

Letters Between Ephraim Elliott and Rowland T. Robinson, 1837

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT:

There are four Ephraim Elliott correspondences: the initial letter of March 12, 1837 sent from Ferrisburgh to North Carolina is obviously not part of the Rokeby collection. The second letter, dated in April is from Elliott. The third letter in draft form is penned on back of letter #2. How can we be assured that the “conditions” in the draft/the third letter were actually acknowledged? Because in response a fourth and final letter was received in June.

Why is viewing the actual primary source document important? Rokeby staff had been working from typed transcriptions of the letters for years. One day while viewing the actual letter a staff member spotted an overlooked piece of information: a return address. Working with pdf-formatted views of North Carolina Census, Ephraim Elliott was found. He lived at Newby’s Bridge, Hertford township in Perquimans County, North Carolina². Further searches on the web uncovered genealogical databases; this information was not taken face value, however. Examination of births, marriages, and deaths certificates to confirmed Ephraim’s lineage. Further investigation into probate records, yearly lists of taxables, and more census figures contributed to building a profile of not only Ephraim Elliott and his family, but of “[his] negro Jesse.”

Research shows that Ephraim and Jesse were peers, both about 25 years old in 1837. Ephraim’s grandfather and father were slave owners. Father Joseph had 13 slaves accounted for on the 1820 census; one was Jesse. Joseph died in 1824 without a will; the courts divided his assets and property among his seven children. Ephraim’s lot included Jesse.

ACTIVITY: Have students use an on-line mapping link to calculate the distance between Robinson in Ferrisburgh Vermont and Elliott in Hertford North Carolina.

² This area is now the Belvidere district off Route 37.

Ephraim did not live on a splashy plantation like we see represented in “Gone with the Wind.” He inherited 80 acres of undesirable swamp suitable for raising pigs. The land is level. Numerous ditches cross the district to alleviate some of the flooding that results from the Perquimans River running high. Few roads exist even today, and the distance between homes is about one mile. Ephraim’s home no longer remains. Few if any early 19th century farmhouses exist in Perquimans County at all, most succumbing to the effects of hurricanes that blast in from the Atlantic Ocean.

The Great Dismal Swamp is less than five miles from the Elliott farm. For many decades freedom might be no further north than there. The dense and dangerous Dismal Swamp was notorious for difficult water levels and currents, snakes, mosquitoes, and yet the Swamp was home to many well hidden fugitives in what are called “maroon communities.” While there is no evidence that Jesse used the Great Dismal Swamp to his advantage, water routes *were* perhaps the best course of escape for him. Many 19th century newspapers from the Hertford area have warning of stiff penalties to ship captains if fugitives were found on their rigs.

Ephraim was illiterate, as were most residents in Perquimans County. His letters were not of his own hand; rather, he paid a neighbor to write for him and presumably to read any letter that he received. This explains the change in penmanship between letters. Another clarification: Robinson’s handwriting was illegible enough for the reader to think he was “Robert T. Robertson.”

April 19th 1837

Perquimans County No Carolina

Robert T Robertson

You re letter of 12th March Is before me in regard to my Negro Jesse his situation at this time places it in his power to give me what he think's proper. But I do not feel disposed to make any title for him for less than Three Hundred Dollars which is not more than one third what I could have had for him before he absconded If I had bin disposed to sell him but I have never had any such Intention I should like for him to return to N. Carolina if he should think Proper he may be assured that I will not Sell him But I can not expect it as he at this time is entirely out of my reach and may not wish to place himself in my power again I never intended that he Should be mad[e] a Slave not longer than three or four years from the time he left Jesse was a man that I had a grate regard for that I am in hopes will do well I should like to hear from him from time to time If he should be disposed to give me the above sum he can forward the money to some one with Instructions to take a Bill of Sale

Respectfully your friend

Ephraim Elliott

Ephraim Elliott to Rowland T. Robinson, April 19, 1837.

1. Why is Ephraim Elliott writing to Rowland T. Robinson? Who is he?
2. What does it mean to have a "title" to something? Why would Jesse have to buy his freedom from another person?
3. Why is Jesse in a position of power in deciding how much to send to Ephraim Elliott?
4. Do you thing Elliott intends to travel from North Carolina to seize Jesse?
5. Can you think of examples of when you would use a "Bill of Sale" today?
6. Knowing that Ephraim and Jesse grew up together, do you think he is being sincere or sarcastic when he states "Jesse was a man that I have grate regard for that I am in hopes will do well."

April 19th 1837

Perquimans County No Carolina
Robert T. Robinson

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my power again I never intended that he
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than three or four years ^{from the time he left} Jesse was a
man that I had a great regard for
that I am in hopes will do well
I should like to hear from him from
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to give me the above sum he can
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Reproduction of letter from Ephraim Elliott to Rowland T. Robinson.

Reply

3rd of 5th Mo. 1837

Ephraim Elliott

Thy letter of the 19th was recd last evening & I regret to find that the sum thou requires for the freedom of Jesse places this desirable object—the most anxious wish of his heart beyond his reach. Since leaving thy Service he has by his industry & economy laid up 150\$ & he is willing to give the whole of this sum for his freedom: & the whole of his savings is all that he can offer--for much as I and his other friend here may desire his liberty. I am bound to inform thee without the least wish to offend, that we cannot consciously contribute any thing toward the purchase of a slave even for his liberation; because we believe it would be recognizing a principle which God forbids. If Jesse was in possession of a larger sum he would freely offer it all for his freedom. I therefore hope thou wilt feel disposed to consider the case of one for whom thou has so great a regard & accept his offer which considering his present circumstances & location must be ackgd liberal. Shouldst thou feel disposed to accept this offer I would propose thy forwarding the relinquishment of thy title to some person in whom thou canst confide either in N.Y.T. or Boston who will receive the money on delivery of thy sd discharge. Please to inform me soon of the result of thy mind in the case & accept my own and Jesse's sincere desire for thy prosperity & happiness.

Thy Frd RTR

PS I mention the above named places because thou & I can each find a person in either of those places whom we could rely upon to accomplish the business. RTR

Reply from Rowland T. Robinson to Ephraim Elliott, May 3, 1837.

1. How much money has Jesse saved since leaving Ephraim Elliott? How did he get this money?
2. Why won't Robinson help pay for Jesse's freedom?
3. Why does Robinson think Jesse's offer of sending Elliott \$150 is a liberal offer?
4. Why does Robinson suggest that someone from New York or Boston get involved with the exchange of the title for the money?

with Instructions to take a Bill
of Sale

Respectfully your friend
Ephraim Elliott
3rd of 5th Mo 1834

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the money on delivery of thy sd. discharge. Please to inform me
soon of the result of thy mind in the case & accept my own
& Jesse's sincere desires for thy prosperity & happiness
Thy friend
R. J. P.



Reproduction of the draft of the letter sent to Ephraim Elliott.

Perquimans County NC 6th mo. 7th 1837

Respected Friend

I recd thy very acceptable letter dated 5th mo, 3rd and was at hand a few days ago. I must inform thee that I do not feel disposed to take any less than I stated before. I don't know how Jesse could with a clear consciense wish me to take any less than what I before stated. If Jesse has a desire to come back I wish he would express his designs in another letter stating his determination If he feels disposed to come back I will meet him at any place that he will mention. And no sum of money or no temptation shall seperate us. But if he does not wish to return I will make the transfer to any friend of his that he will mention for the sum before stated.

Thy friend

Ephraim Elliott

Rowland T. Robinson

Ephraim Elliott to Rowland T. Robinson, June 6, 1837.

1. How long has it taken for a letter to get between Hertford and Ferrisburgh?
2. Why has Ephraim rejected Jesse's offer?