

McLean County Historical Society

**The Major Collection  
of  
Letters from Liberia**

Processed by  
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Spring 1994

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August 2004

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Spring 2008

Edits to historical sketch and letter transcriptions  
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Summer 2020

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**COLLECTION INFORMATION**

Volume of Collection:	One Box.
Collection Dates:	1836-1851, 2004.
Restrictions:	Many brittle documents. Use photocopies unless authorized by Librarian / Archivist.
Reproduction Rights:	Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained in writing from the McLean County Museum of History.

Location:	Archives
Notes:	For additional information, see: Bibliography of James Amemasor's Masters Thesis.

### Historical Sketch

The Major Collection of Letters from Liberia consists of twelve letters written by formerly enslaved people living in Liberia to their former slave holder, Benjamin Major (31 Oct. 1796 – 29 May 1852). In the late 1820s, perhaps as a result of his friendship with Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ Church, Mr. Major came to the conclusion that physical bondage was wrong. He freed his enslaved people and paid their passage to Liberia, where they arrived in late summer of 1836. The Major family moved from Christian County, Kentucky, to Woodford County, Illinois, in 1834. (Between the time Benjamin left Kentucky and the time his formerly enslaved people left for Liberia, the enslaved people lived on the property of Joseph Major, Benjamin's brother, in Kentucky.) The family was and still is prominent in Woodford County, having been very instrumental in the establishment of the town of Eureka and Eureka College.

The letters, written by four different individuals Tolbert Major, Austin Major, Wesley Harlan, and Tolbert's wife, Silvay, describe the vagaries of life in Africa, family matters, the weather and native vegetation, and the recurring troubles that occurred with the indigenous people. (The letter writers frequently misspelled words, including names. Major and Harlan are both frequently misspelled in the letters.) Requests were also made to Benjamin Major for a variety of supplies, such as cotton and paper, which were scarce. Requests were also made for replacement of lost items. Greetings were passed to family members and acquaintances still in this country. For the most part, it appears that Mr. Major regularly sent shipments of goods to Liberia

Most of the letters begin with "Dear Father" or "Dear Father and Mother." This is likely just a term of affection; Benjamin Major was only twelve years older than Austin Major and only seven years older than Tolbert Major. It's extremely unlikely that he was their biological father. Other individuals mention include: Agnes Harlan, Lucy Majors, George Harlan, Edward Watkins, John Major, Enoch Harlan, and Shelvay Bradson.

The earliest letter dates from September 1836 and the final one, announcing the death of Tolbert Major, is dated December 26, 1851. Photocopies and preliminary transcriptions of all the letters have been made, with the exception of one which could not be pieced together. One letter from 1839 has a 2" x 2" hole in the center of the first page and a missing second page; otherwise, the letters appear to be intact. Most are torn, but are still legible. All are in extremely fragile condition. The letters are arranged in chronological order.

### Scope and Content Notes

This collection includes twelve complete letters, appended notes, and letter fragments written between 1836 and 1851 by emancipated people residing in Liberia. (The letter fragments likely go with the letter dated May 20, 1839.) The transcriptions of these letters are in this document. Their former slave holder Benjamin Major and his family, of Eureka, Illinois were the primary recipients, although the first letter

Formatted: Left

was sent to Joseph Major to relay to Benjamin. On the May 1839 letter, Tolbert Major appends a note to James Moore of Christian County, Kentucky.

These letters were gifts from the estate of Gretchen Major, of Eureka, Illinois, in 1992. Gretchen, a great granddaughter-in-law of Benjamin Major, agreed that the letters be donated to the Historical Society before her death in November 1991.

### **Box and Folder Inventory**

#### **Folder 1:**

Photocopied information on Major family from Woodford County and a short history of Liberia and the American Colonization Society compiled by Archives Intern, Kristy Gebhardt in 1994.

#### **Folder 2:**

Letter dated 9/1836

To: W. Joseph Major

Location: Hopkinsville, Christian County, KY

From: Tolbert Major

[forwarded to Benjamin Major]

Bassa Cove Western Africa

Sept. 1836

Dear Sir,

We have all landed on the Shores of Africa & got into our houses. We have been here 3 weeks. So far I am well pleased ~~so far~~ to my master in Illinois. remember me affectionately Tele him that none of us have been taken with the fever yet. We have a prospect of war with the natives. I hope it will be settled without bloodshed. To Joseph Major & his family I want my love & compliments. it rains here almost every day more or less. when the rain is over we com out to over 8 gallen as the Soil is Sandy. we have not got our farms laid out yet. each of us will get 40 acres. Which will be ours when we clear 2 for every 10 - that is 8 acres. we have a Sunday School here 3 missionary white men 2 baptists & a Methodist. as it respects living here it is altogether deffarint to that in America here we have Palm oil & rice. sweet potatoes plantain & Banana.

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& Copada a root something like artichoke  
tastes very well when boiled. we have  
pine apples—limes etc. though the principal  
article of food is rice & palm oil. To W.  
Woolridge & his family & Ed. my love &  
Compliments—tell George Major & Henry  
that it is my desire for them to come  
to this Country. they need not fear the  
heat. it is not so hot as in America &  
we never expect to see frost again. this  
is now the winter here & the trees are as  
green as Spring. Tell Master Jo. Majors  
to please to let them come. my love  
to Mr. Moore in Hopskinsville. to Gid —  
Overshiner my respects. to F. Wheatly &  
his family.  
Your &  
Tobot Major

[ADDRESS PANEL]  
Mr. Joseph Major  
Hopkinsville  
Kentucky

[POSTMARK]  
New York SHIP Nov 8

**Folder 3:**

Letter dated 5/20/1839

To: Benjamin Major

Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL

From: Tot ben Jagers (Tolbert Major)

Bass cove May 20th 1839

My Dear Master,

it is a long time since  
I hav seen you I have seen very many thing  
since I have seen you Some are new

& interesting in the highest degree & some a  
gain are to horrid to mention but the  
Lord has carried us through them blessed  
be his name he does all things well I have  
had the honor of being married to a very  
worthy woman & we have been blessed with a boy  
we are all well thank God for his goodness he  
is good & his kind care is over all his work  
I have found something in Africa that I  
could not find in America that  
I could not find in the Lord Jesus  
Christ whom to know is life eternal  
we were getting along very well & I thought  
I would be able to take it to America in a  
For we were all getting along very well, that is that is Tho Au-  
stin Wa & Thornton and Myself old  
aunt Hannah is dead, she died & her  
both of her sons. Why sir, your  
endowed family was all doing well  
we had learned how to be our own Masters  
to but we have had war & that has  
de-stressed all very much indeed  
we have had the most of things destroy-  
ed Washington was shot in the war  
he was shot in the back near his left  
Shoulder the ball is not out yet  
& he is not able to do any thing

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we are all needy & should be glad  
if you would send us out some things  
if you please we are trying to get  
along a gain. tell all of your family  
how do Dear Sir I am in haste & must  
bid you good bye

Bengemen                      Your humble  
Magers                         Servant Tol  
   ber magers  
   Bassa cove Liberia

Bassa cove May 20th 1839  
Dear Mr Hopkins More  
I take this oppor-  
tunity to write you a few lines to inform  
that I & my wife (health is well please tell)

Mr George                    that agnes Harlin  
& her daug                [w]ell but her two  
sons are                    died first he  
Died soon                 here & Henry  
has been de                six months he  
died in the cou         that he had a  
good deal of              his mother never -  
of beter for it For he was alone amonge  
the coutry people. & agness says that she  
wishish that her good Mastir Harlin  
pleas to send her some necessarys  
for she is needy for we hav had  
war with the natives & and they destroyed

Note: The original of this letter has a square hole in, likely the result of the paper disintegrating along the fold lines. However, someone had long ago written a transcription of the letter. (The handwriting is very old-fashioned and the transcription may have been done decades ago.) Words missing from the original have been inserted from the handwritten transcription into this new transcription. The handwritten transcription does not include the letter to "Mr. More" above; thus the spaces indicate missing text because of the hole.

**Folder 4:**

- a. Letter dated 10/17/1840  
    To: Benjamin Major  
    Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
    From: Tolbert Major

Bassa Cove October the 17th 1840

Dear father I was very happy to here  
from you and the more to So to see the  
much regard you have for me I re-  
cived your letter aug the 8th 1840 I am  
well & family I have marriad sence I a  
rived hear and happy to say that I have  
a vary good in dustris wife and one  
that may be apended on and if she had  
a chance she could do much more with Such  
as whells cards. Lums and thir utenshuls  
not with standing Sence I left you I have  
met with a grat misforthon when I arrived  
here I was put in a thatch house where I  
was taken down with the fever and the  
natives brook in upon me and takin  
every thing I had in this world I like  
this country vear well all to that one can

not raise as much here as they can in  
the States on account of the rough & Sen-  
ce I was robbed I have been obliged to  
take up all of my time in working for  
people to support my Self & family  
we have rice for bread & cassava &  
yams & potatoes we use Palm oil for lard  
meat is very scarce here the Palm  
tree which I have just mentioned

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is I believe the gratis in this country  
& I think Eneay other first it the oil  
Second it gives wine thirdly it  
gives cabbages that is as good if not bet-  
ter than those with you in fact I  
believe its match is not to be found  
on the globe at least not in this  
country the fig & bananas is very good three  
of the plantain species which is also very  
good and plenty in these parts this plant  
never bears but once but year always  
has another crop ready to take its  
place I was very much obliged  
to you for the thing which you sent  
me or rather us but whether we received  
all that you sent us or not I can not tell  
I received five pieces of cloth namely  
one of mixed cotton one of calico thirty four  
yard three pieces of one bleached cotton three  
rolls of raw cotton containing about a  
lb each I also received 125 spools of white  
thread I would be very glad Sir, if you  
would to us how much you sent us  
and the different amount with their their  
names & their numbers the box we received  
was broken open when we received it  
please to try help us all you can  
tobacco cloth large wash basins is gratis

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Sail in this country we stand in  
great need of Seed Such as cab-  
bage seed onion mustard & buckwheat

Seed if you Shuld Send us eny thing  
do Send us your Son John to bring  
it or put it in veary Strict hands  
I am Sir yours Talbeart Magor

P.S. Friend is veary scace sence had hour  
misforthon no one hath ever been so  
good as to give us the worth of a pin  
it apears that the people here  
strives to Eat each other in the stad  
of thriving to help each other I happy  
to tell you that for christ cake cummitted my soul

[ADDRESS PANEL]  
To  
Benjamin Major Esqr.  
Washington Tazawill County  
Illinois U.S.A. Amco

[POSTMARK]  
[City name indiscernible]  
SHIP  
DEC  
10

b. Letter dated 10/17/1840  
To: Benjamin Major  
Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
From: Austin Major

Oac tober the 17th 1840 B. cove  
Dear farther I in barche this oppotun  
ity to writ you these fue lines which  
will in form you of my heth which is  
good at the presan in complinace with  
your reuast I now give you a statme  
nt of my condishon soon after I arrived  
hear I was put in a thratch house  
were I was taking daw sick with  
the fever and when helpless the na  
tives came in an taking every  
thing that I pur-sessed in this world

fater which thay come again in about  
two years and burnd my house with  
all that I hue rake to geather my  
sickness held me at least two years  
I have sufard much Sence I come  
here but the dark clouds begin to disaper  
again if you can Send Send us Sum fue  
artickels of trad such as to bacco clouth  
pipes beed such as china beed it will be  
a proffit to both of us I can by palm  
oil cam wood ivory & I and return  
to you that is if you can make it cunven  
ent to send these things as goods is so  
dear hear I can not by them and make  
eneay profit at all do try to Send these  
artickels for which you shall not loose

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I am happy to in form you of  
the goodness of god to my soul  
sencicome here the lord have  
Spook peace to bouth of our Souls  
or all of our Souls if I never see  
you in this life I thrist to meet  
you in bright glory these mis  
fourtins which I have told you of  
have caused us to laber hard  
to suport our famlys but after chris  
mas we expet to clear farm land  
and commence try to do Some thing  
for our Selves if you do Send  
these things do try to Send them  
by Some veary partiler pourson  
we wont seep much hear I thank  
god that I do in tend to strive to  
live as much above boure as  
posabe yours Auston Magor  
PS you will pleas to writ george har  
lin to write to my motherinlaw  
Enoch harlins wife and She have  
meet with a grat misfoarthin  
She have loast three of hir Sans  
this is four letters I have sent I reci one

ADDRESS PANEL (left)

Talbert  
Austin  
Thornton  
&  
Washington Major  
Thos. Major

ADDRESS PANEL (right)

Excuse the very broken writing for we have  
got about one of the worst pensman that we hav

**Folder 5:**

Letter dated 8/7/1843

To: Ben Majors

Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL

From: Tolbert Major and Austin Major and Wesley Harland

Bassa Cove

August the 7 1843

My Dear mush beloved

father it is with Plesher that I take  
this opperunity of wrighting you  
this letter to informe you that we are  
all well and I sinserley hope father  
these few lines may find you & your  
mush Beloved famley in the  
same as well as the Blessing of God  
But I am Sorry to informe you that  
Washington Tommous is Both Dead  
Washinton Dide with a Bledding it was  
thought that some of his Blode vessels  
Brock frome the wonde he reseved  
in the wore 2 or 3 years a go. Tommous  
Dide with a long lingering diszese  
But nevr the less the Lord workes all  
thinges for the Best  
a nother thing I am Sorrow to informe  
you of and that is thise I hade the mis  
forchen to get my House Burned in  
ashes a Bout 2 monthes a go my Loss

wus grate and hade it not have  
Bine for my Plantation I do not  
know what I would have don

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But I do not fele no wase  
discorrigeed at all for as Long  
as Life Lastes and my helth is good  
I do not fele discorrigeed  
I wud send you Some of the  
Produce of this country But I have  
no one to Send it By and a nother  
thing I do not know where to send  
theme so you can get theme  
But if you will Send me word where  
to Send I will Send you Some coffy  
and ather thinges if it will be ecseptabl  
With you and Some groundnuttes  
and meney other thinges  
We ar well Satisfide in this country  
and I will Say this is the Place for  
the mane of Coller if we can not  
get as mush of the Benfites of this  
Country as you do in yours or as we  
did the country that giv us Borth  
But you may know in all new country  
how it is and as this is the Commens  
ment of things we will do all that  
we can do and leve the Ballance  
for the rizeing ginaration and  
God or father I did wright you  
one letter Befor this But if you reseved it  
I do not know or wives sendes thare  
Love to you all weremane [yours truly  
it is Tobers House Tolbr Magers  
Burnte Austan Magers

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Mr. Magers  
Deare Sir it with plesher  
that yore Humbel Survant attompes  
to inform you that he is well and it is  
my hontes Diszer to have this  
to find you Sir and famly in the

Same all of my Pepel is well and  
ar doing as well as can Be espectedd  
in a new country. I my Self have  
had meny don fals lick others But  
with ambishshon it is that I over  
come theme all and if there is any  
one delites in this country it shorley is me  
But I want you to have the goodness  
to Condecend So much as to Wright me  
if you please where Mr. Gorge  
Harland is or his famley as I have  
sunte and short letter But no anser  
do Dear Sir do me this faver  
I remane yours with Due Respect  
Wesley Harland  
PS I wanto come over to See you all  
Wright me if you think Best  
to com and remane a few monthes with  
you or not  
WH

[ADDRESS PANEL]

To  
Mr. Ben Magers  
Washington Tazewill Co

Ellinois

[POSTMARK]

Bal [possibly Baltimore; rest of letters are illegible]  
Sept 27

**Folder 6:**

Letter dated 4/4/1844

To: Benjamin Major

Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL

From: Wesley Harland

Bassa Cove West Africa Liberia

April the 4-1844

Deare frand I am hoppay that

I have this oppertunity of wrihting you a few lines  
this leve me well and I do hope you a in good helth  
and all your fambley Deare sir there is nothing very  
strang that I have to Relate to you at this time it would  
Be a Plesher to me to have a Regular communication  
with you so that we would be abel to have information  
frome on coutenent to the other not that I am so mush  
consurnd a Bout the a fares in the U States but it would  
Be Some Satesfaction to me in deed to know the State of thinges  
I hope the United States ar all mot [almost?] giv up the habbet of  
Slave holding and I think if thay would God would Bless them  
more it is sumthing varry strang to me that white men  
that hase the Gospel Rather the Bible to giv them all the information  
that is nesserry for the Salvation of thare soles not  
with standing it semes to theme as Creme [crime?] it is time that  
Crisendom would let heare Light Shine ~~on the~~ & La a sid [lay aside]  
Sish darkness and a Bomanations and crimes that know if truly  
ar clare of eany thing ealce that a Lone will sink theme  
Be Low the Sodamites I am a shamed of the U States or  
that Part that indalges in this a caursed thing slaveray and  
I do not know why they do in dulg in it with out it is low enug  
to make a clalatinor of the collerd pepel and whites it seems as it  
is all most imposubel for so menay collerd pepel to Live thare in  
slaveray however it is all wease the Best to Stand Still and  
see the Salvation of God as the israelites Did whane thay

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whene thay hade the tiranickel yok of Bondige on I hope  
God will offer the Pepel Eys that thay may see as they are Blined  
Like ~~he did~~ the Poor Blind man that cald on him thouth Son of  
David have murcay on me) (So ends the subject at Present)

The next thing that comes under aur notice is to giv you  
a Brefe a count of this common welth in all the Settel  
mantes thare ~~may Be Beed~~ ar Beteen 4 & 5 thousand 4000 or 5000  
in habletans or panlatations ~~the place is~~ the seltelmentes mentes  
the most Pauler ones are on the Sea Biord we have some seltemont  
up the River the common welth is aBaut 20 or 23 yare old  
it is governed by or it is a Republican government We send 10

caunselers Anuley to Legislat for us and make Lawes  
The next thing the corrancay of this commanwelth is not  
Acknalliged by forran countrys the corrancay is paper monay  
formed on came wood thare ar no gold nor silver in cercolation  
Came wood may Be hade in Lage quntilays if men hase goodes

suttabl for the marcute of wood But there are no woods none  
the sea Bord it is all in the interior of this country and  
Merchants Buy it from the natives But the settlers never go  
there owing to so many Difficulties that they would have to contend  
with Palm oil this is a thing that is made on a very large  
scale the natives make a great deal of it and a man for 25 leaves of  
tobacco may buy 2 gallons or 2 gals of it as good as 62 1/2 cts  
and this are of the Best things that we have heard for the  
market of this country as there is not tobacco made here  
The next thing that we will notice is farming this may be  
Come [common?] here But it is one thing to have a farm and a nother  
thing to make that farm make money [two crossed-out words] farming  
in this country is not Like farming there it is 2 years all

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after a man comes to this country he for he can learn  
the art of farming and then it is five years before  
he can make any thing on that farm that will be worth  
a Brass cent coffee can be made in that time and there  
is nothing Else that will be of any [survive?] to him with  
out he wants it for his own family and he may make  
a Living at the Business But not a very good one Rice yams potatoes  
Casadras or the Bread fruit is Soursop [soursops] guavas plantains  
Bananas papayas oranges Limes Lemmons there is no nesetay or  
it is not worth while for me to tell you what the Produce of  
this country is as you know all about all the zones and that  
more than I can tell you the Land is very good back from  
the Sea Shores a Bout 20 or 36 miles good a nuff to make anything  
By me saying that it is not Poor Living in this country under  
stand me under the Present circumstance with the Poor class of  
Peopel a manege [I imagine] the men that have been in this country 15 or  
16 years Live as well as any man in the U States that is  
if he is a industrious man and Better than many But if a man  
Comes to this Country if he has not any money nor goods  
he never will get up under [crossed-out word] 16 or 17 years as I say the  
men that have been here that Long Lives will if they shet of  
paper would hold all I would tell you a bout it he has to work hard all  
Day if he hopes for [illegible] ~~the~~ of tobacco and then sometimes it is so  
Badly that he can not sell it at other times for 2 Komod [common?] Hankechifes  
Work a hole day and glad to get work at this Rates it is a harde  
thing for a poor man to make a nofe for his family to live of  
or by in this country when he first comes the first 6 months he  
is sick and he gives oblig to you in debt for things for the support of  
his family Some 2 or 3 hundred dollars and it five or 6 years before he is  
able to Pay this and then it is five or six more before he can do any thing for himself

wod say more But not Rome [room?] am your Respefuley  
Wesley Harland

*Written in the margins*

Will you be so good as to see where Georg Harlandes fambley is and wright to them  
for me also any of the Harlandes as I do not know where thay is also Jhon J. Grifons  
of Kantuckay of Ciriston countray also the Bradsawes fambleys see if Shebay Bradshaw hase any  
thinge of John J grifon and his fambley or the Place that givfor time or belonged to Shelvay Bradshaw  
so wright me and tell me all a Bout every thing that I wud like to know  
do forgit G Harland fambley

[ADDRESS PANEL]

To  
Mr. Bengamin Mager  
Elinois Washington  
Taswill USA

Wesley Harland wrote an additional note in very tiny script on the address panel of the letter. In order  
to read the note, the letter has to be folded in the manner in which it was mailed. The note is  
incomplete since two spots, marked here by ellipses, are illegible.

by me wrighting in this way I hope you will not let it get in the slave stalls for it may be the means of  
making some slaves disabeont to thare masters I hope that I will be able to see you befor long as I am  
coming to America befor Long or next Spring or sumer if I hade silver monay a nofe [enough] after I  
got to New York . . . if you will as[k] Mr. Harlanes . . . wrighte to them if they could in close as draft  
one way or thron [the other?] of a Bout 50 dollrs in cash and will settel for it; if they do and send me  
the draft in a letter and when I a Rives [arrives] in New York I will draw the mony and come on not  
that I am dipons [dependent?] on this money forever or dependes on them, but I manley wanto borry  
[borrow] after I getes to New York as well. Send no silver WH

**Folder 7:**

Letter dated 6/26/1847

To: Benjamin Major  
Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
From: Tolbert Major

Africa grand bassacounty June 26th 1847

Dear fother I write you these few lines to in form  
you of my helth which is good at this time present &  
I hope these few lines may find you and your family  
in good helth the Sheep in this country affordes no wole  
they have Strait hair Like a dog when I lived  
with you I was used to eating meat 3 times a day but  
if I get it once a weak here I think that I am a doing

very well in dead for I have to pay 37½ cents a  
pound of meat flour is \$300 dolars a barrel  
I did think once that I would come home but  
I have decline coming untill I make one or 2 good  
crops So that I can have some thing to bring with me  
the woman would do more than what they do but  
but they have no looms to weave cloath and all  
the cloath that we get we pay from 75 to 50 & 25  
cents a yard for it I want to See you and your  
wife and children very bad I for got one  
thing and that is this my children talks abut you and  
mother very much please to have the profile of  
you and your wife drawn and Send it to me  
for my children to loock at when I am dead  
My oldest dautor Sarah is a bout 5 years  
old and She can read a little She is considered to  
be a ver Sence a ble child by the people to her  
age

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and my motherinlaw enock harlands  
wife in Quiers very much about you  
and Should Like to hear from you at  
all times her and her children She  
told me to write a few lines for for her  
She Still remains a widdow She is a  
bout 50 years old and She loocks to be a  
bout 26 years old and her hair is as black  
as ever it was and She Still is a Striveing  
to Serve the Lord yet and She is got 4  
children Living wesley is married  
and She Says that She wants you to  
in Quier for George harlands famly  
and write her a bout them She says  
that She has wrote so often to them and  
nevr got any anser She wants you to  
write to her a bout them  
Please to remember me and brother  
aston magors we want to write to you  
2 times a year but we have no paper  
Please to Send me Some paper  
your truly tolbert  
Magors

[ADDRESS PANEL]

For Mr. Benjamin

Magors Washington

Tazewell County

Illinois

**Folder 8:**

a. Letter dated 6/22/1848

To: Ben Major

Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL.

From: Tolbert Major

Bassa Cove  
Grand Bassa County  
June 22nd 1848

My Dear Father

I received your letter dated August 1847 and though it has been written nearly a year yet it came safe to hand—which gave me great satisfaction but I heard nothing that was at all dissatisfactory in the least My Wife is at present very well indeed as is the case with myself I have at this time two children Sarah Agnus—& Ann Eliza—the former was born the 20th Oct 1843 and being nearly five years old goes to school and can read a little the latter having been born as late as the 9th Sept 1846 is not quite old enough as yet to go to school and So She Stays home with me —agreeable to your request I shall endeavour to write a letter to you at least twice a year But when ever I see an opportunity of writing I shall not fail to do so I received the medicines and Books which you sent me and was very glad of them and that you were so mindful of me and I shall as far as my poor ability will allow conform to your advice Set forth in the letter We are very thankful for the few seeds you sent us as much So as if you had Sent a Bushel of each kind Seeing You show a willing mind to do a good part by us and I intend to try and do the Same by you but as Poor Lazarus said to the Rich man there is a Great gulf Between us—We have not received the cards which You sent nor even heard of them We are getting along pretty well indeed We have lived together without any dispute or disagreeing as yet and I hope we never will

disagree or have disputes and quarrels I am exceedingly happy. We did on the 29th July last by our representatives Solemnly declare ourselves a free Sovereign and independent people thereby dissolving all political Connection Between the Col. Society and ourselves and we have established a new form of Government viz a "Republican form" and it is my pride and Joy that I am a free man in a free country and can

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enjoy the free mild and equal Government which has just been established and where I can have an equal Share of Republicanism—

The General occupation of the citizens of this country natives included is farming the merchants appreciate their farming more than all their commercial Business Rice—Corn—cassadas—Potatoes—arrow Root—Ginger etc Grow to perfection at the same time may be seen every persons garden sallads of every description which Liberia will afford eatable herbs and here and there is pictured most Beautiful flowers etc etc

Rice cassadas potatoes ginger arrow root etc is the staple production also palmoil—which we use in the place of Lard I may Say that the women do nothing but would tell a little story that is not true they sew and wash and some times they may be seen weeding out the garden and doing other petty jobs of the same nature

We Raise cattle in this country but the oxen here do not work like those in america we also have Sheep Goats Hogs Ducks and chickens and we are making a Start at turkeys

There is also a variety of poisonous reptiles in this country Such as Snakes lizards Scorpions Sentipedes etc there is a kind of Lizard whose Bite is Said to be fatal it is called in this country the Salimango I do not know its natural Historical name.

We are not fixed in a way to make cloth So every yd of cloth that is used in this country is Bought Cotton Grows and was it cultivated would be very plentiful neither can we make Sewing Cotton and at this very moment it is in Great demand any price almost would be paid for it

The above are not fables but realities—I only received four kinds of medicine viz Bayberry Bark

Hemlock No. 4 or Bitters Lobelia Seed I do not  
know whether they are all that you Sent or not  
as to paying you a visit I hardly know what to say  
at this time I am not in a way for paying visits  
and I have changed my notion as I wont be able to

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come for a couple of years yet But I Shall endeavour to  
Send you Some coffee I would have Sent it by the La—  
Packet but not receiving your letter in time I could not  
Get it in Readiness to send as I received your letter only a  
couple of days previous to the starting of the vessel  
and we have no machines in this country but have  
to work with our own hands when she Makes  
another trip across the Ocean I will be Sure and Send  
it I Really do wish to See You and mother and  
Sometimes when I study about past days it distresses me  
most wonderful

What you wrote concerning my Brothers wife &  
children gives me a great deal of satisfaction and  
comfort Please Remember my love to John Major  
your son and Judah your daughter and all the  
rest of your children I would have written to them  
all but for want of time and paper I could not paper  
is a scarce article My Love to Shastene Major  
and his family to Mr Davenport and family to  
to William Majors and all of his family To  
Joseph Majors and his family to Edward Wat  
kins and his family. Dear Mother and father  
pray for me and By the assistance of God  
I Shall endeavour to do the Same for you  
I hope the Lord will make a way for me to  
See you all again this Side of the Grave I am yet striving  
to lay up treasures in heaven where moth corrupt  
eth not nor thieves Break in and steal  
This puts me in mind of the time when I came from  
the Iron works and You had Gone off to illinois and left me  
and when I study about that it makes the tears  
rise in my eyes The Books that you sent me will  
answer for my children they are in my estimation  
valuable Books  
Farewell farther & mother  
Tolbert Majors  
My mother in Law  
Eneck Harlands wife was

very glad to hear from you  
and says Give her love to all her acquaintances

Wesley Harland is Married

[ADDRESS PANEL]  
Mr. Benjamin Majors  
Washington  
Tazewell County  
Illinois State— U.S.A.

[POSTMARK]  
Springfield  
Sep  
3  
IIS

b. Letter dated 6/23/1848

To: Ben Major  
Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
From: Austin Major

Bassa Cove June 23d, 1848

Dear father & mother

We Received your letter  
And was very glad that you thought So much  
of us as to send an answer & we also was  
glad to hear of your healths which Seamed  
to be good—& now I must tell you  
Some thing a bout our health & the health  
of our family's my family is well my wife  
& daughter is in good heath I have only one  
child living which is mary & She is nearly  
grown! She can read tolerably well. But  
She dos not go to school evry day atthis time  
my wife can also Read tolerably well & mary  
Can wright Some But not having had A  
good chance better to she can not wright  
Better. You will be please to wright to me

Seperately so that I may Receive my letters with  
out so much trouble as it appears tha  
their has Ben Some mis carage in them  
I must say Something more A Bout Mary  
She is a School teacher & She has also embraced  
the Religion of Jesus Christ & is now A full  
member in the methodist church If you will  
please to wright to me whether old mother  
Rebecca is yet living or not & with Regard  
to fruits we have corn & casidoes sweet Potatoes &  
arroroot—ginger & plantings & Sower  
Saps & Banannaes & the Palm trees yields  
abundantly—& the popawe & Cotton we can  
rase in the greatest abundance & fousl—  
hogs & goats Sheep—there is plenty Deers  
in this country & also A very ferocious animals  
called the lepard & the Bush cat etc

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& with Regard to my seeing you Again I never ex  
pect to see you Again in this life But I hop to meete  
you all in the King[dom] of Eternal glory whare we  
will meet to part no more for ever—for I am  
so very wll satisfied in this country—the land of  
my fore fathers where I enjoy all the wrights &  
priviledges of A free man & can worship  
my God & there is none to make me affrade or oppr  
ess me in so doing. you will please to excuse me  
for wrighting so to you But I wish not to Brag  
But only to State the Satisfaction of my mind  
in the land of my fathers or ansesters in which  
the lord has Ben So good as to cend me & I must  
say also that I am A class leader & A stewart in  
the methodist Episcopal Church in Bassa cove  
& according to your Request I am trying to  
live agreeable & serve the lord to the Best  
of my knowlege. I have not done much  
farming as yet But I am trying to get  
Ready to do so—My wife is just as well  
satisfied as I am in this country—I oft times  
think of the many good advices that you  
have given me in the house for my aim is  
to live in peace with all men & when  
done with this world get to heaven  
at lass } My Daughter Says She wishes you to send

her some thing to Remember her & we all  
want to send you Something to Remember you all &  
what is Convenient send to us as A memorial  
& now our lord Jesus christ himself guide  
you in the paths of wrighteousness & at last  
Bring you in to his heavenly King dom  
is our sincere Prayer

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Yours very sincerely & most affectionately  
Austin major & family

[ADDRESS PANEL]  
USA  
To Mr. Benjamin Major  
Illinois—Washington  
Tazewell County

**Folder 9:**

Letter dated 10/19/1849  
To: Benjamin Major  
Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
From: Austin Major

Oct 19th 1849  
Oct 19<sup>th</sup> 1849 Bassa Cove & County of Liberia

Dear farther & mother

I embrace this opportunity  
of addressing you with these few lines hoping  
they may find you & family enjoying good Health  
as the same leaves me & mine at present.  
Sence I have been to Liberia I enjoy as a general  
thing tolerable good health and also family and all  
the others. it has been Some Time Sence I here  
from you & mother I Sent Some Letters by the  
Packet\* when she was out time before last  
but whether they got to your hands or not we  
can not tell I would be very glad to here from you  
all indeed and I hope [illegible word] you get this letter you  
will answer it—in order that we may know  
how you are doing &c, &c., My wife & Mary sends their

Best Respects to you & mother and they hope you  
would cherish this opportunity to send them a Bonnet  
each. and Sir above all please send me the age  
of Both myself wife & Daughter or we can not  
tell them our selves and as my Daily ocption  
is farming do avail your self the opportunity  
to send me some Tuules [tools]

\* *La Packet* or *Liberian Packet* was one of the ships of the American Colonization Society. See  
*The African Repository*, Vol. XLIII-1867, 113.

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Please send some carpenters tuus as I can do  
some at that Buisness I hand Saw som philes [files]  
& orgors [augers] & chisels plairs [pliers] ad a good hatchet and  
Der farther I hope you are acquainted with  
Liberia that is—I mean that it is hard to get any  
thing like good cloth to make clothes except - for  
Very thin so please send me some Blue genes  
to make some good wareing clothes & also  
some good calico for wife & Daughter and also  
please Send Some paper as it is very Scarce  
here which cannot begotton unless I pay fifty cts.  
per gr. Please Give my love to Chasteen Mago  
tell him I think Very hard of him for not writing  
& he has never wrote me sence I hev  
I hear Been. My love to Wm. Magor & family  
Jo. Magor & family Wm. Debenport & family  
My wife say give her love Sarah Tenly tel her to send  
her some t. Mary is ~~also~~ a Teacher of  
the Sabbeth School of the M.E. Church ~~please~~  
and also a member of Christn Church  
She is I am happy to say stood a mong the  
first in society in Sab shcl: Church & State

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and I expect before this letter get to you  
She will be married & she will be very happy  
if Mrs [\_ \_ tet] Thalís would lend her some things to  
set her house of. So if you or she either comes  
out here I shall be preparad to Receive you home  
and Little Lucy tel her to send Mary som thing too.  
and please give our love to John major  
and tell him to Remember his old father that  
Raised him I hope he has not fore got him  
because he is in africa—. Give my love to Wm. Magor

tell him. to send us some thing too. for us to Remember  
him. & also Benjamin Magor. Tell him send us  
some things also so as for us to Remember him &  
I am now a Leader of a class of the M. "E" church  
Please send me some Good Books & a Drawing [knife?]  
as I Have none. —please send some 5" & [illegible] nails  
five & Eight Penny nails. —

Nothing More but Remains Yours  
Respectfully  
Austin Magor

P.S. my Best Respects to [ \_ \_ \_ ay] Thails &  
Lucy Mager  
tell them to send ~~me~~ wife & mary  
a Bonnet for we lost all most our things in the  
War  
AM

[ADDRESS PANEL]

To  
Mr. Benjamin Magor  
State of Illinois Taswell Cout  
To the [illegible] of the Rev Mr Gurley  
On Bord the Liberian Packet

**Folder 10:**

Letter dated 12/26/1851\*

To: Benjamin Major  
Location: Washington, Tazewell County, IL  
From: Silvay Major (wife)

\*There is a discrepancy in the date of this letter because Amemasor transcribed it as 1851 while Gebhardt transcribed it as 1854. There is no way to tell just by looking at the letter. However, other sources confirm it was written in 1851.

December 26 1851

Dear Frather Bassa Cov Republic of Liberia  
Since I heard from you last many has been my  
trouble Tolbert Magers My husband volunteered to go to  
Kroo town on 22 of March after being there 4 months  
he move his wife and children down there and  
the President com[e] [d]own an emploud him two months  
longer his time being up for the 4 months he [en]listed  
again two months longer thinking all things was  
well and the natives seemed friendly and kind

and the 5 of november the massacree took place  
an he was killed by those bardaraus people and  
now I am left with out a home with three small  
children 2 girls and one boy about 2 years one girl about  
8 years and the other Six I am now depending on the  
mercy of friends for a home I was at the Kroo town  
my self me and my children and only mad my  
escape the 3 day before the massacree took place  
and it was through the mercy of god they also  
killed my Brother and now I have only one left  
& he has lost one of his eyes in this war for those  
native attacked Bassa cove on the 15 of november and  
a bloody War insued and my brother got shot  
through the nose and that occaissained the last  
of his eye so you see that I am a poor drestresece [distressed]  
creature and any assistance you can render  
me I will be glad of and verry thankful  
young Joseph Magers my son sends word to young  
Benguman magas [Benjamin Major] for a pair of houns and my  
childre often inquires after you and more so since  
the death of their father there was 8 other persons got  
killed in the massacree besides my husband women an

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children and I lost all I had and the rest of them  
that was ther lost all they had and suppose the  
government lost upwards of 5 thousand dollars if  
you send me the houns pleas to send a [illegible] and  
a dog male and female for they are verry useful in this place  
all tho my hus is Dead yet  
that do not hinder me from [wri]ting to you when  
ever I can git an opportunity my mother send her lov  
to you an would like to know where all the Harrlands  
have gon to and if you do know please to her so when  
I write to them I may know where to direct my letter  
to Austin and his family are well  
I would like you to write to            I remains yours  
me as often as you can                truly Silvay Magers

[ADDRESS PANEL]  
Mr. Bengman Mager  
Washington Tazwell County  
Illinois

[POSTMARK]

Baltimore  
Mar  
9  
MD

**Folder 11:**

Undated fragments Postmarked August 7<sup>th</sup>

To: W. Ben Major

Location: Hopkinsville, Christian County, KY

-Although these fragments of a letter are undated, they are likely part of the May 20, 1839, letter.

Folder 11 (letter fragments): Folds in these two fragments align to indicate they were part of the same letter. On the bottom of one fragment, James Moore's name (spelled More) and Hopkinsville appear. Just to the right of Moore's name are Tolbert Major's name and Bassa Cove. The top fragment seems to conclude the sentence that begins at the end of the May 20, 1839, letter and the handwriting matches that of Tolbert Major's handwriting in that letter. These two fragments appear to be part of Tolbert Major's May 20, 1839, letter to James Moore. If so, the final sentence of the letter, which starts, ". . . for we have had war with the natives and they destroyed . . .," concludes:

everything I had & I find it very hard  
to get along, for my two small boys [illegible]  
able to help me for I have to help them  
Tel my uncle [Par\_ \_t] Harlin that I  
want him to pleas to send me out  
some things for I am very needy at  
this time the war has destroyed us  
so that we do not know what to do  
I like the place very much indeed &

The right edge of the second fragment is missing. The words that remain are:

the war has not  
we should have been very  
Give my lov to all of my fa  
tel them that I want to see th  
very much indeed

To More James      Tolbert M

Hopkinsvill  
Christan Count  
US

Bassa cove Libe  
West Af

**Folder 12:**

Photocopies of original letters

**Folder 13:**

Draft transcriptions of letters made by Kristy Gebhardt (1994)

**Folder 14:**

Corrections to errors in James Amemasor's thesis, *A Taste of Freedom: The Benjamin Major Collection of Letters from Emancipated American Slaves in Liberia, 1836-1851*, written by Susan E. Lindsey, December 2012 (updated January 2015).

**Folder 15:**

"The Major Family Collection of Letters: An Examination of Colonization and These and Other Letters from Liberia," Kristine Gebhardt's senior capstone, May 5, 1995.

**Masters Thesis:**

James Amemasor's Masters Thesis written in August of 2004 titled *A Taste of Freedom: The Benjamin Major Collection of Letters form Emancipated American Slaves in Liberia, 1836-1851* with his own transcriptions of the original letters.