliefs, a common language, and other cultural factors determined by a common origin and structurally by their church organization.

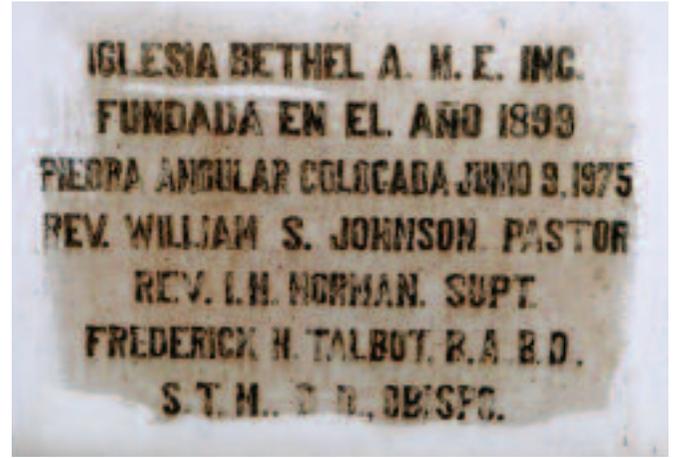
Today some 8,000 descendants of the original emigrants still speak an American English derived from the early 19th



The remains of a failed mission at Copey, northwestern Dominican Republic.



St. Peter's Evangelical Church at Santa Bárbara de Samaná. The first church brought by the Americans was the African Methodist Episcopal Church under the leadership of the Rev. Isaac Miller. When Miller died the white missionaries of the Wesleyan (Anglican) Church of England rapidly assumed religious leadership. The Samaná Americans were told by the Wesleyans that they could not assume the pastoral post of the church. Unwilling to accept such discrimination, a group of parishioners left St. Peter's and in 1899 once again established the AME Church, naming it Bethel. In the early 1900s the Wesleyan Church abandoned St. Peter's and the congregation became evangelical.



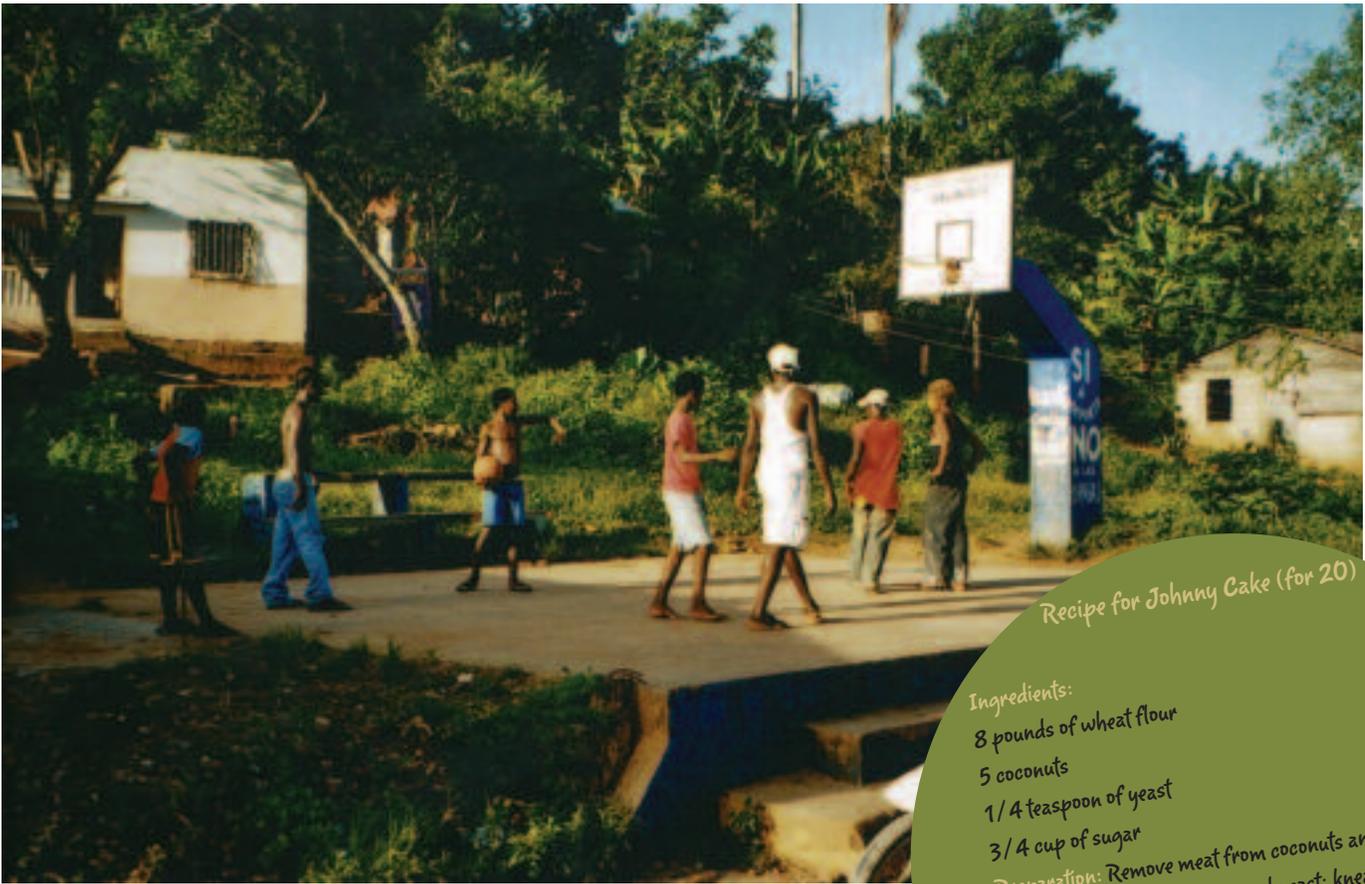
Plaque on Bethel AME Church at Santa Bárbara de Samaná.



Daniel Willmore Health Clinic. Willmores were among the first settlers in Santa Bárbara de Samaná.



Street sign named for Mariano Vanderhorst, Mayor (1998–2002). The Vanderhorsts were among the first settlers in Santa Bárbara de Samaná. This family is still listed in the Philadelphia telephone directory.



Samaná Americans in the Willmore neighborhood of Santa Bárbara de Samaná playing basketball.

Recipe for Johnny Cake (for 20)

Ingredients:

8 pounds of wheat flour

5 coconuts

1/4 teaspoon of yeast

3/4 cup of sugar

Preparation: Remove meat from coconuts and grate; squeeze out milk; combine with flour and yeast; knead and make small balls; put aside to set; knead again; flatten in a pan and cook for 10–15 minutes, or until done.

Johnny Cake

century. Most are Protestants, in contrast to the Roman Catholicism practiced by the majority Spanish-Dominican population. Several denominations are represented, including Evangelical, Pentecostal, Church of God, African Methodist Episcopal, Seventh Day Adventist, as well as some Roman Catholic. There has been considerable congregational intermarriage and visitations. Funerals and weddings have been conducted in one church and baptism from those unions at another church. Despite the dominant Spanish-Dominican culture, North American surnames, including uncommon ones such as Willmore and Vanderhorst, patterns of etiquette, music, and foodstuffs have survived. American English has always been the preferred language in the home, and is considered a source of identity and cultural insulation, though it is now threatened by “Tourist English.”

While their geographic isolation has undermined their full inclusion in the developing national economy and culture, their effort to maintain their ethnic identity has not been easy. Spanish-Dominicans refer to them as *cocolos*—a derisive term in which the characteristics of black, Evangelical Protestant, English accent, and Samaná all converge. There has been increasing intermarriage with Spanish-Dominicans and deviation from strict Protestant norms of earlier generations. Brutal strong-man governments have outlawed English,

undermined local development, and even destroyed the historic downtown of Santa Barbara Samaná in a deliberate fire.

However, many still identify themselves as Americans with Philadelphia as their place of origin. They hope for repatriation, or at least some reunion with branches of their families still residing in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic states. The future of these “Americans” is uncertain. Yet their lives shed light on an overlooked historical alternative to racial animus in the United States and on the bravery and utopian resilience that fuels millions of people who, today, uprooted by war and poverty, relocate in pursuit of a better world. 🏠

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For Further Reading

Dixon, Chris. *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.